

Utilitarian Morality: A Dialectic

Ray: Hi, John! Just getting back from class?

John: Yes, I'm taking a class in ethics. It's given me a lot to think about since our talk on evolutionary morality at the beginning of the year. I'm convinced that morality is a rational process, not an evolutionary one. This class has done a lot for me in this area!

Ray: Really? That's awesome! What are you learning?

John: That man, through his ability to reason, has come up with many ways to determine right and wrong on his own. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but this class is showing me why we don't need God to be a moral people. We can figure it out on our own.

Ray: Hmmm, I see. Can you give me an example?

John: I knew you were going to ask that! I'm prepared for you this time. I got four to share with you, and they all work just fine without God.

Ray: Okay, let's hear them. What's the first?

John: Utilitarianism! Simply put, that which maximizes happiness and well-being is what must be moral.

Ray: That sounds awfully vague. As you state it, it sounds a lot like hedonism.

John: A admit the two have a lot in common, but hedonism focuses on the individual, whereas utilitarianism looks at everyone involved. "Balance of happiness" is the phrase they use. Whatever causes the overall balance of happiness to increase is good; whatever causes the balance to decrease is evil. This makes so much sense, and it's so easy to use. And it allows me to continue working against world hunger, because the sacrifices I make doing it are small compared to the benefits the third world country poor receive. The balance of happiness is increasing!

Ray: That's impressive! I'm glad to see that you are serious about this. I would like to have some things clarified, however.

John: Well, I'm not sure what is left to explain, but go on.

Ray: Thanks. You said that as long as the overall balance of happiness is met, then the act is moral, correct?

John: Yes.

Ray: And, at least for now, let us assume that people want to be moral and act ethically, correct?

John: I'm not sure why they wouldn't, but yes. We can assume that.

Ray: We can hold on to why people wouldn't want to act morally until later, let's focus on the moral

system itself. So, it's your birthday next week, and most of the guys on our dorm floor want to celebrate with you by taking you out to dinner.

John: Yes, celebrating birthdays is a perfect example of how utilitarianism works. Everybody gets to enjoy themselves!

Ray: But you love Thai food, and pizza is what most of the rest of us prefer. So you are willing to give up a Thai dinner for your birthday so the greater happiness can be gained at a pizzeria?

John: That's not fair! I always went to their favorite places for their birthdays!

Ray: You're the one promoting the greater happiness, not individual happiness! I'm just trying to make sure I understand its implications correctly. Have *you* thought about the implications?

John: Well, we could argue that the greater happiness is found by each taking turns going to each other's favorite places.

Ray: Perhaps, but a lot of the simplicity you spoke of just became more complicated. But what if we take this petty example to a more serious matter?

John: What do you mean?

Ray: Well, the human body has at least six organs that are both essential for life and can be harvested for transplants. Plus there are other organs that can be used to improve the quality of life of others, such as the eyes. So the greater well-being is obviously being done by harvesting these organs, right?

John: Absolutely! That is why donating organs is such a wonderful gift! Now that you bring it up, make sure you identify yourself as an organ donor on your driver's license like I did, so you can save some lives, and maybe improve the lives of others when you die.

Ray: But I wasn't talking about donating.

John: Huh?!?

Ray: It's a fact that voluntary donations don't meet the needs for organs, and many people die because they couldn't get a donation in time. Is it moral to select people, kill them, and then use their organs if at least two other lives can be saved by doing so?

John: Wow, I never thought of that. But we could argue that fear of randomly being chosen for such a donation lowers the overall happiness of society as a whole. That would stop that practice.

Ray: Well, I agree that such a universal fear would decrease the quality of life for everyone, but if the sum happiness of those whose lives are extended is greater than the collective fear, then doesn't utilitarianism say that this is what we ought to do?

John: Well yes, but how can you measure the happiness of a few and the fear of the many?

Ray: Are you expecting me to defend your argument?

John: Well, I don't know how to make those measurements, but I'm sure people would vote against it if they were given the choice on the law.

Ray: I am sure you are right, but my question is not what people want, but what this morality looks like in use.

John: But can't you agree that people tend to vote for what makes them happier? So if they vote against this law, isn't that indicative of the greater unhappiness such a law would create?

Ray: I find that line of thought intriguing, but not convincing. It seems they are voting with fear on their minds, not happiness. If they are voting out of personal fear for their own lives instead of the happiness multiple people will gain from extending their lives, aren't we going back into hedonism, albeit in a backwards sense?

John: I would say that even if the majority were voting out of fear, that this itself is indicative of what the greater good looks like.

Ray: In one sense, I agree. But doesn't it come down to motivation? Or is utilitarianism really just a democratic version of hedonism? If enough hedonists agree on something, then it must be right?

John: But killing random people just isn't right!

