

ETHICS: Utilitarianism

Lecture 24

Phil 1000, Fall 2008
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Quick Review

- What is Ethics/Morality?
- Purpose of Ethics/Morality?
- Descriptive vs. Prescriptive claims
- Moral Relativism vs. Moral Objectivism
- Morality & God
 - Divine Command Theory
 - Two Functions for God
 - Four Challenges to DCT: Moral Skepticism, Euthyphro, Karamazov, Moral Motivation

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Is objective morality possible without God?

- Two Theories we will look at:
 - Utilitarianism (Mill)
 - Social Contract (Rawls)
- Others we will not look at:
 - Deontology (Kant)
 - Virtue Theory (Aristotle)
 - Relational Theory

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The Value of Your Actions

Imagine you witness a car accident. You see the driver unconscious in the front seat. You jump into action and pull the driver to safety. However, the car does not explode as anticipated. As a result of your heroics the driver's neck has been damaged, leaving the driver paralyzed in both legs.

Did you do the right thing? Explain why?

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The Value of Your Actions

Intentions

- You intended to help a person in need/danger.
- The moral value of your action is determined by your intention (good will), not the outcome of the action.
- Alternatively, the moral value of your action is determined by whether the action followed some principle of good action, to help people in need.

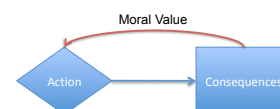
Consequences

- The net result of your action was a moral wrong, you harmed the person even though you didn't intend to.
- The moral value of your action is determined by the outcome of the action.
- Alternatively, the moral value of your action is determined by whether you maximized the calculated utility.

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Utilitarianism

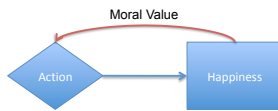
- A consequentialist ethical theory that holds the rightness or wrongness of an action is judged on the basis of its consequences, not any intrinsic feature of the action itself (contrasted with deontological ethics).
 - Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
 - In strict terms: Insofar as the consequences are good, the action is good; insofar as the consequences are bad, the action is bad.
- An attempt to objectively evaluate the moral value of an action: determine what are desirable consequences, and evaluate accordingly.
 - What are desirable consequences?
 - By what standard should we evaluate (objectively) outcomes.



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Principle of Utility

- "...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, by unhappiness is intended pain and privation of pleasure."
 - Happiness is the good at which actions should aim, because that is what everyone aims for and is the only intrinsic good.
 - Happiness is equated with pleasure and/or absence of pain



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Happiness is the Greatest Good

- It is what everyone wants/seeks
 - Mere pleasure and/or absence of pain?
 - Mill's Higher vs. Lower Pleasures?
- It is the only intrinsic good
 - Not good in virtue of achieving another goal
 - Sought after for itself
- Greatest happiness for the greatest number...?

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Strengths of Utilitarianism

- Intuitively compelling:
 - We should want our actions to have good consequences (purpose of morality).
 - Happiness is a consequence worth striving for (common sense).
- Provides a clear standard for evaluating actions and how to guide actions.

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Challenges

- 1. Difficulty in calculating utility**
 - Should I calculate consequences each time or depend on some general rules
 - Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism
- 2. Justice Objection**
 - If we take the principle of utility seriously, some consequences may justify horrible actions, such as torturing innocent people. This seems unfair (unjust).
 - Does rule utilitarianism have an answer?
- 3. Integrity Objection**
 - Utilitarianism demands a lot from individuals, namely to forsake individual happiness for the greater good at nearly every turn; that is, the happiness calculated is not individual happiness but collective happiness.
 - Does rule utilitarianism have an answer?

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Next Time

Social Contract Theory

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