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Midterm assessment for professor Dr. Pablo Gilabert

PHIL 232

Midterm exam

**A.1 Reconstruct and assess the “Argument from Autonomy” against hedonism. What is this argument? Is it compelling? Explain.**

Paving the way for a better life results in maximum pleasure. It is believed that pleasure is the primary objective of living a good life. Knowing what brings us pleasure is set as a standard that determines our progress in our well-being. Instrumental goods are things that pave the way to good things. Mostly materialistic goods are considered instrumentally goods, because they are a source of pleasure. These sources help bring values about things that are intrinsically goods, about the reason on why they are pleasant to us.

Hedonism, meaning pleasure in Greek, states that sustainable happiness is the only intrinsically good that makes our lives better, while unhappiness is the only intrinsically bad thing that makes our lives worse. Happiness it an attitudinal pleasure, meaning it does not affect us in any physical way. Epicurus (241-270 BCE) believed that living virtuously and wisely augments the quality of life the highest. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) believed that intellectual and artistic pleasures bring the highest amount of pleasure, unlike physical pleasures. If we want to remain or become happy, we have to prove it. We must know what makes us happy and why. It is the case that evil deeds may bring the same happiness as good deeds. But hedonism does not concentrate only in individual welfare, thus, genuine moral actions can be described as better-off than immoral or false beliefs.

Happiness requires autonomy in order to be acquired. By having the choice, we have the power to pave our own life, the way we believe it can make us happy. When happiness is limited, it is believed that life cannot be fully good. Sometimes those limits may be for the better, as paternalism limits liberty for the good of someone who lives under false happiness. In contrast, such manipulations can make autonomy obsolete, which is an intrinsic good, therefore, autonomy, as well as happiness, is important in its own right. The A*rgument from Autonomy* [37] against hedonism implies where it fails to project a clear implication:

1. If hedonism is true, then autonomy contributes to a good life only insofar as it makes us happy.
2. Autonomy sometimes directly contributes to a good life, even when it fails to make us happy.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

The first premise makes the distinction of happiness and other virtues, such as autonomy. It is clearly legitimate that their level of importance varies, therefore this premise is considered true. The second premise seems plausible. But Hedonism does not resolve this premise, because it concentrates on having an authentic life, a life of our own values even if the results are not maximizing our happiness.

My assessment of this argument compels me on how it tackles certain hedonistic views. I believe that autonomy is as valuable as happiness. Materialistic things may bring happiness to an extent, but autonomy is the main contributor to it. Suppose you are working as an employee for a company. Everyone would prefer being independent when it comes to managing tasks instead of being heavily supervised and restricted. In consequence, workers will achieve higher performances and obtain greater motivation. Thus, I firmly agree with premise 1.

There are instances where having the power to choose may be our downfall, leading to unwanted misery. Although many criminals and killers may show no remorse in court, there are some who collapse with great regret when the punishment has been established. They chose to break the rules, follow their choices and act out of emotion in order to gain pleasure. But their values and beliefs may only get them so far to an authentic life. Hedonism disputes authenticity, but this contradicts the liberty that it offers for choosing what makes us happy. Hedonists believe that even genuinely delirious choices are equally endorsed to virtuous ones only if they produce the same amount of happiness. They completely bypass the negative outcome autonomous choices may arise. Therefore, supporting the second premise as well, it concludes my agreement for this argument against Hedonism.

In conclusion, I admire the hedonistic views on happiness and having a good life. Seeking our pleasures and allowing them to guide us to happiness is an ideal way of living. Pleasures may vary depending on the person and provides the autonomy for our actions. However, its scope is limited for certain situations and such freedom and autonomy may lead to misery and undesired outcomes. Sometimes, we think rules and paternalism confine our pavement towards happiness, but we forget it’s our own actions and desires that control how far we will get to it.

