

Phil 104, Monday, November 22, 2010
Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, IV

Utilitarianism:

In contrast to common sense, utilitarianism is systematic. Instead of a welter of conflicting directives, utilitarianism consists in a single, simple principle: “that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct” (411).

Sidgwick’s strategy to convince intuitionists to be utilitarians:

The negative strategy: common sense is a mess.

“The Utilitarian must, in the first place, endeavour to show to the Intuitionist... that the different rules are liable to conflict with each other, and that we require some higher principle to decide the issue thus raised; and again, that the rules are differently formulated by different persons, and that these differences admit of no Intuitional solution, while they show the vagueness and ambiguity of the common moral notions to which the Intuitionist appeals” (421–422).

The positive strategy: utilitarianism offers a natural systematization of common sense.

When we need to explain exceptions, draw definite boundaries, resolve conflict and disagreement, Sidgwick suggests, we turn instinctively to utilitarianism. Indeed, Sidgwick goes so far as to say that common sense may be “unconsciously Utilitarian” (424).

“Utilitarianism sustains the general validity of the current moral judgments... and a method for binding the unconnected and occasionally conflicting principles of common moral reasoning into a complete and harmonious system. If systematic reflection upon the morality of Common Sense thus exhibits the Utilitarian principle as that to which Common Sense naturally appeals for that further development of its system which this same reflection shows to be necessary, the proof of Utilitarianism seems as complete as it can be made” (422).

Where should we go from here?

Should we follow the rules of common sense as the best strategy for maximizing the greatest sum of human happiness? After all, it is plausible that common sense morality evolved in a way that was sensitive to what brought people pleasures and pains.

- (1) People come to dislike actions that cause pain to themselves and (to a weaker degree) to others close to them, with whom they sympathize.
- (2) We come to be disposed to restrain ourselves from actions that are painful to others, through fear of *their* dislike of them.
- (3) As we come sympathize with the pain of men in general, (1) and (2) become stronger.

On the one hand, the morality (i.e., Common Sense) resulting from this process is *unlikely* to be “a perfectly Utilitarian code of morality.”

1. Sympathy has been limited.
2. People have been ignorant about causal relations, in particular what causes pleasures and pain.

3. Deference to authority has introduced distortions.
4. False religions.
5. Changes may make formerly good adaptations bad.
6. Adapted only “for ordinary men in ordinary circumstances.” Perhaps, “men of peculiar physical or mental constitution ought to be exempted from ordinary rules, as has sometimes been claimed for men of genius, or men of intensely emotional nature, or men gifted with more than usual prudence and self-control.”

On the other hand, how *could* we determine a perfectly Utilitarian code of morality?

1. Recall all the problems with Empirical Hedonism.
2. People are so different “in different ages and countries, that it seems *prima facie* absurd to lay down a set of ideal Utilitarian rules for mankind generally.”
3. Should we then try only to “ascertain the rules appropriate to men as we know them, in our own age and country”? But since these people *already* accept common sense morality, this leads us to a dilemma.
 - (a) *Either* we abstract away the fact that they accept common sense morality, in which case “what remains is an entity so purely hypothetical, that it is not clear what practical purpose can be served by constructing a system of moral rules for the community of such beings.”
 - (b) *Or* we consider them as already accepting this moral code, in which case “we have to take the moral habits, impulses, and tastes of men as a material given us to work upon no less than the rest of their nature, and as something which, as it only partly results from reasoning in the past, so can only be partially modified by any reasoning which we can now apply to it.”

So Sidgwick opts for (b): We “must start... with the existing social order, and the existing morality as a part of that order: and in deciding the question whether any divergence from this code is to be recommended, must consider chiefly the immediate consequences of such divergence, upon a society in which such a code is conceived generally to subsist.”

Suppose that there is a new rule that, if *generally followed* in a society similar to the present one, would produce greater pleasure. This doesn’t show that, *advocating* new rule “by example and precept,” will produce greater pleasure.

First case: The new of duty rule conflicts with the old one. Here there are lots of “cons.”

