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Lecture Notes: Utilitarianism

Greatest Happiness Principle: The right act is the act which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
Mill formulates it slightly differently, p 27.

There are really three clauses of the utilitarian creed:
1) Consequentialism: acts are judged by their consequences.
2) Hedonism: consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.
3) Egalitarianism: each person counts as one.

Utilitiarianism is not egoism: that's 'the right act... the greatest happiness for me'.

Note that it seems to fulfill the 5 requirements of a moral theory.
- Prescriptivity
- Universality
- Overridingness (happiness is the only consideration).
- Publicity.
- Practicable (though this is debatable).

Utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, pleasure is the ultimate end.

How do we measure happiness?

Jeremy Bentham provided seven ways to measure it:
Intensity;
Duration;
Certainty;
Propinquity (proximity);
Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings);
Purity (chance it has of not being followed by opposite sensations);
Extent.

We can talk about units of happiness (utils), but we must be careful to distinguish them from money.
Law of diminishing returns: more money is always more money, but not always more happiness.
Cold drink on a hot day, the first is great, the twelfth is not so good.
There may be a problem with quantifying happiness.
But economists do this all the time.
We'll let it slide, here.

How does it work, 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
Total is now 22, so she should do it.

Another day, John=10, Harriet=10
John wonders if he should gather flowers for Harriet.
John doesn't 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.

Notice the requirement of self-sacrifice.
Utilitarianism encourages working hard to get a raise, to provide better for ones family.
Or going out of the way for a stranger in dire need.
It's not too stringent, perhaps: don't lose more than is gained.

This works for larger worlds, too. Consider persons A, B, and C:
1) A=20, B=15, C=10; vs
2) A=15, B=20, C=7
You should choose 1), for its higher total.
This holds even if you are person B, and you personally lose.

Utilitarianism is not a defense of pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.
It can account for short term sacrifice v long term gains, for self.
E.g., Should I work hard to get a college degree?
This is like moving from A=B=10 to A=9, B=12, where A is you now, and B is you later.
The question one asks is: Does the happiness I gain later outweigh the happiness I sacrifice now?

Utilitarianism works well on large scale:
Should the Fed raise interest rates?
Should the U.S. have gone to war with Iraq?

But, is it the right moral theory?

The consequentialism:
It captures our bare intuition that consequences matter.
It's better than 'don't lie', 'don't kill', or any other absolute proscription.
There are times when any such specific prohibition might be better violated.
Consider being stopped by the SS when transporting Jews out of Nazi Germany.
It's better than: 'you must fulfill your promises': meeting some one for lunch vs saving an accident victim.
In other words, it's a more honest theory in that it builds in the exceptions.
Instead of a lot of detailed rules, it gives you one flexible, general guideline.

The hedonism:
How does Mill defend the theory?
Consider any good thing. Why is it good?
We can show that it traces back to happiness.

Mill's argument for hedonism, p 30:
1. Every one wants to be happy.

2. If we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.
∴ Utilitarianism is the right moral theory
Even God likes it: she made us all want to be happy. (p 29)

The egalitarianism:
Maybe some people are worth more than others.
Consider Godwin's argument that the archibishop is worth more than the chambermaid. (p 243B)
This defense is actually utilitarian.
He's worth more for two reasons:
1) He affects more people.
2) He has the capacity for a higher degree of happiness.
The utilitarian, can defend the higher value of the archibishop, without dropping egalitarianism.
The president isn't himself worth more, but actions that affect him, and which he performs will also affect others. There's no need to count each one as more than one.

Consider some criticisms
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.

Criticism #1: happiness is a life for pigs (p 27)
That is, utiltarianism provides too low a standard for morality.
Response: there are 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.
Godwin's defends the archbishop's "more refined and genuine happiness". (243A)
Mill says, "It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." (Not in the textbook)
This objection may thus be dismissed.
We just look to long term and quality of happiness, and the problem is solved.
So, let's dismiss this criticism.

Criticism #2: The happiness clause
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 I 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.
You could reject the notion that a happiness box is possible, e.g.

Another possible response: drop the happiness clause (hedonism) from utilitarianism.
Then we are left without a guideline for evaluating consequences.
We can replace hedonism with appeal to personal preferences.
This 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 utilitarianism:
The right act is the one that creates the greatest fulfillment of personal preferences for the greatest number.

Notice that the theory is still saved, though amended.

But there are problems with preference utilitarianism.
We really don't want to fulfill unacceptable preferences.
Should we maximize the preferences of Nazi's, racists, etc.?

Criticism #3: Utilitarianism has difficulty accounting for our notions of justice.
Consider a situation in which better consequences arise from performing an injustice.
For example, sacrificing an innocent to quell an angry mob.

Justice is a complicated issue.
Mill's discusses five concepts of injustice, and argues that utilitarianism can account for them
1) breaking law
2) breaking moral law
3) not giving what one deserves
4) promise-breaking
5) unfairness
Mill's defense of justice arises, of course, out of social utility
He sees injustice as infringement of rights, which are defended by utility (pp 32-33).
Consider: Who should we pay better, the harder worker or the needier worker?
The surface utilitarian answer is to pay the needier one.
But long-term considerations may push us to pay the harder worker better.
It may be better to provide incentives to workers, and not alienate the harder workers.
That is, utilitarianism may be able to account for notions of justice by appeal to long-term benefits.

Justice and utilitarianism are sometimes incompatible.
Utilitarianism requires we look forward, justice that we look backward.
In these cases, either we give up our notions of justice or we give up utilitarianism.
The borderline cases are difficult, and perhaps irrelevant.
The question of whether to insure the happiness of world by torturing one innocent isn't really going to arise.

Criticism #4: Utilitarianism has difficulty accounting for our notions of rights.
This relates, in an obvious way, to criticism #3.
For example, consider the peeping tom, who secretly adds his own happiness.
It looks like the utilitarian defends the peeper.
One response to criticisms #3 and #4 is to adjust the theory.
If our intuitions about justice and rights are so strong, we can just add them as rules, generating:

Rule Utilitarianism: The right act is the act that conforms to the general rule that creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Actually, the above is Hedonistic Rule Utilitarianism. We could create, also:

Preference Rule Utilitarianism: The right act is the act that conforms to the general rule that creates the greatest fulfillment of personal preferences for the greatest number.

Utilitarianism is a family of theories, not just one theory.

So, should I peep?
In this instance, I might gain more pleasure than anyone loses.
But which rule should we follow, the one that allows peepers or the one that prohibits them?
If we adopt the former, some people would get caught.
Then, the overall unhappiness of the peepees outweighs the titillation of the peepers.
So, I shouldn't peep.

Adopting Rule Utilitarianism means losing the flexibility that was the great advantage of utilitarianism.
Imagine yourself in a situation in which you have to choose either to follow a general rule that creates

great 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.
That is, there's always the rule: peeping is prohibited, unless you can be sure not to be caught!
Since this rule creates greater happiness (or fulfillment of preferences), we should choose it.
And this means that we're back to evaluating individual acts, to see if they are the exceptions which we should build into the rules.

Utilitarianism is a wily theory. It keeps shifting to account for the objections.
How might we argue successfully against it?
Maybe we can't:
We've been trying to show that it doesn't account for important intuitions: justice, desert, promise-keeping.
Consider the arctic explorers.
The survivor is supposed to act as if the promise was never made.
Notice that some problems with utilitarianism (justice, rights, promises) are backwards looking.
When presented with such cases, either we give up the theory or the intuitions.
But it's not always clear which to cede.
There are perhaps 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.