Level 2 - 10/7/18

The moral theory of Utilitarianism states that an action is right if and only if it, among all the actions the agent could perform, maximizes utility. That is to say, out of all the possible actions someone can take, the morally right choice is the one that most increases utility, or the total balance of good over bad for everyone affected over all time. The Hedonic conception of utility then defines "good" as happiness/pleasure and "bad" as unhappiness/pain.

It is only possible to act on expected utility, which is how much utility we *think* an action will have. This is constrained by the limited accuracy of estimates based on past experience. Actual utility, meanwhile, is the measure of an action's utility in reality. We are unable to know exactly the impact an action will have from now to the end of time, so an action that seems to have maximum utility may, in fact, not.

Hoever, a competing moral theory, Kantianism, doesn't register actual events at all. It states that an action is right if and only if it treats no one merely as a means, and it does treat everyone as an end in themselves. In other words, the intentions behind actions matter more than the result. To treat another as a mere means is to ignore the other person's humanity—their rationality and freedom to pursue their goals—and use them solely to achieve our own goals. In order to treat another as an end-in-themselves, we must firstly not treat them as a mere means. Then, we need to respect them as a rational being with their own ends, which might involve helping them achieve those ends.

Utilitarianism and Kantianism may each issue different judgments regarding what one ought to do. For example, if I were trying to avoid attending a friend's house party, I ostensibly have two options: I could tell her truthfully that I'm not interested, or I could lie to her about an external event preventing me from going. With all other things being equal, Kantianism would require the first action, while Utilitarianism would probably prescribe the second.

According to Kantianism, I have to be truthful; lying is almost always morally wrong because it treats someone as a mere means. If I tell my friend that I had extenuating circumstances preventing me from going, I am disrespecting her rationality and autonomy. She cannot rationally consent to being lied to, so I am treating her as a mere tool to further my own goal, even if my goal were to prevent her from having her feelings hurt. Presumably, she sent me an invitation to hear my honest response, so I would be taking away her freedom to choose the truth by lying. Additionally, I am manipulating her rational faculties, using my knowledge of her trust in me to trick her into reaching my ends by ignoring hers.

Hedonic Utilitarianism would, quite differently, encourage lying if it resulted in maximum utility. If my friend will be more glad to hear that I really want to attend but can't be there only because my car broke down, as opposed to my being completely disinterested, then it is necessary that I lie to make her happy. Assuming that she would never find out about my lie and feel bad about it later, lying here would be the morally right thing to do.

Some find the Utilitarian approach implausible, however. The Experience Machine Objection uses a thought experiment that details the existence of a device that would simulate a perfect life for anyone who plugs in. Once plugged in, though, one cannot leave the virtual reality. The argument is as follows: If Hedonic Utilitarianism is true, then it would be morally required for each of us to plug into an experience machine. It is not morally required for each of us to plug into an experience machine. Therefore, Hedonic Utilitarianism is not true.

This is a valid argument; the conclusion cannot be false if the premises are true. Thus, it is necessary to examine the premises to determine the soundness of the argument.

The first premise appears to be true because it is simply an extrapolation of the definition of Utilitarianism. An experience machine would provide the maximum possible happiness to the one plugging in. If plugging in equates to maximum happiness, then, by the definition of Utilitarianism, it is the only morally right course of action. A Hedonic Utilitarian cannot deny the first premise without denying the very definition of their moral theory.

The second premise is based on strong intuitions. Even assuming that our absences wouldn't result in negative utility for our friends, family, and society, it still seems wrong to be *required* to plug in. Perhaps this is because of the principle of autonomy—we seem to lose most of our freedom after plugging in, since we can't return after doing so. Or, perhaps a fictional life can't satisfy us because the thing we desire is false, explaining why it's not required to plug in. Whatever the reason, the end result of this speculation is that something matters more than just happiness; it is severely counterintuitive to require people to plug in. Unless one is prepared to accept that major intuitions are wrong, the second premise must be true also.

In conclusion, if by the definition of Utilitarianism, we're required to do something that seems intuitively false, Hedonic Utilitarianism must not be true.