

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006  
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## I. Introduction to 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 66.

There are really three clauses of the utilitarian theory:

- 1) Consequentialism: acts are judged by their consequences.
  - 2) Hedonism: consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.
- Utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, pleasure is the ultimate end.
- 3) Egalitarianism: each person counts as one.

Be careful to distinguish utilitarianism from ethical egoism.

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

Consider an ethical egoist named Al.

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

Be careful to distinguish ethical egoism from the 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 another doctrine, called '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.

Note that it 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. How do utilitarians measure happiness?

Morality, for the utilitarian, is a question of performing the right actions.

We determine right actions by calculating the consequent 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.  
The first cold drink on a hot day is great, the twelfth is not so good.  
There may be a problem with quantifying happiness.  
But economists do this all the time.

### III. How does utilitarianism 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 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.

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.  
Sacrifice has its limits, though.  
We should not give more than is gained.

But utilitarianism is not a defense of pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.  
It can account for short term sacrifice in the hopes of long term gains, for oneself.  
For example, working 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 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. go to war with Iraq?  
Should we legalize gay marriage?  
If you examine the relevant considerations which surround all of these issues, you will discover that they are generally utilitarian.

But, is it the right moral theory?

#### IV. Examining the three clauses.

##### Consequentialism:

Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition that consequences matter.

It is better than “Don’t lie,” and “Don’t kill,” or any other absolute proscription.

There are times when any such specific prohibition should be violated.

Consider being stopped by the SS when transporting Jews out of Nazi Germany.

It is better than, “You must fulfill your promises.”

Meeting some one for lunch vs saving an accident victim.

In other words, it is 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.

We will talk more about hedonism and egalitarianism next Tuesday.