

A Romp Through Ethics for Complete Beginners

**Session Six:
Utilitarianism: Mill and the utility calculus**

**Marianne Talbot
Department for Continuing Education
University of Oxford
7th March 2011**

Last week we:

- learned about categorical and hypothetical imperatives**
- reflected on whether the categorical imperative is central to morality**
- compared Hume's account of moral motivation with Kant's**
- considered the differences between Kant and Aristotle**
- reflected on whether to side with Kant or Hume**

This week we shall:

- learn about consequentialism**
- consider whether there are counterexamples to utilitarianism**
- consider the many different interpretations of utilitarianism**
- reflect on whether there are different qualities of happiness**
- reflect on the distinction between ‘act’ and ‘rule’ utilitarianism**

Consequentialist theories...

... evaluate the moral worth of actions...

...by looking at their consequences

The most famous consequentialist theory...

...is probably utilitarianism....

...though libertarianism comes a close second

Utilitarianism is the view that...

.... the right action is that which produces...

...or tends to produce...

.... the greatest happiness of the great number.

We shall be considering the views...

... of John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873)...

... probably the most famous proponent of utilitarianism...

...though not the person who initiated the theory

Mill offers an apparently shaky...

... official argument for utilitarianism...

...and a rather stronger unofficial argument

The official argument is that as...

... the only thing each of us desires is happiness...

...we all desire the general happiness....

...happiness, therefore, is the ultimate end....

... of human conduct and the standard of morality.

But even if we do desire happiness does this mean:

- it is the *only* thing we desire?**
- that we *ought* to desire it?**
- or that desiring happiness entails desiring *general* happiness?**

Mill's official argument isn't as shaky as it seems...

...but we're going to examine an argument...

... Mill relies on in several places...

...but never makes explicit

Utilitarianism explains...

... why it is implausible to think that...

...our everyday moral rules are absolute truths

The fact there are exceptions to all our everyday rules....

....demonstrates, according to Mill, that it is not to these rules we should look...

.... in deciding what to do...

....rather we should look to the Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP).

The GHP tells us that...

... the right action is...

.... the action that produces...

.... the greatest happiness of the greatest number (GHGN).

In order to understand utilitarianism properly we need to know:

- a. what the GHP means**
- b. whether there are counterexamples to the utilitarian claim**
- c. whether the GHP is practical**

For a utilitarian an action is right *only* if it produces the GHGN

This does not require that an agent must *intend* to produce the GHGN.

This is just as well...

**... because it might entail that you act
immorally if...**

.... you relax with a cup of tea...

**.... instead of doing a voluntary stint at the local
Oxfam shop.**

With the exception of Aristotle, whose focus is unclear....

...our other theories have focused primarily on the agent and his reasons for acting...

...the utilitarian shifts our focus to the action itself...

...and to its consequences

Exercise:

Imagine Tom takes his elderly aunt out for tea. Unfortunately as they cross the road to the tea shop, she is run over.

- 1. what you think a utilitarian would have to think about the morality of Tom's action?**
- 2. What do *you* think about the morality of Tom's action?**

The utilitarian can, though, shift his focus back to the agent....

...to judge the moral worth of an agent by...

... whether his actions, over time, successfully produce the GHGN

The claim that the right action is that which produces...

.... (or tends to produce)...

....the greatest happiness of the greatest number...

.... is multiply ambiguous

Questions:

- are we talking about action *tokens* or action-*types*?
- what do we mean by ‘happiness’ ?
- do we mean the greatest *total* happiness or the greatest *average* happiness?
- what do we mean by the ‘greatest number’ ?
- the greatest number of *what*?

The ambiguity of the GHP has caused some...

.... to think of utilitarianism as a ‘slippery’ theory...

...in that every time there is an objection to utilitarianism...

...a different interpretation is postulated...

...isn’ t this just semantics?

This is not a good objection....

...if utilitarianism *on some interpretation*...

... is the *right* moral theory...

.... then it is our duty to find...

... the interpretation that works.

We shall consider just two different interpretations:

- whether we should consider the quantity of happiness or only its quantity**
- whether the GHP refers directly to token acts or does so only via types-acts**

The utilitarian notion of happiness is simpler than Aristotle's.

Mill defines it thus:

“By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”

But there is a disagreement between utilitarians...

... about whether it is only the *quantity* of happiness...

... that should be counted in the utilitarian calculus...

... or also its *quality*

Jeremy Bentham...

.... another famous utilitarian...

**.... believed that we need only look to the
quantity of happiness...**

**....Mill believed that we must also look to its
quality.**

Mill categorised pleasures into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures.

He argued that anyone capable of experiencing both would always choose the higher pleasures over the lower.

According to Mill it is better to be...

.... 'Socrates dissatisfied'

... than...

.... 'a fool satisfied' ...

...do you agree?

Now let's look at the ambiguity about action-types and action-tokens

If we say ‘*that* lie is wrong’ we are saying only that a particular lie is wrong.

If we say ‘*lying* is wrong’ we are committed to the belief that *all* lies are wrong.

