

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

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Lecture Notes, March 27

I. Utilitarianism, redux

Last week, we distinguished three clauses implicit in the Greatest Happiness Principle.

1. Consequentialism
2. Hedonism
3. Egalitarianism

There are different versions of utilitarianism, some of which we will examine this week.

Some of these versions abandon the second clause.

Other versions abandon the third clause, though abandoning egalitarianism is not a standard move.

But, any version of utilitarianism will be consequentialist.

Note that utilitarianism seems to fulfill the 5 requirements of a moral theory:

It is prescriptive, since it tells us what actions to perform.

It is universal, since it applies to every one.

It is intended to override other principles. In determining whether an act is morally acceptable, the total happiness produced is the only consideration.

There is no reason for secrecy.

The only questionable characteristic is its practicability, as we shall see.

II. Distinguishing utilitarianism from ethical egoism and prudence.

Ethical egoism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for me.

Consider an ethical egoist named Al.

Al believes that every one else should act to serve Al.

The utilitarian, in contrast, says that we should act for the benefit of every one.

Make sure to distinguish ethical egoism from the more plausible claim that every one should act to serve him or her self.

This is just self-interest, or prudence, and is really a form of subjectivism.

One might be inclined to follow only one's self-interest because of psychological egoism.

The psychological egoist says no one ever does anything that he or she does not want to do.

Faced with some one who sacrifices for others, a Mother Teresa, say, the psychological egoist says that sacrifice must be rewarding to that person.

Psychological egoism may well be right, but it is irrelevant to ethics, since it leaves us with no way to distinguish among good and not so good, and truly bad people or actions.

It is philosophically vacuous, even if psychologically compelling.

Utilitarianism is not the claim that we should act only in our own interests, nor that every one should act in one's own interest.

It is the claim that we should all act in ways that best further every one's interests.

III. Utilitarianism in practice

Imagine a world in which there are two people, John and Harriet, and each has 10 units of happiness.

Harriet wonders whether she should gather some flowers.

The new totals would be: John=10, Harriet=12

The total is now 22, so she should do it.

That is, we have a moral duty to increase our own happiness.

Another day, John=10, Harriet=10

John wonders if he should gather flowers for Harriet.

John does not like flowers, but Harriet does. John would prefer to go swimming.

The new totals would be:

John=9, Harriet=12.

The total increases to 21, so John should do it.

The point here is that we have a moral duty to sacrifice ourselves for others, as long as the rewards are greater than the sacrifice, when every one's happiness is measured.

Utilitarianism encourages working hard to get a raise, to provide better for one's family.

Or going out of the way for a stranger in dire need.

Sacrifice has its limits, though.

We should not give more than is gained.

So, if John really hates collecting flowers, and Harriet only like flowers a little bit, there is no moral requirement for John to go pick them.

The requirement of self-sacrifice also prevents utilitarianism from supporting immediate pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.

We are often required to sacrifice in the short term in the hopes of long term gains, for oneself.

For example, many of us calculate that we should work hard to get a college degree.

This is like moving from $A=B=10$ to $A=9, B=12$, where A represents your current self, and B represents you at a later time.

The question one asks is: Does the happiness I gain later outweigh the happiness I sacrifice now?

Harwood focuses on the demands for sacrifice in his first objection, in which he denies that utilitarianism is practicable.

The utilitarian must put her own interests aside, and treat herself as just one individual affected by her actions.

On first glance, it looks like I should give away most of my belongings in order to try to combat humanity's worst conditions: famine and disease and war.

Harwood says that this impartiality is impractical, p 181.

Mill agrees with Harwood that no one said it would be easy to be moral.

Mill mentions that the business of ethics is to tell us our duties, p 144.

Harwood notes that maximizing and protecting wealth may in fact have good consequences in the long run, so we are not forced to cede all our stuff.

Harwood quotes Baier using utilitarianism to support a limited egoism: every one's best interests are served if every one puts his or her interests first.

So, utilitarianism might even support Friedman-esque free market principles.

Utilitarianism works well on large scale:

Should the Fed raise interest rates?

Should we pull our troops out of Iraq?

Should a company adopt a new health care coverage?

If you examine the relevant considerations which surround all of these issues, you will discover that they are generally utilitarian.

We will mainly ignore the problems of whether to consider the average happiness or the total happiness, which arise when considering large scale applications of utilitarianism, see Harwood's fifth objection, pp 185-6.

To increase the average, we can (quietly) kill all those below average.

To increase the total, we can require a population explosion.

Total utilitarianism seems preferable, since the population explosion will have long-term ill-effects.

IV. Is utilitarianism the right moral theory?

Note that it differs from common-sense morality in some important ways.

It does not prescribe rules, except in a version we will examine below.

It does not allow much room for supererogation, doing more good than is morally required.

Harwood's second objection concerns the lack of supererogation, but he does not really see it as a problem.

Ordinarily, some acts are morally required, like refraining from murder.

But, other acts are even better: giving twenty percent of one's income to worthy charities, say.

Or, volunteering on Friday nights at a soup kitchen.

The case of supererogation may just be one in which our moral intuitions are wrong.

If utilitarianism were the right moral theory, and if it did contain extremely high demands for sacrifice, then we could easily understand how some people would take an accepting attitude to those of use who failed to be fully moral, and a more laudatory attitude to those who hit the moral jackpot.

The common-sense notion of supererogation is really just this attitude.

Mill defends utilitarianism with a simple argument:

People desire happiness.

Utilitarianism says that we should increase happiness.

So, utilitarianism is the right moral theory.

Mill's argument seems to commit fallacy, about which Hume warned, of deriving an ought from an is.

That is, people in fact desire happiness.

But, it remains an open question whether they should desire happiness.

Or, whether utilitarianism is the correct guide to our actions.

Still, we should look at the theory and its use, and compare it to other theories.

We proceed to considering some criticisms of utilitarianism

Along the way, try to notice forms of responses:

One can dismiss the objection.

One can adjust the theory in response to the objection.

One can reject the theory, abandon it, in the face of insuperable criticism.

V. Criticism #1: Hedonism provides too low a standard for morality.

Mill says that some critics of hedonism say that happiness is a life for pigs, p 141.

Mill responds by distinguishing higher and lower pleasures.

Since the higher pleasures are more valuable, the standard is not too low.

We have to decide between pleasures, so we need a criterion.

We can ask some one who has had both.

Those who have had both higher and lower pleasures will say that some pleasures require work, but are worth it.

Mill says, "It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

This objection may thus be dismissed.

We just look to long term and quality of happiness, and the problem is solved.

So, Mill dismisses this criticism.

Harwood presses the point, in his seventh and eighth objections.

If the utilitarian distinguishes among pleasures, then he abandons what Harwood calls monism, the focus on a single standard for evaluating pleasures.

Mill is really not distinguishing different kinds of happiness, but saying that the happiness we get is of a greater sort.

Just as I can be happy with a cold drink or the birth of a child, the latter is a greater happiness.

On monism, though, we seem to have to satisfy the interests of animals to too great a degree.

The real problem with hedonism may be seen by considering an example from Nozick.

Nozick presents a thought experiment: consider an experience machine.

The experience machine could give us any experience we wanted.

Would we want to plug ourselves in to the machine?