

Virtue Ethics

The anatomy of utilitarianism

We understand what could make an act right in terms of what could make an option the best of those available. Because there could be nothing more (or less) to a choice's being the right one than the choice's producing what is best, we accept *consequentialism*.

What is distinctive of *utilitarianism* is its theory about what features of a thing could make it good—it contributes to happiness or pleasure. Pleasure/happiness is intrinsically good and nothing else is.

Against consequentialism

The consequentialist thinks that because all of ethics can be explained in terms of promoting what is good or valuable from an impersonal point of view then we have a workable conception of what is good or valuable from this point of view. Foot denies this:

What is it, let us now ask, that is so compelling about consequentialism? It is, I think, the rather simple thought that it can never be right to prefer a worse state of affairs to a better. opinion. For surely it will be irrational, we feel, to obey even the most useful rule if in a particular instance we clearly see that such obedience will not have the best results. Again following Scheffler we ask if it is not paradoxical that it should ever be morally objectionable to act in such a way as to minimize morally objectionable acts of just the same type. If it is a bad state of affairs in which one of these actions is done it will presumably be a worse state of affairs in which several are. And must it not be irrational to prefer the worse to the better state of affairs?

Where the argument for consequentialism errs

An argument for consequentialism might proceed like this: it is never rational to prefer an acknowledged lesser good to one that is greater. The consequentialist view is that the right action and the best action are one and the same. It is never rational to prefer a course of action to the course of action the consequentialist identifies as the right action.

Foot remarks:

This thought does indeed seem compelling. And yet it leads to an apparently unacceptable conclusion about what it is right to do. So we ought, as I said, to wonder whether we have not gone wrong somewhere. And I think that indeed we have. I believe (and this is the main of the paper) that we go wrong in accepting the idea that there are better and worse states of affairs in the sense that consequentialism requires. As Wittgenstein says in a different context, 'The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent' thesis.

Good, better, best

Foot thinks that while we can sensibly talk about things being good, better, best, the consequentialist thinks of what's good, better, and best in a distinctive way. If she's right, the way that the consequentialist thinks of good states of affairs and the best available state of affairs differs from the way we ordinarily think of it. Once we're clear on this, the argument for consequentialism loses much of its force. Why? Because the sense in which we agree that it's right to do what we judge to be best is *not* the sense in which the consequentialist suggests that it is always right to do what's best.

Ordinary conception: what's good/best is not characterized from the impersonal standpoint. It might reflect our sense of what's good to do/best to do given our moral obligations. As such, our ordinary judgments about what's good/best won't provide an independent way of determining where our obligations lie.

Consequentialist conception: what's good/best is characterized from an impersonal standpoint.



We might imagine that the first woman hit Alice (the neighbor's kid) with her car and the second has brought Beatrice (her own kid) to the emergency room because she had been hit by a falling tree branch. Both children are equally bad off. There's enough pain killer for one child only and it's sitting on the tray before them.

The first woman might think to herself, "It would be better (for me) to give the drug to give it to Alice because I hit her with the car".

The second woman might think to herself, "It would be better (for me) to give the drug to Beatrice".

A nurse might think to herself, "It wouldn't be better to give it to Alice or Beatrice because they're both in as much pain. I should flip a coin".

Four things to notice. First, each of these thoughts seems intuitively correct. Second, nobody is picking an acknowledged lesser good over a greater good. Third, only the nurse is thinking about the issue from anything like an impersonal standpoint. Fourth, it's not even clear that there's a disagreement here between the first two women and the nurse.

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- (4) There's no disagreement between the first two women and the nurse.

Given (1), (3), and (4), it seems that our intuitive sense of what's best *doesn't* support the consequentialist hypothesis that the right = the best (characterized impersonally).

Given (2), (3), and (4), it seems that while there's some sense in which our moral judgments reflects the disposition to think of the best as what ought to be done, this *doesn't* reflect the thought that what's best (characterized impersonally) is what our obligation is.

Can utilitarians be friends?

Can you be friends with a consistent and morally conscientious utilitarian? The utilitarian thinks that what you ought to do is perform that act that brings about the greatest happiness for the greatest number whoever happens to be included in that number. You might think that true friends look after their friends' needs before the needs of others. If you visit someone in the hospital, they thank you for coming, and you say that you came only because you couldn't find a better way to promote happiness, it doesn't seem that it would be right to think of your act as an act of friendship.

What the objection is *not*. The objection is not to the idea that utilitarians are required to calculate ahead of time which of the available actions would maximize utility and then act accordingly. Such calculation is only required if it is required to maximize utility and rarely if ever would it be. * (This is important because there's a misplaced objection to the utilitarian view which is precisely that the view requires such calculation. Here's Austin discussing a version of that objection. "It was never contended or conceited by a sound, orthodox utilitarian that the lover should kiss his mistress with an eye to the common weal. This is in response to the objection that if we tried to consciously work out what the greatest happiness principle requires, "the occasion for acting usefully would slip through our fingers, whilst we weighed, with anxious scrupulosity, the merits of the act and the forbearance")

What is the objection, then? I take it that we think that it's part of a morally sound and virtuous life that a person cultivates friendships even if acting as a true friend involves acting in ways that deviate from the greatest happiness principle.

Can utilitarians be benevolent?

