

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

Russell Marcus, Instructor

email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org

website: http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Business_Ethics/BEHome.htm

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I. Criticism of Utilitarianism #1: Against hedonism

Mill's utilitarianism, which we called classical utilitarianism, instructs us to maximize happiness.

In our last class, we wondered whether we would plug ourselves into the experience machine.

The question is important because we could get as much happiness as we wanted from our experiences while plugged into the machine.

If we decide not to plug in to the machine, then there might be a problem with Mill's utilitarianism.

In the experience machine, we would not actually experience the simulated experiences.

We would not be what we experienced ourselves as being.

It seems that we want more than the sensations.

We want the reality.

Consider an accident which renders a young pianist unable to use her hands, but whose happiness may be insured by a 'happy pill'.

If the utilitarian says that all that matters is happiness, and the happiness is maintained, it seems that the utilitarian has no means for describing why this is a bad outcome.

Mill says fulfilling your goals is a means to your happiness, but maybe the goal is independent of happiness.

One might try to dismiss this objection as an implausible scenario: of course the happiness would be decreased.

There are two utilitarian responses to this criticism.

One dismisses the objection as an implausible scenario, there is no such thing as a happiness pill, or an experience machine.

But still, they are logically possible, and it would be nice if the utilitarian could account for it.

The utilitarian can also claim that our intuitions in this case are wrong.

If we really had a happy pill, or an experience machine, then even if the pianist lost the use of her hands, as long as she were happy, we should not see this as a problem.

We are misled by our intuitions, here.

This response also dismisses the criticism.

II. Preference Utilitarianism

There is a different kind of response to Criticism #1.

If we are convinced that the utilitarian inappropriately emphasizes happiness, we can drop the happiness clause (hedonism) from utilitarianism.

We still maintain the consequentialism and the egalitarianism.

But we are left without a guideline for evaluating consequences.

We need to replace hedonism with something.

Consider replacing hedonism with appeal to personal preferences or desires.

Counting the satisfaction of preferences instead of happiness would capture what is wrong with the scenario above.

The pianist may be happy, but not in the way she prefers.

This proposal generates preference-satisfaction utilitarianism:

The right act is the one that creates the greatest fulfillment of personal preferences for the greatest number.

Notice that the utilitarian theory is saved, though amended.

(I will just call this version preference utilitarianism.)

Harwood motivates preference utilitarianism by considering the preferences of the dying mother whose son promises to decorate her grave with fresh flowers every year.

If we promise something to a dying person, the preference utilitarian may count that promise, where the hedonist might not, since the person to whom we promise can no longer have experiences.

The preference utilitarian can thus evade some of the problems with hedonism.

On preference utilitarianism, we work to satisfy people's preferences, like the preference of the pianist to be happy by playing the piano instead of by taking a happy pill, or our preference to have real experiences rather than artificial ones, even if we could be happy with artificial ones.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with preference utilitarianism.

We really do not want to fulfill unacceptable preferences, as Harwood notes in his ninth objection.

People can have crazy, and even self-destructive desires.

More severely, we do not want to fulfill certain kinds of preferences, like those of Nazis.

The classical (i.e. hedonistic) utilitarian can oppose genocide, even if the vast majority prefer it, by appeal to the various measures of happiness, quantity, quality, long-term, etc.

The hedonist can argue that the preferences of sadists should not be counted, since the sadist is really not happy.

Harwood argues that Mill's defense of hedonism is unconvincing.

But, the preference utilitarian response is less convincing.

We really do not think that racists and pederasts are happy.

There is psychological data to support this opinion.

But, the preference utilitarian can not argue that the sadist's preferences are not his or her preferences.

There are other versions of utilitarianism which avoid hedonism.

Ideal utilitarianism, for example, argues that we should maximize certain goods, like creative expression.

The right act, for one such idealist, is the one which fosters most creative expression for the greatest number.

We proceed to other criticisms of utilitarianism.