In the terminology of lecture one, the latter claim is *generalist*, the former *particularist*

A particularist utilitarian is called an ‘act utilitarian’ (AU).

The AU checks each *token* action against the GHP.

A generalist utilitarian is called a rule utilitarian (RU).

The RU uses the GHP to check action-*types*...

...and then checks action-tokens against the rules this generates.

RU has seemed attractive to some..

... because the AU can only recognise 'rules of thumb'

....rules based on past experience....

...so if, in your experience, lying has nearly always ended in tears...

... then the rule 'don't lie' will be a useful reminder of this.

When lying would clearly promote the GHGN...

...the AU will break the rule....

...because for him rules...

... do not have deontological force

But we do sometimes think rules have deontological force don't we?

A possible counterexample to utilitarianism

The populace of a small US town are living in fear because of a series of horrific rape/murders. The newly appointed, not yet trusted, sheriff knows the culprit is dead because he shot him. But no one saw him do this and the body fell into a fast flowing river and disappeared.

But last week the sheriff locked up a vagrant who is suicidal, claiming to have lost his whole family and all his possessions in a disaster.

What, the sheriff thinks, if he finds 'proof' that the vagrant committed the crimes, tries, convicts and hangs him. This will make everyone happy and is clearly, therefore, the right thing to do.

Is it the right thing to do?

If the AU is happy to break rules every time he thinks it' ll promote the GHGN...

.... then doesn' t he fail to recognise the proper force of moral rules?

RU enables the utilitarian to insist that utilitarianism...

.... does recognise the proper deontological force of everyday moral rules....

....we should *always* tell the truth...

....because *generally speaking* truth-telling promotes the GHGN

But it has been argued that RU collapses into AU...

An RU has three possible responses he might make to the situation in which the GHGN demands that a rule be broken:

- he should keep the rule**
- he should break the rule**
- he should modify the rule**

If the RU keeps the rule then isn't he a deontologist masquerading as a utilitarian?

If he breaks the rule isn't he simply an AU?

But what if he modifies the rule?

Imagine that he modifies the rule to read ‘Do A except in circumstance C’ .

The next time he meets an exception he will modify it again to read ‘do A except in C1 and C2’ ...

and so on....

On this story the RU...

...will never actually act differently from an AU...

....so how can his theory count as *different*...

... from that of the AU?

The collapse of RU into AU, however, can be resisted by recognising that:

- 1. different people play different roles in respect of the rules:**
- 2. in everyday life there are two sorts of rule:**

Different people play different roles in respect of the rules:

- a legislator decides whether a certain laws should be made and practices introduced.**
- a judge looks to the law to decide who to punish and how**

The legislator can look directly to the GHP to decide which laws will produce the GHGN, so he acts as an AU

But once the law is introduced the judge must look to the law, not to the GHP, so he acts as an RU

In everyday life there are two sorts of rule:

- there are rules that summarise past decisions made in particular cases**
- there are rules that define a practice and that must be treated as the practice suggests if we are to adopt the practice**

A summary rule can be broken whenever the GHP suggests it should be.

Anyone acting on a summary rule will act as an AU.

One who chooses to adopt a practice that is governed by rules...

.... thereby commits himself to looking to the rules of the practice to decide what to do....

...he cannot look directly to the GHGN, and must act as an RU.

To see the different ways in which we use rules...

... and the different types of rule we use...

.... is to see that the situation regarding AU and RU...

... is far more complicated than we might have thought.

Finally let' s look at...

...the epistemology...

... and metaphysics...

... of utilitarianism

What would a utilitarian have to say about the truth of the claim:

‘dropping the bomb on Hiroshima was the right thing to do’ ?

The utilitarian wouldn't *have* to say anything:

his answer would depend on his beliefs about whether or not dropping the bomb on Hiroshima produced the GHGN.

It seems likely that we' ll *never* know whether this statement is true or false.

But this doesn' t mean it isn' t either true or false.

The utilitarian is a moral realist.

The facts that make moral statements true or false for the utilitarian are not independent of us.

If there were no conscious subjects there could be no happiness.

But this doesn't make utilitarianism anti-realist:

...the utilitarian still thinks there are real facts...

... that make moral statements true and false....

...it's just that they are facts about us

The utilitarian believes that we acquire knowledge of morality...

... by inductive means, by learning about the consequences of our actions.....

...and, assuming the future will be like the past...

... we think of those that will produce the GHGN as (likely to be) right...

... and the others as (likely to be) wrong.

Moral knowledge is not therefore *a priori*...

.... as Kant would have it...

.... we do not discern right and wrong by intuition...

.... instead we discern it by observation and experience

So what do you think about utilitarianism?

Questions to test your understanding:

- What does Mill mean by happiness? How does this differ from Aristotle's account of happiness?
- Can you name at least two consequentialist theories of ethics?
- Can you identify at least three ways in which the utilitarian claim is ambiguous?
- Does utilitarianism focus on the act or the agent? Are there any advantages to its focus?
- Should the utilitarian calculus count quality of happiness or only quantity?
- What is the difference between AU and RU?
- Can a utilitarian recognise rights?

There is no reading for next week....

...instead come armed with questions