140: Matters of life and death – 3 – Utilitarianism: too demanding?

1  Utilitarianism
Named after its basic normative principle; roughly: do what produces the greatest benefit or utility (the greatest balance of good over harm).
A readily intelligible account of morality: (1) minimal metaphysical commitments (2) easy to see why morality should matter.

Note 1: there are different ways of construing 'utility' (pleasure versus desire satisfaction).
Most now assume that desire is more basic.
What makes pain bad? The sensation itself, or the desire for its absence? Surely the latter. E.g. the masochist who welcomes pain; the morphine that leaves the sensation of pain but suppresses the desire for its absence.
⇒ What matters are people's desires, not (except derivatively) their sensations.

Note 2: this is a consequentialist moral theory – actions are to be assessed by their consequences.
Objection: we don't in fact judge the rightness or wrongness of acts in terms of their actual consequences.
E.g. the carrier of the previously unknown disease, who starts an epidemic. He is the cause of the epidemic. But did he act wrongly? Surely, only if he knows, or can reasonably be expected to know, the consequences, would we say this?
Utilitarians reply by distinguishing between judging the worth of an agent, with which traditional morality is mostly concerned, and judging the morality of an action, which enables us to learn for the future. Utilitarianism is a forward-looking theory, and is mostly interested in the latter. An agent's knowledge and motives are only relevant when one wishes to assess the worth of the agent.

Note 3: there are a variety of forms of utilitarianism –
(1) act-utilitarianism – the right action, for an agent A at time t, is: the act whose total consequences include a greater total balance of pleasure and/or satisfaction than would be included in the total consequences of any alternative action open to A at t.
(2) rule-utilitarianism – individual actions are judged by rules, and the rules are judged by their utility. Direct calculations of utility are only to be made where there is no rule covering the case, or where rules conflict.
(3) quality-of-character-utilitarianism – acts are to be judged by the qualities of character displayed, and only the latter are to be judged by their utility (see handout 4).
This makes it hard to get a clean assessment.

A major theoretical attraction: it provides a decision procedure for ethics, a single criterion of right and wrong.
Common sense contains a variety of moral rules and principles, which can easily conflict. But it seems unsatisfactory to have to say in such cases, "Whatever you do will be wrong". E.g. many sorts of circumstances where you must choose between telling a lie and breaking a promise. Utilitarianism gives us an answer to such dilemmas (or a procedure for looking for an answer).
This is the attraction of reducing all moral rules and principles to just one.

2  Utilitarianism and Moral Motivation
Recall the demand of wide reflective equilibrium: to provide a Governing Conception of morality – where does morality come from? why do we care?
These questions are answered together: we begin with limited natural sympathy for the needs and
sufferings of others, which is then *universalized* through the impact of *reason*. We are supposed to come to see that the distinctions visible/invisible, friend/stranger, etc., are irrelevant to sympathy: pain is pain, no matter who feels it. Moral progress can be seen as a gradual weakening of our natural partiality through the impact of rational considerations. (Now arguably to be extended to animals – see Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* and elsewhere.)

The above explanation can be summarized in the picture of the *impartial sympathetic observer*. The right thing to do is what we *would* decide if we had *full knowledge* of the consequences of our actions *and* were *equally sympathetic* to the interests of all those affected. Think of this as an imaginary device to represent the moral standpoint.

### 3 Is Utilitarianism too demanding?

**(a) Distinctions lost?**

1. **First point**: Utilitarianism makes every action fall into one of two classes. *Either* the act produces more utility than any alternative, in which case it is a duty; *or* there is some alternative action which would produce more utility (which you ought to do instead, therefore) in which case it is against duty or wrong. *Common sense* allows that many actions fall into a third class. Acts that are neither duties nor against duty – they are neither required nor wrong, but discretionary (a matter of free choice). This is the idea of non-moral space.

2. **Second point**: Utilitarianism draws no distinctions amongst duties. If an act is for the best, then it is morally required of you. *Common-sense* divides duties themselves into two distinct categories – those that are strict or "perfect" which are required by justice, and those that are "imperfect" which are required by charity or beneficence.

3. **Third point**: Utilitarianism holds you are required to act for the greatest utility, so it is impossible to do more than is required of you. The minimum required is the maximum! *Common sense* allows that within the class of discretionary actions there is a special category of acts which go beyond duty. These are morally admirable but do more than is morally required. E.g. acts of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, extreme generosity, etc.

***(b) Too much to ask?***

If Utilitarianism obliges me to act for the best, would it oblige me to give up almost everything for charity?

In a roughly equal world, no – if all are equally well off, then most utility will be produced if each looks after their own (their self, their family, their friends).

Here the arguments from *insecure causal chains* (action at a distance is less likely to succeed) and *insecure knowledge* (you know your own needs better) come into their own.

But in the actual world Utilitarianism may entail that I should give up everything (or almost everything) for charity. Would this be to demand too much?

We return to the issue late in the course, when discussing famine. But on the face of it, common-sense says ‘Yes, this is too much’.

**Conclusion**: there are problems, here, for any utilitarian approach.