

Utilitarian Ethics

The Calculus of Felicity

Consequentialism

- Consequentialism is a family of normative theories to which Utilitarianism belongs.
 - Under consequentialist theories, the outcomes—consequences—of an action is all that is morally relevant; intentions are not morally relevant.
- Simple Consequentialism
 - Only examines the consequences for the agent—the person performing the act.
- Utilitarianism is social:
 - Examines the effects on others besides the agent.

Hedonism

- Hedonism is a family of normative theories as well.
 - Looks only at pleasure or happiness of certain types (what virtue ethicists refer to as the appetites).
- Traditionally, Utilitarianism is a hedonistic normative theory.
 - The modern version is not hedonistic at all.
 - The emphasis is on well-being and suffering.

Types of Utilitarianism

- Rule Utilitarianism
 - The Principle of Utility applies to rules.
 - We are to act on that rule which promotes well-being or reduces suffering... across multiple contexts.
- Act Utilitarianism
 - The Principle of Utility applies to individual actions in individual circumstances.

Principle of Utility

- Classic version:
 - Act in such a manner as to promote the greatest amount of happiness or reduce the greatest amount of unhappiness for the greatest number of people possible.
 - Problems:
 - Treats happiness as an end state (like graduating from college) rather than as a regulatory state (like being healthy).
 - Happiness (and unhappiness) can be subjective.

Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham's revision:
 - Replaced "happiness" and "unhappiness" with "pleasure" and "pain".
 - Both are objective states of affairs.
 - Problems:
 - Most animals with a central nervous system (and substance-p receptors and neurotransmitters) can feel pain. Pain is physical and does not require mental states.

Principle of Utility

- Modern version:
 - Act in such a manner as to promote the greatest amount of well-being or reduce the greatest amount of suffering for all those involved *without violating anyone's rights*.*
- Well-being and suffering are objective.
- Suffering, unlike pain, requires cognitive capacities.
- Including rights escapes problems endemic to simple Consequentialist theories:
 - Maximized, aggregate consequences, and nothing else, matters in determining the moral status of actions.
 - For example, simple consequentialist theories entail that killing one person is justified if it saves two or more people.

* For the Star Trek fans, this is essentially what Spock had in mind when he says, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one."

Calculus of felicity

- In determining whether an action (or rule) conforms to the Principle of Utility, we must consider 7 factors:
 - Intensity
 - Duration
 - Certainty
 - Proximity
 - Fecundity
 - Purity
 - Extent
- We will examine each of these.

Intensity

- How severe is the suffering resulting from the action?
 - Doctors often ask patients to rate their pain on a scale of 0 to 9. A similar concept applies here.
- In terms of well-being, to what severity does the action benefit the person?
 - Giving a hungry person food only benefits them to a small degree. Giving them the means to acquire their own food for themselves benefits them greatly.

Duration

- How long does the suffering or well-being last?
 - Utilitarians prefer long-term well-being over short-term well-being.
 - If an action produces suffering, short-term suffering is less problematic than long-term suffering.
 - Providing a hungry person with the means to acquire food also provides long-term duration.
 - “Give a man a fish, you feed him for a for a day; teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime.”
 - In abortion, poor or no prenatal care entails life-long negative effects. See, “Deficit in ‘poor’ brains identified”.

Certainty

- How confident are you that the intended consequences will be the actual consequences?
 - We cannot always be certain of our intended consequences.
 - Actions often have unforeseen consequences. As many need to be controlled for or discovered in advance as possible.
 - We are only expected to act upon the information available at the time. We have a duty to utilize the best information possible.

Proximity

- How soon will the consequences occur?
 - Generally, Utilitarians are biased in favor of immediate results.
 - This basis is somewhat unfounded. Sometimes delayed consequences should be preferred.
 - This category is contextually relevant.
 - (In the euthanasia debate, immediate results are validly preferred.)

Fecundity

- What are the secondary effects of the action?
 - Most actions entail secondary effects. These too must be evaluated.
 - Do the secondary effects promote well-being, reduce suffering, or promote suffering?
 - Examples:
 - In medical care, the more individualized care one patient requires entails reduced care for other patients. The secondary effect is poorer quality healthcare for other patients.
 - In abortion must consider side effects of abortion procedures for the woman, the effects on future child (if keeping it) verses adoption as alternatives to abortion, etc.
 - Also under abortion, parental notification laws sometimes leads to second trimester abortions (a negative—low purity—secondary effect).

Purity

- To what degree is the action free from suffering where it promotes well-being as well?
 - Many actions have dual effects producing both well-being and suffering.
 - Utilitarians prefer pure actions.
 - The mixture must be more positive than negative.

Extent

- How many people are affected by the action?
 - All parties, primary, secondary, tertiary..., must be considered equally!
 - In euthanasia must consider the interests of the dying person, her family, the hospital staff, other patients.*
 - Low extent does not *automatically* entail an action being morally impermissible. Again, context is relevant.
- *Each person counts for one and only one.*
 - Principles of fairness and equal consideration are embedded in the Calculus of felicity.

* This is one point where Utilitarianism is criticized. In some contexts it is clear that everyone does “count for one and only one”; that is, everyone should count equally. But in other contexts, such as euthanasia, should the interests of doctors, nurses, and other patients, count equally with the interests of the dying person and his/her family?

Example

- Let us take a simple example:
 - Should you go to the beach with your friends or stay home and study for an upcoming exam?
 - Going to the beach will most likely score higher (if we assigned numerical values) in categories: intensity, certainty, proximity, and purity (assuming no guilt feelings).
 - Staying home to study will score higher (assuming you pass) in categories: duration, fecundity, extent (you're studying or not effects me too).*
 - Which *ought* you to do?
 - Study of course!

* IDEA survey results are largely a function of a student's expected grade in the course. The IDEA survey does not include such a question as a control variable thereby undermining its validity. Faculty evaluations are a small part of tenure decisions. (I'm not tenure track.)

The beach and well-being

- Studying for any particular test promotes your well-being. Going to the beach, this weekend, most likely does not promote your *well-being*.