

Basics of Ethics-1

Lecture 5

Course structure

Topics:

- Ethics and critical reasoning, argument analysis
- Moral skepticism
- Goodness and Value
- Consequentialism
- Non-consequentialism
- Virtue ethics
- Engineering ethics, Moral responsibility

So far:

- Realism vs relativism
- Emotivism
- Divine command theory
- Ethical Egoism
- Relativism
- Error Theory
- Hedonism

Add

- Desire satisfaction theory
- Consequentialism

Two foundations of Ethics

- Theories of Good
- Theories of Right

Theories of Good

- **Hedonism**
 - Epicurus
- **Utilitarianism**
 - Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, G.E. Moore

Structure

- There are things of positive value in the world. Actions that produce them are good actions. Actions motivated to produce them are ethically right.
- Ethics is not simply a matter of “right” and “wrong,” “on” and “off.”
 - There are cases in which people do the right things for the wrong reasons. There are cases in which people do the wrong thing despite pure motives.
- At the base are things of genuine value: the good things.
 - Actions are good in terms of whether they produce good things.
 - Actions motivated by an attempt to produce the good are right actions.
 - Traits of character that result in right actions are virtues.

Hedonism

- How to make our lives better
 - Instrumental and intrinsic goods
- Instrumental goods
 - Valuable because of the goods they bring about
 - Good-for
- Intrinsic goods
 - That which the instrumental goods are good-for. Whose value does not depend on being a means to anything else that is good

Hedonism

- Happiness as the intrinsic good
- Good life = happy life
 - Filled with pleasure and free from pain
- **Epicurus:**
 - “Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we always come back....**When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and the aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table that produces a pleasant life. IT IS RATHER SOBER REASONING, SEARCHING OUT THE GROUNDS OF CHOICE AND AVOIDANCE, AND BANISHING THOSE BELIEFS THAT LEAD TO THE TUMULT OF THE SOUL.**

Argument from evil pleasure

- 1. If hedonism is true, then happiness that comes from evil deeds is as good as happiness that comes from kind and decent actions.
- 2. Happiness that comes from evil deeds is not as good as happiness that comes from kind and decent actions.
- 3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

Problems

- Hedonism is not concerned with moral goodnesses of different sources of happiness, but rather with happiness per se. So the argument fails. No matter the source, the happiness is equally beneficial!
- Schadenfreude!

The Argument from False Happiness

- 1. If hedonism is true, then our lives go well to the extent that we are happy.
- 2. It's not the case that our lives go well to the extent that we are happy; those whose happiness is based on false beliefs have worse lives than those whose happiness is based on true beliefs, even if both lives are equally happy.
- 3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

Problems

- Hedonist's response
 - Truth/falsity of belief has no role to play
 - All that matters is happiness
- Nozick's "Experience Machine" to critique the above
 - Imagine that there is an amazing virtual reality machine that lets you simulate any experience you like. Suppose you program it for a lifetime of the very best experiences. Once you plug in, you think that you are in the real world, and have no memory of life outside the machine. Your entire life from then on is lived in the machine, and you are as happy as can be, believing yourself to be doing all of the things you truly enjoy.
 - Compare this with a case in which someone actually does the things and enjoys the experiences that the plugged-in person only imagines. It seems clear that the second life—the real one—is more desirable. Yet both lives contain the same amount of happiness.
- Sound familiar?

Argument from Autonomy

- 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.

Problems

- Hedonism cannot account for the value of autonomy
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Nozick's Experience Machine

- **What matters to us in addition to our experiences?**
 - We **want to do certain things**, and **not just have the experience of doing them**
 - it is only because **first we want to do the actions** that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we've done them
 - we want **to be a certain way**, to be a certain sort of person.
 - Someone floating in a tank is an **indeterminate blob**. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. **Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving?** It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is.
 - Thirdly, plugging into an experience machine **limits us to a man-made reality**, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct. There is **no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated.**
 - Perhaps **what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves**, in contact with reality. (And this, machines cannot do for us.)
 - See Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 58 – 60.

