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Utilitarianism

The fundamental idea of utilitarianism is that the morally correct action in any situation is that which brings about the highest possible total sum of utility. Utility is variously understood as happiness, pleasure or the satisfaction of desires and preferences. The problem of finding a way of comparing happiness is known as the problem of “interpersonal comparisons of utility”. Bentham puts forward a utilitarian theory of political obligation—we should obey our rulers as long as the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. This is bolstered by “indirect utilitarianism” (to deal with the obvious collective action problems) which states that we need a body of laws which will be respected even when breaking one of these on a particular occasion would, if it were permitted, lead to an increase in happiness—obey the laws to maximize happiness. Therefore:

- Laws should be passed if and only if they contribute more to human happiness than any competing law (or the absence of law) would do.
- Laws should be obeyed because they are laws (and will be disobeyed because disobedience means punishment) and should only be disobeyed to avoid disaster.
- Laws should be repealed and replaced if they fail to serve the proper utilitarian function.

Three premises:

- The morally best society is the one in which happiness is maximized.
- The state promotes happiness better than the state of nature.
- The state and the state of nature are the only alternatives available to us

Therefore:

- We have a moral duty to bring about and support the state.

JS Mill:

Crux of the matter: Utility or the *Greatest Happiness Principle*—actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. Happiness=intended pleasure and absence of pain; unhappiness=pain and deprivation of pleasure. (NB: Happiness is not a “continuity of highly pleasurable excitement” but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures and not to expect from life more than it is capable of bestowing)

Points to be remembered:

- pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends. All other things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves or as the means to the promotion of pleasure and prevention of pain (thus, not ends in themselves). The ultimate end is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain and as rich as possible in enjoyment, both in terms of quantity and quality.
- Of two pleasures, if there is one which is given a decided preference by all or almost all, then that is the more desirable pleasure.
- What is happiness can be ascertained by experience which embodies opinion and testimony.
- It is an “unquestionable fact” that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of enjoying two types of pleasure, give a marked preference to the one that employs their higher faculties (i.e. quality superior to quantity). All human beings possess dignity in one form or other (approx. in proportion to their higher faculties) and it is such an essential part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong that nothing that conflicts with it could be an object of desire to them. This preference does not take place at a sacrifice of happiness i.e. a person whose capacity of enjoyment is low has a greater chance of being fully satisfied but there is a difference between happiness and content. We should not be satisfied with that which ought not to satisfy us. Hence, “*it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied*”.
- Utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own greatest happiness but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. The *highest virtue* is the readiness to serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of one’s own. Thus, there is a “utilitarian morality” which recognizes in human beings the power or sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others.(NB: the sacrifice itself is not a good; a sacrifice which does not increase or tend to increase the sum total of happiness is considered wasted).
- Utilitarianism is not a “godless doctrine” because “if it be a true belief that God desires above all things the happiness of his creatures and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine but more profoundly religious than any other”.

John Grote:

Grote is essentially a critique of Mill and the utilitarian doctrine. According to him (and he gets really (justifiably) grouchy):

- Happiness may be worth striving for but it is different according to different people and it is difficult to compare the happiness of one person with that of another.
- How can a man by the power of his own will make his own happiness under any circumstances? Mill points out the difference between happiness and content and then does not sufficiently bear it in mind. Is life to be an effort after the higher happiness or a satisfaction in the nearer and lower? Moreover, it is all very well to say happiness lies in “mental cultivation” but the “springs of human happiness and unhappiness” lie deeper than all this. He does not touch on the complexity of the problem or face the difficulty of the variableness and vastness of the nature of man.
- We have no way of deciding whether we should best spend our efforts in trying to be happy under existing circumstances or in trying to improve the circumstances.
- Thus there is a paradox between the philosophy of happiness as a lofty ideal of what man may rise to and a philosophy of happiness as the fact of enjoyment as unaffected by man’s will and his moral nature (Mill hovers between the two—*I’m not sure I agree with Grote here*).
- Mill does not sufficiently explain whether those who tell us their experience are giving us testimony or opinion. If the former, then their experience only stands in place of what might have been our own—why trust a second-hand witness when first-hand testimony would be much more satisfactory? If the latter, then what makes us value one person’s opinion more than another? In that case “the pleasure most valued by a man whom we think worthier than others, is the pleasure we most value”—we evaluate the worthiness of pleasures by observing which people value them. If we do have some faculties higher than others, then why don’t we just let those determine our actions instead of waiting to see whether others (whoever they are) indicate a preference.
- Moreover to judge between pleasures, requires that the mind of the comparer should be in the same state and judge in the same manner, at the same time of the one pleasure as at that of the other.
- Utilitarianism must measure pleasures and the difference of what is quality as distinguished from quantity is not measurable.
- Pleasures are not independent things to be thus compared but interwoven with the rest of life, having their own history. Moreover, in the interval between one pleasure and an another, the mind itself is changed so there is no touchstone which can act as the medium of comparison.

David Lyons:

(I didn't understand him at all but I'll outline the two main points I gathered) There are two kinds of utilitarianism:

- Simple utilitarian considerations—those that concern all the effects of the particular act in question or the effects of that act as compared with those of alternative acts. E.g. “what will happen if *this* act is performed?”
- General utilitarian considerations—those that concern the total effects that could be produced if all acts similar to the one in question, which could be performed, actually were performed. E.g. “what would happen if *everyone* did the *same*?”