**B.1 Explore this case by applying egoist and utilitarian theories in normative ethics. What verdicts would the applications of these theories yield? What would be the argument in each case? In your opinion, what are the relative strengths and weaknesses of these theories? Explain.**

Different opinions and stances can be proposed to this depending on the ethics applied. In this dilemma by Bernard Williams, we apply both egoist and utilitarian theories to assess the different scenarios that Jim can commit.

In normative ethics, an egoist, more specifically a psychological egoist, is someone who acts only for the benefit of self-interest. Even the most sacrificial actions for saving others are committed for the purpose of fulfilling a positive influence on oneself. If those actions were to cause harm to us, then it is highly unlikely we would do them. If Jim was an egoist, he must make a decision in order to maximize his own well-being. Even if he had to sacrifice himself, it would have been done for the sake of being positively praised by society. Although that’s not the best option for his well-being, what he can do is sacrifice benevolence and compassion by refusing to shoot anyone and let all of the protesters die. This comes down to a moral decision.

Psychological egoism is not an ethical view. Ethical egoism is a moral theory, where the only moral duty we have is to improve our own well-being in any way possible. This theory allows violent and criminal actions in the condition that it serves our self-interest. If Jim killed one of the protesters, he walks away unharmed, resulting the same for refusing to shoot. Therefore, both choices work for him. Proposing the *Best Argument for Ethical Egoism* [113] will provide more insight into what works better:

1. If you are morally required to do something, then you have good reason to do it.
2. If there is good reason for you to do something, then doing it must make you better off.
3. Therefore, if you are morally required to do something, then doing it must make you better off.

In Jim’s case, we question whether he is required to kill a protester or not in order to make himself better off. By accepting Pedro’s offer to kill one protester, the argument does not hold. Jim may lose his reputation and attract national media attention for intervening to such an unusual case. Although the villagers and protesters understood his dilemma, we can never know if it was the right view for his well-being. Situations like these produce a lot of stress, so his decision process becomes clouded. This reveals the main weakness of egoism. Our self-interest does not broaden our view and restricts our perspective in challenging situations. In addition, being targeted by other audiences may result in negative effects down the road.

By refusing to shoot anyone, he may still attract media attention on why he did not shoot and save more lives, but his involvement is minimal. Therefore, there is no good reason for him to shoot in order to make himself better off. What makes egoism appealing to this challenging choice, is the excuse it provides for easy getaways without any personal cost. The argument supports this decision by Jim.

In contrast, a utilitarian Jim may act differently. Utilitarianism is all about being duty-bound to maximize well-being for the greater number. The *principle of utility* [123] states that an action is morally required just because it does more to improve the overall well-being than any other actions that could have been done in the circumstances. Precisely, utilitarianists believe that the morality of an action is contributed by its results and not by its intentions. If Jim was to attempt and fail to save the protesters by gunning down the soldiers, his action would favor no one, since no one watching asked him to do that. The *slippery slope* argument prevents this from occurring. By attempting such small action, a series of bigger events with worse results occur later on. I believe this is what makes utilitarianism work in such bizarre cases. Judging actions based on their results will make us understand its overall impact on society.

In such unusual situations, utilitarianism believes it’s right to violate taboos or break central moral values in order to serve the well-being of the majority. If Jim walks away, all protesters are killed, while also dissatisfying the villagers who urged him to accept Pedro’s offer. To choose the action with the greatest balance of benefits, it must be optimific. The good and bad must be identified and a balance between quality and quantity must be maintained. By far, this is the most accepted choice by society. I personally believe this is where utilitarianism is weakened by its own foundations. Sometimes utilitarianism requires us to commit serious injustices in order to favor the mass. The protesters may have revolted in order to resist a possible oppressive government, where the majority of society failed to realize. Thus, killing even one of them for speaking their voice may be an extreme measure which falsely satisfies an illusioned majority of people. Although this is a minor setback, I firmly conclude that a utilitarian Jim would deliver the preferred decision to satisfy himself and everyone else surrounding him.

**Book Cited:**

Shafer-Landau, R. (2018). *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.23-158.