Some other response to the experience machine

- To be in the machine is **to think of ourselves in isolation**. A **solipsistic way of viewing ourselves and others in the world**.
 - Recall Aristotle: we are *zoon politikon*, i.e., political animals!
 - Our identity is in community; no person is an island.
- It is in pain (and not the pleasure of pain) that we give and find solidarity with and in others.
- It is the **entire range and gamut of emotions** that makes us human—not just pleasure and pain.
 - Sorrow, joy, achievement, love, heartbreak, companionship, solitude, loneliness, despair, anxiety, well-being, health, contentment, discontent, disquiet, et al.
- To plug into the experience machine is **to limit our repertoire of feelings and emotions**. It is to believe that we already have had all kinds of experiences and we know we will be happy with plugging in!
 - There are **many which we have not experienced and they might have a life-changing effect on us**.
- Moreover, there's **so much that needs be done in the world**. What matters is what we can do about it, given we can do something about it. What is our place in the world? What is our responsibility to the world and others in it? Do we have one?

Desire Satisfaction Theory

- something is intrinsically good for you **if it satisfies your desires, only if it satisfies your desires, and because it satisfies your desires.** Something is instrumentally good for you if, only if, and because it helps you to fulfill your desires
- the **good life must consist of satisfied desires.** But what these desires are for—that is entirely up to you.
- **Benefits**
 - Many models of a good life; pluralistic theory
 - Need not add up to anything such as the highest good or eudaimonia.
 - Individualistic
 - No need for objective theories of human welfare
 - Connects desire satisfaction with what is intrinsically good

Central Claims

- (A) Something is intrinsically good for us **only if it fulfills our desires;**
 - Necessary condition
- (B) **If something fulfills our desires, then it is intrinsically good for us;**
 - Sufficient condition

Counterargument

- **Against A**
 - Can we come up with an example in which **something is good, even though it doesn't satisfy or help to satisfy any of our desires?**
 - Pampering
 - Suicide prevention
- In each of these cases, **we can improve the lives of people without getting them what they want or helping them to do so.** They may, later on, approve of our actions and be pleased that we acted as we did. But **this after-the-fact approval is something very different from desire satisfaction.**

- **Against B**
 - Are we **always better off** whenever our desires are satisfied?
 - **Is desire satisfaction sufficient** for improving one's life?
- Think of all the celebrities who get depressed with fame and fortune and all the misery it brings
 - Or those who are down and out since they have not achieved their due fame
 - Nick Drake
 - Jackson Frank
 - Otis Redding
 - Compare with **Sixto Rodriguez**
 - **Watch: Searching for Sugar Man (2012)**
- We may get what we want, but there is something problematic about our desires themselves
 - Beware what you wish for, you might just get it!

Eddie Vedder, “Society”

It's a mystery to me

We have a greed

With which we have agreed

You think you have to want

More than you need

Until you have it all you won't be free

Vis-a-vis Buddhism

- **Buddhism**

- *dukkha*: there is suffering
- *samudaya*: there is a cause to suffering
- *nirodha*: there is an end to suffering
- *magga*: there is a path to the end to suffering

- **Or Existentialism**

- “Suffering is the origin of all consciousness”
- “we are condemned to be free”

- **Or *The Rolling Stones***

- “*You can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need...*”
 - How to differential ‘needs’ from ‘wants’??

Consequentialism

- an action is morally required just **because it produces the best overall results (optimific)**
- From hedonism to consequentialism to utilitarianism
 - **Whereas DST maximizes satisfaction for one, this could come into conflict with the desires of others**
- Utilitarian principle **maximizes the recipients of the good**
 - Greatest good for the greatest number
 - Politically progressive
 - But falls short in accounting for
 - Moral desert, justice, rights, etc.