1. The effects of “social disapprobation which [the innovator] will incur,” will not only be painful to him...
2. ...but also “diminish his power of... promoting the general happiness in other ways.”
3. The new rule may not catch on, because it may be too intellectually or emotionally demanding.
4. At the same time, others may be led to abandon the old rule, *without* replacing it with anything. It is “easier to weaken or destroy the restraining force that a moral rule, habitually and generally obeyed, has over men’s minds, than to substitute for it a new restraining habit, not similarly sustained by tradition and custom.”
5. This may encourage more general lawlessness: that is, lead others to abandon *perfectly good* rules.

6. The innovator's own moral impulses may be compromised. It is hard to stick by a rule of conduct that everyone else rejects. "[T]he direct sympathetic echo in each man of the judgments and sentiments of others concerning conduct sustains his own similar judgments and sentiments."

Second case: The new rule of duty only *supplements* the old one.

- These new rules would be *more demanding requirements of universal benevolence*: of charity and public-spiritedness. "[I]t is chiefly conduct which shows a want of comprehensive sympathy or of public spirit, to which the Utilitarian will desire to attach a severer condemnation than is at present directed against it. There is much conduct of this sort, of which the immediate effect is to give obvious pleasure to individuals while the far greater amount of harm that it more remotely and indirectly causes is but dimly recognised by Common Sense."
- The above "cons" don't apply, since the innovator "is merely giving a special and stricter interpretation to the general duty of Universal Benevolence, where Common Sense leaves it loose and indeterminate."

Third case: An *exception* to an old rule whose general observance promotes greatest happiness.

Two kinds of "exceptions" to rules:

1. *General* acceptance of a rule with an exception would promote greatest happiness. E.g., being permitted to lie about how one voted on secret ballot. Presumably, this sort of exception would be fine to encourage.
2. *General* acceptance of a rule with an exception would *not* promote greatest happiness, but an exception to it in this *particular* case *would* promote greatest happiness. E.g., breaking a deathbed promise to a rich, childless miser, in order to give his money to the poor. This sort of exception we probably should *not* encourage. In other words, we should *not* tell people the *truth* about what morality requires!

Esoteric morality

"Thus, on Utilitarian principles,... it may be conceivably right to do, if it can be done with comparative secrecy, what it would be wrong to do in the face of the world; and even, if perfect secrecy can be reasonably expected, what it would be wrong to recommend by private advice or example."

Of course, common sense will be repelled by this. Surely, morality requires that we tell people the truth about what morality requires!

But, from a utilitarian perspective, it's a *good* thing that common sense *is* repelled by this! We don't want people getting it into their heads that it can be a good thing to violate common sense moral rules, so long as one does it in secret. "[I]t seems inexpedient to support by any moral encouragement the natural disposition of men in general to conceal their wrong doings."

Thus, among the moral truths that we should *not* tell people about is the moral truth that *there are moral truths that we shouldn't tell people about!* "[I]t seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept esoteric."

Thus, a utilitarian should sometimes *want* people to *reject* his theory! “And thus a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands.”

If this seems paradoxical, be careful to distinguish the claims:

- Utilitarianism is *false*
- *Belief* in utilitarianism would have *consequences* that are not good from a utilitarian point of view.

Review Questions:

1. “People should not care for their own aged parents, but instead should care for whichever senior citizens are most in need, even if they are complete strangers.” Would Sidgwick tell us to encourage people to adopt this rule? Why or why not?
2. “People are morally required to give more money to charitable organizations like Oxfam or UNICEF than they currently believe that they are morally required to give.” Would Sidgwick tell us to encourage people to adopt this rule? Why or why not?
3. “According to Sidgwick, utilitarianism is inconsistent. On the one hand, utilitarianism says that it is *true* that a person is allowed secretly to break deathbed promises to childless misers in order to give their money to charity. On the other hand, utilitarianism says that people *should not believe* that that a person is allowed secretly to break deathbed promises to childless misers in order to give their money to charity.” Is this statement accurate? Why or why not?