

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007  
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## I. Three clauses of utilitarianism

We will read about utilitarianism in the work of its most prominent proponent, John Stuart Mill. Versions of utilitarianism predated Mill, and there are contemporary utilitarians. Utilitarianism can be condensed into one single principle, called the Greatest Happiness Principle: The Greatest Happiness Principle says that the right act is the act which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Mill formulates it slightly differently, p 575.

There are really three clauses of the utilitarian theory:

Clause 1. Consequentialism: acts are judged by their consequences.

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.

Consequentialism captures some strong intuitions about morality.

The principle itself is more flexible, and candid, than theories which provide a variety of specific rules.

Utilitarianism gives you one flexible, general guideline.

Clause 2. Hedonism: consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.

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

Jeremy Bentham, Mill’s godfather, provided seven ways to measure happiness:

Intensity

Duration

Certainty

Propinquity (proximity) or remoteness

Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings)

Purity (chance it has of not being followed by opposite sensations)

Extent

To calculate the effects of an act, you just add up all the effects on each individual.

When adding effects, we may refer to units of happiness, which Bentham called utils.

We must be careful to distinguish utils from money.

Money abides by a law of diminishing returns: more money is always more money, but more money does not always lead to more happiness.

The first cold drink on a hot day is great, the twelfth is not so good.

Utils do not suffer diminishing returns.

There may be a problem with quantifying happiness.

And some people argue that utilitarians have problems with interpersonal comparisons of happiness.

Economists make interpersonal comparisons all the time.

Though economists often work with preferences, rather than happiness, they do so with the implicit assumption that we are happy when our preferences are fulfilled.

Mill's principle argument for hedonism is that any thing we value we do so because of the happiness it brings us or others.

Every one wants to be happy, and if we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.

Clause 3. Egalitarianism: each person counts as one.

The egalitarian clause is not too controversial, but maybe some people are worth more than others.

The utilitarian can account for valuing some people over others, without abandoning the basic egalitarianism.

The president, say, is not himself worth more, but actions that affect him, and which he performs, have a greater range of effects. There is no need to count each one as more than one.

There are different versions of utilitarianism, some of which abandon the second clause.

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

Any version of utilitarianism must be consequentialist.

## 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.

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?

Adding quantities of happiness begs the question about whether to maximize average happiness or total happiness.

Either way, there are quick, repugnant consequences.

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

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

### IV. Is utilitarianism the right moral theory?

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

It does not prescribe rules.

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

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.

V. A criticism of utilitarianism: Hedonism provides too low a standard for morality.

Mill says that some critics of hedonism say that happiness is a life for pigs, p 575. 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" (576). 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.

Still, Nozick presents a real challenge to Mill's hedonism. He considers a thought experiment about an experience machine. The experience machine could give us any experience we wanted. "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?" (580). Mill's utilitarianism, which we called classical utilitarianism, instructs us to maximize happiness. We could get as much happiness as we wanted from our experiences while plugged into the machine.

Would we want to plug ourselves in to 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.

## VI. Preference Utilitarianism

There is a different kind of response to the criticisms of hedonism.

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

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.

Notice that the utilitarian theory is saved, though amended.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with preference utilitarianism.

We really do not want to fulfill unacceptable preferences.

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.

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.

## VII. 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.

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.

There are other ways to criticize the theory, and many responses.

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

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