Identifying the optimific

- Intrinsically good
- Intrinsically bad
- Weigh in the options
- Determine value of results
- Pick action

Umbrella of theories

- Based on what we evaluate to be intrinsically valuable
 - Happiness
 - Utility
 - Environment
 - Peace and harmony
 - Health and well-being

Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham
 - “Nature has placed mankind **under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure**. It is for **them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do**” (*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1780).
 - That action is right that produces the greatest amount of *pleasure* for the greatest number of people.
 - **Act utilitarianism**

Hedonic calculus

- The procedure to calculate how to reach the right decision based on the above conception
 - Weigh the options by focusing on
 - **Intensity**: how strong it is
 - **Duration**: how long it is
 - **Certainty**: how likely it could be
 - **Propinquity**: when it'd arrive
 - **Fecundity**: propensity to cause further pleasure
 - **Purity**: how free from pain it is
 - **Extent**: number of people affected

Challenges

- To judge whether an act is right, for utilitarians, you have **to be able to compute that it will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number**. But how do you do that?
 - Do you have to count everyone? And **how are different pleasures and pains to be weighed against one another?**
- Because of it, Karl Marx referred to **utilitarianism as a philosophy for “accountants”** or perhaps bureaucrats, or “bean counters.”
- Utilitarianism vs. justice and moral desert
 - Trolley problem
- A good moral theory should tell you **what the right thing to do is before you do it**, but that means **you would have to be able to predict the future regarding how much happiness your action will produce**.
- **How do we know that failing to do an action would not produce greater happiness than doing the action? This would mean knowing the truth of a counterfactual statement!**

J.S. Mill's Utilitarianism

- That action is right that produces **the greatest *happiness*** for the greatest number.
 - **Qualitative utilitarianism**
- In calculating utility, Mill distinguished **classes of pleasure:**
 - “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; **better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.**”

Act and Rule Utilitarianism

- **Act utilitarianism**
 - **Intrinsic value:** well-being
 - **Moral Action:** that which improves overall well-being
- **Rule utilitarianism**
 - morally right action as one that is required by an optimific social rule.

Act utilitarianism

- Attractions
 - Impartiality
 - Justification
 - Advocacy
 - Moral flexibility
 - Moral community

Difficulties

- Very demanding
- Supererogation
- Impartiality
- Moral desert and violation of rights
 - Patient's dilemma

Patient's dilemma

- a healthy man walks into a hospital where there are five dying individuals, one in need of a heart, one in need of a kidney, one in need of a liver and two others each in need of parts that he has. The utilitarian rubric would seem to suggest that if those five can be saved by harming him that that's what morality demands.

To rule-utilitarianism

- An action is morally right because it is required by an optimific social rule.
 - One which meets the condition: if everyone in a society were to accept it, then the results would be optimific.
- From results to rules:
 - Moral rules are optimific social rules
 - Imagine a society where everyone endorsed the social rule
 - Is that a better society than otherwise?
 - If yes, then it's an optimific social rule
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J.J.C Smart's attack on rule-utilitarianism

- Irrational rule worship
 - Rule consequentialists demand that we obey moral rules, even when there might be a chance that breaking them would yield better results.
 - But that is irrational, since in these cases, consequentialists know in advance that their ultimate goal (making the world the best place it can be) will not be fulfilled.
 - It is irrational to knowingly defeat your own goals.
 - Rule consequentialists do this whenever they issue a recommendation that differs from act-utilitarianism.

Self-defeating?

- Act-utilitarianism demands that we always to do what is optimific.
- So, by definition, whenever rule-consequentialists give us different advice, we are required to act in a way that fails to yield the best results.
- Rule-consequentialists would forbid torture and embezzlement and vicarious punishment—even when specific instances of such action would be most beneficial.
- This is self-defeating, since a consequentialist's ultimate aim is to produce the best possible results.

Examined Life (Astra Taylor)

- Featuring Peter Singer

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Watch/Listen

- **Watch**

- The Great Hack
- Human Nature
- We Need to Talk About AI
- The Bleeding Edge
- Coded Bias

- **Listen**

- Examining Ethics
- Ethics of AI in Context
- Land of the Giants

Read:

- Russ Shafer-Landau, *Living Ethics: An Introduction with Readings* (2018)
- Dean A Kowalski, *Moral theory at the movies: An Introduction to Ethics* (2012)