Utilitarianism: objections

This handout follows the handouts on 'Utilitarianism' and 'Utilitarianism: Happiness and Preferences'. You should read those handouts first.

PROBLEMS WITH CALCULATION

Act utilitarianism seems to offer a clear and straightforward way of discovering what is right and wrong. We need to consider how much pleasure and pain (or preference satisfaction) an action will cause. But is it possible to work out the consequences of an action for human happiness? How can we know or work out the consequences of an action, to discover whether it maximises happiness or not? Surely this will be too difficult and too time-consuming for us to do. Bentham's felicific calculus is, in practice, mind-boggling, and we just can't get the relevant information (how intense each affected person's pleasure or pain will be, how long it will last, what other pleasures or pains it might cause in turn, etc.).

Preference utilitarianism might try to claim another advantage here. It is easier to know whether someone's preference has been satisfied than how much pleasure someone experiences. But this is very little improvement if we still need to compare the strength of different people's preferences and so on.

However, the objection misrepresents what utilitarians say. Bentham does not say that an action is right if it *actually* maximises happiness. He says it is right according to 'the tendency which it appears to have' to maximise happiness. We don't need to be able to work out the consequences precisely. An action is right if we can reasonably expect that it will maximise happiness. He also says that the felicific calculus need not be 'strictly pursued' before each decision or moral judgement. It just needs to be 'kept in view'.

This still means we must be able to work things out roughly. Mill thought this was still too demanding. Happiness is 'much too complex and indefinite' a standard to apply directly to actions. But we don't need to try, he claims, because over time, people have automatically, through trial and error, worked out which actions tend to produce happiness. This is what our inherited moral rules actually are: 'tell the truth', 'don't steal', and 'keep your promises' are embodiments of the wisdom of humanity that lying, theft and false promising tend to lead to unhappiness.

Mill calls these moral rules 'secondary principles'. It is only in cases of conflict between secondary principles (e.g. if by telling the truth you break your promise) that we need to apply the greatest happiness principle directly to an action. We shouldn't attempt to calculate happiness directly

unless we have such a conflict. Only in cases of conflict will there be genuine exceptions to these rules.

Of course, our inherited morality still makes mistakes in what it thinks will or won't contribute to general happiness. So we can improve on the rules that we have. But saying this is quite different from saying that we have to consider each action from scratch, as though we had no prior moral knowledge.

INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND RIGHTS

A second criticism of act utilitarianism is that no type of action is ruled out, in principle, as immoral. For example, if torturing a child produces the greatest happiness, then it is right to torture a child. Suppose a group of child abusers only find and torture abandoned children. Only the child suffers pain (no one else knows about their activities). But they derive a great deal of happiness. So more happiness is produced by torturing the child than not, so it is morally right. This is clearly the wrong answer.

Act utilitarians can reply that it is *very probable* that someone *will* find out, and then many people will be unhappy. Because we should do what is *likely* to produce the greatest happiness, we shouldn't torture children.

However, the theory still implies that *if* it was very unlikely anyone would find out, then it would be right to torture children. But other people finding out isn't what *makes* torturing children wrong.

This thought expresses two possible objections. First, we can point out that the example shows that happiness (or satisfying people's preferences) is not always morally good. For example, the happiness child abusers get from hurting children is morally bad. The fact that the abusers are made happy by what they do doesn't make their action better *at all*, but worse. So there must be some other standard than happiness for what is morally good.

Second, we can appeal to moral rights, understood in terms of restrictions placed on how people can treat each other. For instance, I have a right that other people don't kill me (the right to life). I also have a right to act as I choose as long as this respects other people's rights (the right to liberty). One of the purposes of rights is to protect individual freedom and interests, even when violating that freedom would produce some greater good. For example, my right to life means that no one should kill me to take my organs, even if doing so could save the lives of four other people who need, respectively, a heart, lungs, kidneys and a liver. Utilitarianism doesn't respect individual rights or liberty, because it doesn't recognise any restrictions on actions that create the greatest happiness.

Some utilitarians simple accept this. We have no rights. As long as we consider situations *realistically*, then whatever brings about the greatest happiness is the right thing to do. Counterexamples that appeal to very unlikely scenarios are unhelpful, because they have little to do with real

life. In real life, act utilitarianism gives us the correct moral answer.
(Another response is given in the handout 'Mill on Conscience and Justice'.)

THE VALUE OF MOTIVES AND CHARACTER

Utilitarianism is a theory about right action. It claims that an action is right if it leads to the greatest happiness. But, we may object, in such a theory, there is no recognition of the moral value of our *motives* for acting as we do. In particular, the desire to do good, to act as morality requires, is an important part of morality. In just considering actions, utilitarianism fails to consider the fact that we talk about good *people*; it doesn't recognise that our characters also have moral value.

As an objection to Bentham, this is fair. However, Mill has a developed response. It is correct to say that utilitarianism considers people's motives for action as irrelevant to whether the action is morally *right* or not. However, that does not mean that it thinks motives have nothing at all to do with morality. They are relevant when considering someone's 'worth' as a person. Now, such a judgement rests on many factors, some of which have little to do with morality. But utilitarianism will say this: a motive or trait of character that tends to produce morally bad actions is itself a bad motive or trait.