Ray: Well, I think you just opened up another "can of worms" with that, but I'll go along with it for your sake. What if a work-around could be thought of to minimize the fear of society as a whole? The government could establish some criteria that means only a small segment of society are unwilling donors, so anyone not meeting this criteria doesn't have to worry. At least not until something happened that made them part of that group, which only has a small chance of happening. We can also start an ad campaign to encourage more people to let themselves be slaughtered for the greater good, and it can target those who are depressed and disenfranchised. We can also ensure forms of painless killing are perfected to reduce the fear.

John: Okay, okay! I get your point. But you are giving me an extreme example. I don't think it's fair.

Ray: Having a birthday is not extreme.

John: Yes, but I came up with a reasonable solution to that. What else you got?

Ray: Well, what does utilitarianism say about a married couple having a kid?

John: Well, it seems to me that utilitarianism will ace this test! If having a kid will bring the couple happiness, then yes, they should have one. Otherwise, no they should not.

Ray: So, if I understand you correctly, if the couple will have less happiness by having a child than by not having one, then they should not have one.

John: Yes, of course.

Ray: So, abortion is acceptable?

John: Yes, I don't see why not.

Ray: What about the loss of happiness that the child would have had if it was allowed to be born?

John: You are confusing me! You are making this something this isn't.

Ray: You said that what separates utilitarianism from hedonism is that utilitarianism means we have to look at everybody, not just yourself. Yet we keep coming back to what *you* want, not others.

John: But there is no child yet, I don't think we need to take it into account until after it is born.

Ray: I disagree that it is not a child, but I really don't see why it matters. If we remove the possibility of having a child without including the child's happiness, then how can we have sex without slipping back into hedonism?

John: How so? No one claims orgasms aren't pleasurable. As long as sex is consensual, we can safely assume that the greater pleasure is always being achieved.

Ray: "As long as it's consensual?" So, fidelity has no place in utilitarianism?

John: Fidelity clearly has a place in utilitarianism! While I got excited before, this is a much more sober example of how utilitarianism works. A couple can decide that a greater good can come from being faithful to each other than from fooling around.

Ray: Yes, this is a much better example than before. Ideally, this is what a marriage should be about. But I still come back to the same question: How are we measuring the greater happiness here?

John: What do you mean?

Ray: If the greater happiness comes from simply not offending the other, then it seems to me that, as long as an affair is secret, then it is also moral. As you said, consensual sex can be assumed to be increasing the greater happiness, at least for the two involved.

John: Well, I don't like it, but as long as the affair is secret, I can't argue with it. But we both know that affairs never stay secret for long.

Ray: True, but a secret can usually be kept for some period of time, which means it's a future concern. And earlier you claimed that the future happiness of the child was not a concern because he hadn't been born yet. So, are we going to be consistent in our argument or not?

John: Well, I have to admit you got me on that one. But can't we turn this around, that if we *have* to consider the future of the child, then everyone has an obligation to produce as many children as possible?

Ray: It's *your* argument. What do *you* think the answer is?

John: But there quickly comes a time when parents would be overwhelmed with children, and unable to meet any of their needs. This means the overall happiness for everyone in the whole family suffers!

Ray: Yes, and I do agree with the utilitarian solution that at some point the parents need to decide when enough is enough. But if we agree that potential future children are necessary for non-selfish sex, then we have to accept that if no more children are to be had, then sex needs to stop.

John: So, are you satisfied with utilitarianism now that it justifies the Catholic proclivity of having as many children as possible?

Ray: Actually, that is not what the Catholic Church teaches, although sadly most Catholics think so as well. I'm trying to bring this awareness out, but we'll save that for another day. In truth, I'm still not satisfied with utilitarianism. While having sex without the possibility of having children is a form of hedonism, as you agreed to, it seems to me that having sex for the sole purpose of having children is also a form of hedonism.

John: But it's hard work raising churn, how can you call it a selfish endeavor?

Ray: For me, it again comes back to motivation, which is always a personal matter. Are you having as many children as possible because you want them to have the best life, or are you responding to some unhealthy sexual desire?

John: Are you comparing having children to masochism?

Ray: In the case of having children for the sake of having children, I think that's a very good analogy. But whatever you want to call it, you are not having the children for the goodness of the children, but for some selfish reason.

John: Okay, so utilitarianism means that to have sex, one ought to be married and willing to accept children. And this means only having sex when one is prepared to have a child. You ought to be happy with this, as you have shown that utilitarianism has validated Christian teachings.

Ray: I don't think we have closed the book on utilitarianism, but I'm not impressed that it recreated some Christian morals. That is the whole point of secular morality, isn't it? To see if philosophy can do as good as Christianity did on this matter?

John: Well, I never thought of it that way, but I have to agree.

Ray: The Catholic Church never denied that man can't come up with morality on his own, and Saint Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law Theory is based on this premise. Natural Law Theory, by the way, was heavily influenced by Aristotle's Virtue Theory.

John: But if man *can* determine right from wrong himself, why have religion?

Ray: Mainly because of what we've been talking about. While man is capable of determining the good, all too often he is satisfied with stopping as soon as he sees something he thinks he likes. Christianity challenges us to look deeper. Also, there are some things that man is simply not capable of understanding on his own, and divine revelation is necessary. But we don't have to go there today. Anything else you want to say about utilitarianism?