Foot writes:

In the light of this discussion we should find it significant that many people who do not find any particular consequentialist theory compelling nevertheless feel themselves driven towards consequentialism by a thought which turns on the idea that there are states of affairs which are better or worse from a moral point of view. What is it that seems to make this an inescapable idea? Tracing the assumption back in my own mind I find that what seems preposterous is to deny that there are some things that a moral person must want and aim at in so far as he is a moral person and that he will count it 'a good thing' when these things happen and 'a good state of affairs' either when they are happening or when things are disposed in their favour. For surely he must want others to be happy. To deny this would be to deny that benevolence is a virtue-and who wants to deny that?

Benevolence as a virtue

We might agree that benevolence is a virtue and think that one attractive feature of the utilitarian view is that it reminds us of this fact. This, however, is a mistake, for the utilitarian works with a defective conception of benevolence (much in the way that the utilitarian conception of friendship is defective). To the extent that you think benevolence is a virtue and think that we ought to act as the virtuous person would, you should be opposed to the utilitarian view.

Doctrine of the mean

You might think that reasoning is called for when we face a difficult choice. Aristotle thinks that the right way to resolve a difficult choice is to strike the sort of balance that the person of wisdom would.

He thinks that the virtue that is manifested in action sits between two opposing vice (one of excess and one of deficiency). In the case of healthy eating, your health will be wrecked if you eat too much or too little. In the case of generosity, to the extent that generosity is admirable, it doesn't involve giving away too much or too little. In the case of bravery, the brave person will face danger when it is proper and will not when it is not. Etc.

To instill in someone courage, honesty, generosity, etc., you have to help this strike the proper balance between the relevant opposing vices. How might that be done?

Honesty

Suppose you want to raise an honest child. Your child might learn at an early age that people tend to believe what they tell them and discover that this can be used to their advantage. When they discover lying, you might try to break them of their habit by reminding them that they shouldn't hurt others or that they owe loyalty to others. There's a fear that once you break them of their lying, they won't be as careful with the truth as they should be. They might tell truths that are unkind when that's not called for. They might share secrets that were supposed to be kept secret.

To get the child to appreciate the importance of keeping the feelings of others in mind, you have to tap into some sense of kindness. To get the child to appreciate the importance of telling the truth when it is hard to do so, you might tap into some sense of justice or loyalty. Notice that you have to draw on other virtues. Otherwise, the child will never appreciate the difference between keeping a confidence and lying or telling the truth and brutal frankness.

Courage

The courageous person is neither cowardly nor reckless. The difference between courage and cowardice can't be understood numerically. There's not some level of risk that you count as cowardly if you won't face and courageous if you will. (A similar point holds for courage and recklessness.)

Think about a military example. If you rush the enemy trench armed only with your pocket knife, that's reckless, not courageous. (Remember, the courageous action is admirable.) If you flee when your job is to stand rear guard, your actions are that of the coward (even if staying and fighting means certain death.) We can't determine what true courage is until we know what's required by loyalty, say. Again, it seems you can't perform acts that manifest one virtue unless you have further virtues to help you find the mean between the two opposing vices.

The doctrine of the unity of the virtues

For Aristotle, a virtuous person is disposed to think, feel, and act at the right times about the right things in the right way. This requires having each of the virtues. Each virtue has a proper sphere of application (e.g., courage in facing danger, justice in distributing what's hurtful and helpful, etc.). A fully good person would display *practical wisdom*, knowing which ends to pursue and the effective means to pursue them. Moreover, a practically wise person must be virtuous. They have a true conception of what's good for human beings, not just in limited spheres (e.g., horse training, medicine, the arts), but in general. The understanding requires the possession of virtues because this is what's required for understanding which ends are good. The clever person can effectively pursue ends, good or bad, but such a person is not wise. With this in mind, consider Aristotle's remarks:

Each of us seems to possess the character he has in some way by nature, since right from birth we are just, prone to temperance, courageous, and the rest. Nevertheless, we expect to find that what is really good is something different, and that we shall possess these qualities in another way. For both children and animals have the natural states, but without intellect, they are harmful.

It is clear from what we have said, then, that we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character. (Moreover, on these lines one might also meet the dialectical argument that could be used to suggest that the virtues exist in isolation from one another. The same person, it might be argued, is not best suited by nature for all the virtues, so that he will already have acquired one before has acquired another. This is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those on the basis of which a person is said to be really good; for he will possess all of them as soon as he acquired the one, practical wisdom.)

True benevolence

Whereas the utilitarian thinks of benevolence as the central or chief virtue, Aristotle would reject the idea that the virtue could play such a role. True benevolence has to be constrained (it will sit between two opposing vices) and the wise person can properly strike a balance between deficiency and excess only if they have further virtues to draw upon.

It might be benevolent to provide the means by which someone discovers a cure for some horrible disease, but not if that involves rounding up hobos and giving them the disease to learn about its effects.

If one were to hold that benevolence were the sole moral virtue and that all others were derivative, it seems that in predictable ways, one's moral theory will tell us to perform acts we cannot believe would be right:

Drug Shortage: A drug is in short supply and is needed by six patients. One patient needs all of the drug to survive. Five patients need $1/5^{\text{th}}$ of the drug to survive. What should you do?

Organ 'Donor': A drug is in needed by an otherwise healthy man to counteract the effects of an allergic reaction. If nothing is done, the man will die. Next door are 5 patients in need of organs. It just so happens that their blood types match up and you have at your disposal a team of surgeons you know could successfully transplant the organs of the one man to save the five others. Should you withhold the shot so that the man dies and his organs can be redistributed?