Utilitarianism

Mill 1806-1873

Hume 1711-1776

Hume

- Hume’s version of utilitarianism is a precursor to Mill’s classical utilitarianism
- Like Mill, Hume ground morality in human nature and not in some divine entity
- Unlike Mill, Hume’s version of utilitarianism is contingent upon human agency and not some objective feature of the world
  - For Hume, social utility grounds ethics
  - The more good a given behavior produces for society, the better the action (virtue)
  - Pleasure is still that standard for moral value. But, true pleasure appears to result from responses to the correct virtues, which are those that have social utility

Classical Utilitarianism (Mill)

Three points

1. Actions are judged right or wrong only by appeal to their consequences.
2. When evaluating consequences, all that matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is created.
3. Each person’s happiness counts the same.

What is a right action?

- What makes right actions right and wrong actions wrong?
  - Right actions are those that produce the greatest amount of happiness over unhappiness.
- What are wrong actions?
  - Wrong action are those that produce more unhappiness than happiness
  - Called the "Greatest Happiness Principle"
What's Meant by "Happiness"?

- The "Happiness" Machine: Imagine a machine that provides you with any pleasure you desire....
- Given what you know about the Happiness Machine, would you choose to step into the machine, living a life of total contentment and pleasure?
- Is all we seek from life pleasure, happiness, and contentment?
- Why wouldn't we want to live a life of total happiness?

Mill's Qualitative Hedonism

- Mill realized the problems with a theory based purely on hedonism, or pleasure
- So, he thinks there are "higher" and "lower" pleasures, and the higher are better than the lower
- "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."
- What does Mill mean by this quote?

Hedonism

- The Happiness Machine illustrates hedonism
- Hedonism: the pursuit of one's own pleasure as an end in itself
- Early versions of Utilitarianism identified happiness with hedonistic pleasure
- Mill comments, "by happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure"
- The second case challenges hedonism: Why do we value friendship? Is it simply because it makes us happy?

We're More than Pleasure Seekers

- A human's pleasures are of a different degree than a pig's
- While a pig might be satisfied hooked up to the Happiness Machine, humans demand more from life and experience than merely the satisfaction of bodily pleasures
- Humans strive to realize their potential as human beings and this means striving to realize uniquely human capacities and potential, not just the satisfaction of bodily pleasures
Consequences Matter

• For Utilitarianism, the motives of one's action do not affect the morality of an action
• Actual consequences of an action determine whether that action is right or wrong
• What if there is more to determining the morality of actions than simply an appeal to the consequences of an action?

Equal Importance

• Each person's happiness counts the same
• Since each person's happiness counts the same, we must treat each person's welfare as equally important
• Mill said we must be, "as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator"
• Agent-neutrality: which consequences are deemed better is independent of the agent’s perspective
• Utilitarianism endorses a principle of fairness and equality

Objective Ethical Theory

• Utilitarian believes there is a universal, objective ethical principle that everyone ought to follow
• This objective principle is utility
• Can one be wrong about rightness and wrongness?
  • The right action is not necessarily what you might think is right or what you might desire
  • Rather, the right action is determined by the goodness or bad of the action's consequences

Motive to Obey Principle of Utility?

• The motive to obey the principle of utility is both internal and external
• The internal motivation is that we all desire our own happiness
• The external motivation is that we desire and reinforce behavior in others that promotes their own happiness
• The use of external rewards and punishments can promote or prevent an individual's happiness
Hume’s Virtues and Vices

- For Hume, pleasure is not the consequence of one’s actions, but the response to doing the right (virtuous) thing
- Virtues are those moral sensibilities that create pleasure in one
  - Vices are those moral sensibilities that create pain in one
- Virtues are good, or lead to long-term and long-lasting approval because they produce pleasure
  - Vices are the opposite
- Virtues are good or desirable because they contribute to the good of the whole system
- Sentiment is one’s internal capacity to respond to morally significant properties in one’s environment

Of Chastity and Modesty

- What does Hume think is the role of chastity and modesty among women?
- Why is female chastity and modesty important?
- What is the over-arching reason for the expectation that women should be chaste and modest?

Hume's Naturalistic Account

- Hume attempts to naturalistically ground women's virtues of chastity and modesty
  - Women are chaste and modest not because of some divine entity or because it is simply true by definition (a priori)
  - Women's chastity and modesty is of greater moral significance (social utility) than men's chastity and modesty

Nature of Procreation

- Raising offspring requires a union of male and female
  - Infants are feeble and require nurturing
  - Since children require years of nurturing, the male/female union must be of considerable duration
  - To keep men committed to a long-term relationship and commitment to raise children, men must believe the children are their own
  - Men can be easily mistaken about their biological relationship to a child
  - Women cannot be mistaken about their biological relationship to their children
Why Do Women Not Succumb to the Temptation of Infidelity?

- Speculative philosopher: because women don't want to risk a bad reputation
- But, what makes infidelity any worse than any other kind of immoral act?
- Nothing

Whence Come Chastity and Modesty?

1. If women were not chaste and modest, then men would not support and nurture the offspring of women
2. Men would not support and nurture the offspring of women because they could not know that the offspring were their's.
3. One cannot expect one to commit one's time and resources, often at one's own expense, to support and nurture offspring which are not one's own.
4. If all men were to neglect the offspring of women, then society, and the species, would be harmed.
5. Therefore, the chastity and modesty of women exists to serve the public interest.