

Chapter 23, Normative Ethics: Consequentialism and Virtue Ethics

Consequentialism

I. Definition:

The rightness/wrongness of an act depends entirely on its good/bad consequences
– but what is it about a consequence that makes it good/bad?
i.e. need to define it in non-moral terms – otherwise = circular

2. 2 types:

Goodness defined as

- a) **Hedonistic** – as pleasure and avoidance of pain
- b) **Agathistic** – something unique

Utilitarianism

I. Act/Rule:

a) Act:

- (i) **excludes universal implications** of an action beyond the actual situation
- (ii) **time** – generally don't have the time for this sort of calculation therefore need general rules for particular types of situation

b) Rule:

- (i) **avoids** the need for us to be **incessant calculators**
- (ii) **avoids elevating expediency** to status of our most important moral principle
- (iii) **prob = many of our acts normally thought wrong = right under utilitm**
+ when they are recog as wrong it is for the wrong reasons
e.g. bearing false witness
- (iv) **Bentham's first and second order evil:**
– something other than consequences makes some acts right
- (v) but our **moral intuitions may be wrong:**
– they may need to be examined and tested re. **R.M. Hare**

c) Happiness:

- (i) **Williams** – utilitarianism = four important attractions:
 - I. **Non-transcendental**
 - II. **Minimally problematical**
 - III. **Empirical**
 - IV. **Common currency**
- (ii) **Problems:**
 - I. **Tracing the consequences and calculating**
– commensurability – non-arbitrary scale of measurement
 - II. **Incessant calculators**
 - III. **Quality:**
 - 1. distinctive range and variety of human happiness
 - 2. Ideal utilitarianism – somethings other than happiness = good in themselves
 - 3. Hedon machine
 - 4. Paradox of hedonism

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d) Preference utilitarianism:

- (i) **Definition:**
Good = maximisation of preference satisfaction regardless of what that is and whether it produces pleasure
- (ii) **Problems:**
 - I. **Special responsibilities:**
Special responsibilities that have nothing to do with increasing the sum total of human happiness
e.g. Tyranny of the majority – the problem of distributive justice
e.g. Responsibilities to family, friends and loved ones
 - II. **Answer = measure the strength of preferences:**
 - 1. Problem = how to measure the strength
– R.M. