Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 19

Utilitarianism: Mill

Preliminaries. Pain and pleasure can determine (1) what we *shall* do and (2) what we *ought to* do.

So they govern the actual course of our behaviour (better: its actual motivation) and also its morally right course. This corresponds to the doctrines of *psychological hedonism* and *ethical hedonism* respectively. It is clear that Mill (in contrast to some other theorists) does not endorse *psychological egoism*, the view that we are motivated by *our own* pleasure and pain.

Further, moral value resides in the impact the action has upon the world. This is the doctrine of *consequentialism*.

Mill's principle of utility. Mill's aim in chapter 2 is to confront different objections made against 'utilitarianism' (= consequentialism + hedonism). Mill begins by rehearsing the utilitarian criterion of moral value of actions. A is morally right to the extent it promotes pleasure. A is morally bad to the extent it promotes pain. In other words, moral value resides in the impact the action has upon the world (the doctrine of consequentialism). This impact is evaluated by the amount of 'happiness' it produced, while happiness itself is interpreted as pleasure and absence of pain (so we get the doctrine of hedonism).

Low pleasures. This is a problem for hedonism. All that matters for moral evaluation is the amount of pleasure. The reason is that the only ultimate value in the world is pleasure. Is this so? A problem arises which is best put with regard to a *life*. A life of a care-free playboy is better, on this account, than a life of a struggling composer (e.g. Schubert), which contains a fair amount of pain. So utilitarianism calls on us to increase pleasure at the expense of any other goal. Not only is this scandalous, but also it does not cohere with our deep-seated beliefs.

Example 1. A more extreme case: imagine a frog floating in a warm lake. Suppose it lives for 500 years and receives a great deal of pleasure: food, sex, and the like. By the way, being a frog, he never gets bored. And imagine Schubert who creates music and lives for 30 years experiencing lots of suffering (but also some pleasures). Then, according to utilitarianism, it is better to be a frog than to be a Schubert.

Question 2. Can we coherently propose to Schubert to become a frog? Does it matter?

Quality of pleasure. Some utilitarians and ordinary people find no fault with the frog cases. Not Mill. In response he mounts the theory of the quality of pleasure. The estimation of pleasure depends not only on its quantity (intensity), but also on its quality. If one pleasure is of higher quality than another, then even a huge amount of the first would still be less valuable than a small amount of the second. Thus my activity of reading a book for one hour could be more pleasant than days of (enjoyable) scuba diving. We can think of this formula for the value of A:

$$V(A) = k_1 \times Q_1 + k_2 \times Q_2,$$

where Q_1 and Q_2 indicate how much quality and quantity respectively the action has (on the scale $[1, 10]$) and k_i represents the significance we attach to quality and quantity. Now $k_1 \gg k_2$ to ensure that quality beats quantity. Then, for instance, the values of reading and diving could be calculated as follows:

$$V(R) = 1000 \times 9 + 5 \times 1 = 9005$$
$$V(D) = 1000 \times 2 + 5 \times 9 = 2045.$$

Principle of impartiality. Mill emphasises the universal nature of utilitarianism. A person must act as if he were a disinterested (that is, divested of his own self-interest) and impartial spectator. This, he thinks, will have immediate socio-political consequences: people should think of themselves as ordinary members of a larger community, and education will proceed accordingly.

A standard too high? But can we reasonably expect people to care for everyone in the vicinity indifferently? Indeed, it seems that people have attachments to certain groups of people stronger than to other groups. We care about our immediate family more than we care about our acquaintances, and we care about our acquaintances more than we care about people on another continent. To think otherwise, and to act in a way that eliminates these preferences, is to impose an impossibly high standard on normal humans.

Mill's response: to insist on the priority of consequences. Motives are not crucial in evaluating the value of action. It is the consequences that we examine to establish the moral worth of action. So an action can be done out of a selfish (or otherwise non-impartial) motive, but still produce a good (='happy') outcomes. Then it is still counted as good, regardless of the motive. (But see the footnote below.)

Question 3. Is it coherent to evaluate an action while ignoring the agent's motives?

An obsessive humanitarian? Another objection is that, according to the impartiality principle, a moral person is required to care about a whole world, rather than about his own career, his family etc. For example, a student should not go to the university to pursue a selfish goal of advancing his career. He rather must contribute to fighting poverty in Africa (or at least, he must choose occupation that will help fight poverty in Africa). But this requirement seems harsh and unreasonable.

Mill's response: an important concession. We must distinguish between people in position of power (political, financial etc.) and ordinary people. Only the first group of people should obey the impartiality principle. Thus a government official who is not impartial is exactly the one who is corrupt. We rightly blame him for corruption. But ordinary people are exempt from being strictly impartial.

Question 4. How convincing is it to exempt ordinary people from being impartial? What implications does Mill's concession have for utilitarianism?

Coldness of dispositions. Suppose that Frank visits his sick grandmother. He brings her a cake. The grandmother is touched. She praises Frank for being so considerate. Frank is bemused: he replies that he does not care about *her* specifically. Being a good utilitarian, he cares about the overall happiness in the world. Bringing a cake was merely a small step in increasing happiness. The grandmother begins to weep...

The objection is that utilitarianism does not cultivate feelings of love and compassion, making agents mere instruments in promoting a grand project of overall happiness. Mill's response about private/public sphere should be applicable here. His other response is also straightforward: the objection is related to the estimation of character. Utilitarianism is all about the estimation of actions. Character is important only to the extent it increases the chances of a good action. Nothing, then, was wrong with Frank's action, save for his candid explanation (he should have lied!). And the third response is that this sort of problem is a small nuisance. After all, the grandmother did get her cake, while so many other grandmothers did not.

Computational complexity. Morality is a practical enterprise. A moral theory must produce a rule of action possible to follow. Consequentialism (an ingredient of utilitarianism—see our earlier discussion) places the value of action in its consequences. Suppose I wish to be moral. Then, in performing an action, I am supposed to calculate its consequences. But those consequences will be far too complex to calculate. How am I supposed to reach a decision? Of course, *after* the fact I may be able to evaluate the action, though even then it may be 'too early to tell' whether it were good or bad. In any event, from the point of view of the agent *before* the action the consequences are opaque. Then the agent will be unable to act, locked in an endless calculation.

A variation on this objection: consequences are influenced by accidental circumstances beyond our control. I help an old lady to cross the street. A meteorite comes down and kills her. Did I do something good? Remember that we can have no recourse to my motives. And if we look at the net results of my action, they are not so good. Had I not tried to help her, she would have survived.

Question 5. Would I be held responsible for the old lady's death? Why?

Subordinate principles. Mill's response is highly significant. He argues that 'tendencies of actions' have been known to us in the long experience of history. We do not begin to calculate them anew with each action. Those tendencies now emerge as 'subordinate principles', while the principle of utility becomes the 'fundamental principle of morality'. In our daily life we are supposed to be guided by subordinate principles, and thus *not* to engage in utilitarian calculations.

Question 6. Does the theory of subordinate principles signify a major pullback from the doctrine of utilitarianism?

Question 7. What is the role of common sense in moral thinking if the theory of subordinate principles is taken on board?

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