The utilitarian generalization test is “if the consequences of everyone's doing a certain sort of thing would be undesirable then it would be wrong for anyone to do such a thing”.

Machiavelli

The Prince:

See for terse summaries of each chapter:

<http://www.the-prince-by-machiavelli.com/summary-of-the-prince-by-machiavelli.html>

or overall summary:

<http://www.princeton.edu/~ferguson/adw/prince.shtml#summary>

The Discourses on Livy:

Some key points:

- The most effective governments rest on firm popular support. Therefore, the ideal form of state is a republic with a mixed constitution.
- History moves in cycles. Civilizations rise when they find their proper spirit, achieve unity, and propel proper leaders to the fore. Then, in success, they become decadent, and those qualities that made for greatness at an earlier time are forgotten and discarded.
- Only a single individual's actions can found a new republic or reform a corrupt city. Therefore, it takes one to order and many to maintain a republic.
- Religion is an essential institution because it ensures that citizens will observe oaths and instills courage in the citizens.
- In order to maintain a republic in a corrupt city, it is necessary to turn it into a monarchy rather than a democracy.

- It is often necessary to have recourse to violent means in order to establish a republic.
- Some forms of social conflict (e.g., class struggles) are beneficial to a republic. It is factions that are dangerous.

The tension between the two works is that *The Prince* advises princes on how to obtain and maintain power and *The Discourses* promotes maintenance and preference for republics. However (apart from the fact that he wrote these two books at exactly the same time so he clearly could not have had such a dramatic change of mind) the difference between the two works is not as great as it seems on the surface—the popular character of *The Prince* and the reliance of the prince on the support of the people (besides obvious references to establishment of a republic scattered through the book—p.74 (set up of institutional arrangements), chpt. 1 (draws attention to republics), concern with “new” principalities indicative of sweeping away existing social orders to establish new ones much like the Roman empire, p. 91 (emphasis on the common good) etc.) are consistent with *The Discourses*.

Virtue:

The Prince (from what I gather) contains two concepts of virtue—traditional and the “virtu” which Machiavelli’s prince must have. The former implied the Christian notion of virtue (embodied in Moses¹). Virtu however is “political virtue” that is, virtue defined within and by politics. Political virtue consists in knowing how to make use of an art or skill to one's advantage in the world. Thus, he rejected Christian virtue as inimical to the Roman virtu of state formation and preservation (embodied in Romulus).² Mansfield finds the proper alternative especially in Aristotle: virtue as moral excellence, the exact nature of which requires much study and reflection apart from political action. It can make itself manifest in politics—even occasionally elevating politics—but is not defined in and by politics and does not misunderstand itself by believing that by entering it can control and transform politics. Machiavelli's virtue is not republican, not of the soul but of the body and spirit, not a habit but on the make, and never in itself (Mansfield). It is necessity, its end is acquisition, it must be impressive (show and be recognized), and it is politi-

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1. Although, Machiavelli does urge the Prince to follow Moses’ example, it must be noted that this is emphasized only in the very last chapter of the book. The last chpt. is a call to liberate Italy and it gives encouragement to Lorenzo by citing the miracles performed by Moses. It is almost an attempt to smooth over the radicalism present in the rest of the book.
 2. The addressee of *The Prince* is advised to imitate Romulus among others. To imitate Romulus means to found Rome again—indications (among others) of wanting a republican form of government.

cized, i.e., understood by its political effects. Arguing thus, Machiavelli must dispense with (natural) justice. Moreover, virtue is what it gets you - but it will get you the wrong thing unless you compromise with evil. It is therefore distinct from goodness (although goodness is needed for its impressiveness). To sum up, Machiavelli redefined morality, teaching that “evil” deeds do not oppose but are a necessary part of virtue. (NB: Here you can bring up Mandragola. Machiavelli dramatically depicts how deceit and hypocrisy are needed to resolve the conflicts among individuals to produce a mutually satisfactory outcome not possible through appeal to reason alone. Mandragola can thus be seen as a morality play for politics).

NB: the words “justice”, “tyranny” and “political science” do not occur in *The Prince*.

Questions:

1. Why is utilitarianism so successful in political theory? What is attractive about it? (Krause)
2. What is Plato's justice? Compare it with Machiavelli's virtue. (Krause)
3. Utilitarianism: its strengths and weaknesses as a moral and descriptive theory. (Krause)
4. Rights theories and how they relate to utilitarianism. (Krause)
5. Is utilitarianism egalitarian or realistic? (Krause)
6. What is the difference between the ancients and the moderns? (Muirhead)
7. Compare Plato's conception of justice with Machiavelli's. (Mansfield)
8. What would Machiavelli have to say about patriotism? (Mansfield)
9. Which interpretation of Machiavelli's views on morality do you find more persuasive? (Mansfield)
10. Do you see more similarities, or more differences, between *The Prince* and *The Discourses*? (Mansfield)
11. We began with a discussion of whether Machiavelli was a modern, and what the distinction was between modern and ancient thought. (Sandel)
12. Is Machiavelli a modern? Is his secularism modern? (Mansfield)
13. Does Machiavelli think that security is the real political problem? (Mansfield)