

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

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Lecture Notes, April 16

I. Quiz. Discuss one problem with utilitarianism

II. Problems with rule utilitarianism

In our last class, we discussed the conflict between utilitarianism and justice.

I mentioned that the utilitarian can either dismiss these criticisms or adjust the theory.

To adjust the theory, the utilitarian might adopt rule utilitarianism, which says that the right act is the one which conforms to the general rule which creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Adopting rule utilitarianism means losing the flexibility that was the great advantage of classical utilitarianism.

Imagine yourself in a situation in which you have to choose either to follow a general rule that creates good consequences, or to break the rule because of the better consequences that would result by doing so.

A rule with an exception is still a rule.

Applied to the peeping tom example, we saw that

Rule #0: Do not peep

was a better rule than

Rule #1: Peep, if you wish.

But, we might adopt the following rule:

Rule #2: Peeping is prohibited, unless you can be sure not to be caught.

Rule #2 creates greater happiness (or fulfillment of preferences) than Rule #0.

We are back to evaluating individual acts, to see if they are exceptions we should build into the rules.

Harwood credits Jonathan Harrison with this objection, p 187.

III. Utilitarianism Summary

Consider two astronauts, who have an accident which damages their oxygen.

They have only enough oxygen for one of them to return alive.

One astronaut sacrifices his life in return for a promise.

According to the utilitarian, the surviving astronaut should act as if the promise was never made.

Harwood notes that preference utilitarianism (though not felt-preference utilitarianism) could solve the problems of promises, but we have already seen the problems with preference satisfaction.

The utilitarian defends promise-keeping on the basis of precedents and expectations.

You should keep your promises because of the expectations of those to whom you promise, and the precedent set for others who see you break your promises.

No one else knows about the astronaut's promise, so breaking it will not create any ill precedents.
Any guilt is residual evidence of non-utilitarian presuppositions.
There seems to be something wrong with the assumption that no promise was ever made, even if, in the end, you do break the promise.

We have been trying to show that utilitarianism fails to account for important intuitions: justice, desert, promise-keeping.

Notice that these problems are backwards-looking.

When presented with such cases, either we give up the theory or the intuitions.

But it is not always clear which to cede.

There are other ways to criticize the theory.

We might show that it is inconsistent.

See Bernard Williams and J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism, For and Against*, for an extended debate.

Another way to criticize a theory is to present a preferable alternative.

In this vein, we shall examine Kant's ethics.

IV. Introduction to Kant's Ethics

Consider helping a struggling person across the street.

This is a good act.

Consider the same situation, but which ends with an unforeseeable bad consequence.

A previously unseen truck runs over and kills both of you.

The utilitarian, given the bad outcome, must describe your act as a bad act.

But the initiating action is the same action.

How could it be good in one case and bad in the other?

Kant accounts for our intuition that the acts are equally morally worthy.

He says that the only good thing is a good will, a desire to do one's duty, p 195; see also p 198.

Since the will in each case is the same, the moral worth of each action is the same.

For Kant, morality is always independent, or autonomous, of consequences, depending only on our will.

Mill makes morality heteronomous, involving factors outside of us, and over which we have little or no control.

Our first step toward understanding Kant's moral theory is to clarify his notion of the will, which he calls reason in its practical employment, and how it relates to our inclinations.

We naturally have inclinations, or desires, as do all animals.

Our inclinations will naturally conflict in some cases with our duties.

We might want, for example, something that belongs to some one else.

We might be inclined to take it, but it is our duty not to steal.

Still, refraining from stealing is not praiseworthy.

We can not be said to have a good will merely by refraining from committing a bad act.

Consider saving some one's life with the expectation that there will be a reward.

The moral worth of the action itself is unclear.

If we are doing it for reward, we are pursuing only our self-interest, and acting for the right reason.
To have moral worth, an action must be done from the motive of duty.
To determine if an action is morally worthy, we have to determine the content of our will.
An action can only be seen as morally worthy if we are acting against our inclinations.
Otherwise, we might be acting for the wrong reasons.

There are four ways in which duty and inclination may meet:

1) Acting contrary to duty

E.g. robbing, murdering, lying.

These are obviously not morally valuable.

2) Acting consistently with duty and with inclination

E.g. the shopkeeper charging a fair price.

Here, we do no wrong.

But since the act is in our interest, we can not see the moral value in it.

3) Acting consistently with duty, but not with immediate inclination, though we might have some inclination

E.g. Not picking some one's pocket.

We might be inclined to steal, but we want to avoid being caught.

So, we act in the right way, but for the wrong reasons.

4) Acting consistently with duty but contrary to inclination.

E.g. returning lost money, volunteering one's time to help others.

Here morality shines.

We may interpret Kant as holding a weak claim that we can see only see moral value in acts done contrary to inclination, though other acts may also have moral worth.

We might see the weak interpretation as charitable to Kant, but Kant is committed to a stronger claim.

The strong claim is that only acting contrary to inclination creates moral worth.

The weak claim is less controversial, but the strong claim is really Kant's position.

In fact, Kant claims that there may never be actions of moral worth.

Even when we think that we are acting purely out of duty, we may be misleading ourselves, 201-202.

Kant has provided a strict standard for morality.

We will put aside for now questions about whether it is too strict.

The basic intuition to which Kant appeals, that the only good thing is a good will, seems fair enough, and worthy of pursuit.

A good will is the reasoned desire to do one's moral duty.

V. How, for Kant, do we determine our duties?

The simple answer is that our duty is to obey the categorical imperative.

An imperative is a command.

Hypothetical imperatives take the form, "If you want A, then do B."

Categorical imperatives take the form, "Do B." See p 204.

Moral commands cannot be hypothetical imperatives, according to Kant, because then you would be worrying about the consequences.

We still need to know precisely what these commands of morality are.

There is one moral law, according to Kant, called the categorical imperative (CI).

There are three versions of the CI.

So there is one rule in three supposedly equivalent forms.

Version #1: Formula of Universal Law, p 205.

Version #2: The Formula of the End in Itself, p 209-210.

Version #3: The Kingdom of Ends, p 211.