John: So, you accept utilitarianism as a legitimate secular morality, as long as it's thought about long enough?

Ray: No, it seems to me that utilitarianism is really just a democratic version of hedonism, despite you saying otherwise.

John: How so?

Ray: Despite the promise that utilitarianism is for the greater good of all, it keeps coming back to what the individual wants. You want the party at a Thai place rather than what will make the group happier, so you negotiated. One can use the "greater happiness" argument to have an affair, or to abort a child, yet the concerns of the spouse or unborn child are disregarded. But I think the real truth of utilitarianism came from when we talked about organ donating: it is better to receive than to give. Utilitarianism only seems to be desirable by those who want to enslave others.

John: I think you are missing the point of utilitarianism. It's true that some give-and-take needs to take place, such as with the party.

Ray: But what if it's not possible for everyone to get what they want? What if someone literally needs someone with them to take care of basic needs? They are going to take a lot more than they can give. What is to become of them?

John: Well, we already discussed the fact that it is not good for people to live in fear. We ought to contribute to the common good by helping them.

Ray: That seems a lot like slavery to me. You are forced to provide comfort to another with nothing in return, except a hope that, in the very unlikely case that you will become an invalid as well, you will get someone to wait on you hand and foot. Meanwhile, this person who is contributing nothing could save the lives of at least six others by having his organs donated.

John: You call yourself a Christian after making such an accusation!?!

Ray: I didn't say I don't think taking care of the invalids is a bad idea, but I have much different reasons to do so. Utilitarianism means I must be a slave to any and all who are less fortunate than me. My religious faith requires me to help the less fortunate out of my abundance, but I'm also expected to appreciate and enjoy the blessings I do get.

John: Sounds like you are playing both sides of the coin!

Ray: I can understand why you might think that, but that's a talk for a different day. Let me try to word it this way for now. Utilitarianism seems to polarize concepts. The greater good must be worked for, which I agree is not a bad thing. But it seems to me that you can only find happiness in one of two ways with utilitarianism, and neither option seems very pleasing to me.

John: Okay, what are they?

Ray: The first one was the birthday party: if what you want is what society as a whole wants, then you can be happy. Otherwise, you are to suffer for the "greater good." As for the second case, I think I may have given the wrong impression by saying you can be happy, but there is still a connection. The second one is if you are an invalid, as you can expect all of society to assist you. If you are capable of taking care of yourself, there is no reason for anyone to help you. As a human being, I should be able

to enjoy the things that make me different than others, and the help I give to others should be based on a sense of charity, not slavery or guilt.

John: Don't you think you might be over-exaggerating things? Certainly we don't have to go to such extremes!

Ray: Sure, but where do we draw the line on what is too extreme?

John: I don't know, but I'm sure plenty of smart people can tell us.

Ray: So, we are to obey their opinions? Doesn't that make it self-serving for them? If so, doesn't it really make this hedonism of the oligarchs?

John: Not opinions. Facts.

Ray: I can agree with facts. What are the facts? How do we get them?

John: I told you. We need to ask smart people.

Ray: Remember, this is your argument. And I'm not trying to be mean here, but if you can't explain your position, then understand I'm not going to give it much credibility.

John: <sigh> Well, I can't fault you for that.

Ray: Is it even possible to know what the "greater good" looks like? Sure, maybe for simple things, like agreeing that the birthday boy gets to choose where to eat. Everyone eventually gets a chance that way. But very little in life is so simple. Is it even possible to know all the relevant information, including outcomes, with any degree of certainty?

John: Maybe, if one had enough facts to go by.

Ray: Come on, aren't we talking about needing to have an infinite understanding for even relatively simple social policies to guarantee the greater good?

John: <sigh> Yes, you are right. Don't say it. You made your point about God. And the more I think about it, the more you are right. Utilitarianism always seems to come back to self-interest at some point, and that leads to hedonism. Without all the facts available to make a decision with, you have to insert your own opinion, and it therefore becomes about you.

Ray: Not surprising. After all, the theory *is* called utilitarianism.

John: What do you mean by that?

Ray: The root word is "utility," which means "to use." It makes perfect sense that the whole purpose of utilitarianism is to use others, even if one is willing to be used in return.

John: I never thought of it that way. I did think it was an unusual word for what it was trying to do. So much of utilitarianism depends on being able to measure happiness, which, of course, is impossible to measure. And since it is impossible to measure happiness, it is so easy to impose one's own opinion.

You are only pretending to worry about greater happiness, in fact you are imposing personal desires on others.

Ray: That's the way I see it. The only meaningful difference between the two that I can see is that hedonists at least *admit* they are in it for themselves. Utilitarians only *claim* they are worried about the greater good.

John: Well, I need to drop my stuff off in my room. Care to join me for dinner tonight?

Ray: Sure, I'll be at the Newman Center. Meet me there and we'll go to the cafeteria from there.

John: Awesome, see you soon!

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