Mill expands on this thought in his essay on Bentham. Morality as a whole is concerned not only with right and wrong action, but also with character. This is partly because our actions naturally arise from our character. But there is another reason. Having a good character is important to understanding what happiness is, and furthermore, it is itself one of the 'ingredients' of happiness. He argues that the desire to do good is one of those things that is desirable (good) for its own sake. For people who desire to do good because it is good, it is *part* of their happiness that they have this motive. Doing good is, in itself, pleasant to them. (For this argument, see the handout on 'Mill's Proof of Utilitarianism'.)

For the utilitarian, this is the best possible psychology to have. What is good is maximising happiness, and here is someone who gets happiness from maximising happiness – what could be happier!

But then, we may object, utilitarianism is too idealistic, if it expects people to be motivated by 'the general happiness' all the time. Mill's response is that utilitarianism doesn't expect this. People can do the morally right thing irrespective of their motive. But utilitarianism does entail that children should be educated in such a way that promoting other people's happiness becomes part of their happiness.

This response depends on Mill's defence of happiness being the only good. If he is mistaken, if there are other goods which are valuable quite independent of their contribution to happiness, then we will understand the value of motives and character differently as well. For instance, if truth is valuable independent of happiness, then honesty is a valuable character

trait, and not (only) because being honest forms part of our own happiness or brings happiness to other people, but just because it respects the value of truth.

THE MORAL STATUS OF PARTICULAR RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the things that we do to make people happy are aimed at *specific* other people, our family and friends. We do them favours, buy them presents, generally spend our time and money on them. But act utilitarianism argues that in our decisions, we need to consider the *greatest* happiness that our actions could create. So shouldn't we spend much less time with the particular people we love and more time helping people who need help, e.g. through voluntary work, and likewise spend less money on the people we love and much more money giving to charity? This would lead to greater happiness, because people who really need help will be made much more happy by the same amount of money or effort than people who don't really need anything.

There are different ways we can develop this thought into an objection. For instance, we can argue that utilitarianism is too idealistic, expecting people to give priority to needy strangers over those they know and love. Or again, we can argue that utilitarianism misses something morally important in counting each person equally. In the abstract, each person is equal, but *to me*, each person does not and should not count equally. It is morally right and good (or at least, not morally wrong) to show partiality towards those people one knows and loves.

Mill's response, in Ch. 2, is simply to say that on the whole, there are very few opportunities any of us have to benefit people 'in general'. And so only considering and contributing to the happiness of a few people is absolutely fine, and utilitarianism does not require more.

But there are two objections to this response. First, if it was true in Mill's day that people could not often benefit people 'in general', that no longer seems true today. There are many charities that work around the globe and welcome volunteer fund-raisers, and the news makes us continually aware of many different causes of suffering around the world. It is perfectly possible, therefore, to dedicate much of one's time and money to helping others 'in general', and there are many opportunities to do so. So it seems that utilitarianism does demand more.

Second, Mill's response doesn't address the objection that utilitarianism simply fails to understand the moral importance of particular relationships. If the general happiness is the ultimate end that we should seek in our action, then we should think of our friendships as a way to maximise the general happiness. Suppose a woman visits a friend in hospital. The friend thanks her. She replies, 'It was nothing, I was just doing my duty, maximising the general happiness in the world'. The friend can feel upset – the visit isn't personal, it is just a *means* to create happiness. If some other

action would have created more happiness, the woman would have done that instead of visiting the friend.

Or again, suppose a man is in a boating accident with both his wife and a stranger. Neither can swim, and he can only rescue one. We might think that he should simply rescue his wife. But if he thinks, 'Rescuing my wife will lead to greater happiness than rescuing the stranger', this seems to miss the particular importance that being married has, including its moral importance. The man has 'one thought too many', and we (and his wife!) can object to his way of thinking about what to do.

Friendship requires that the friend is valued as the individual person that they are, and that we act out of love for them. The motives that are involved in friendship seem to preclude a utilitarian understanding of morality. Yet doing something for a friend is morally good. Furthermore, attachments of love and friendship are central to our happiness, indeed to wanting to stay alive at all. But these attachments motivate actions that are not impartial between everyone's happiness. Utilitarianism fails to recognise the moral importance of partiality.

Some utilitarians have replied that morality is just much more demanding than we like to think. Can you defend spending money on your friends, rather than helping others through charity, when much of the world is in poverty or at war? However, Mill explicitly allows for partiality in his discussion of justice in Ch. 5. He would most likely argue that we are considering utilitarianism in the wrong way again. People have learned that having partial relationships is central to happiness, and so it does not maximise happiness to require people to give them up in favour of promoting the general happiness all the time.

To this response we may object that Mill is giving up on *act* utilitarianism. Instead, he is appealing to general rules about living, and considering which of these rules would maximise happiness. And this is rule utilitarianism.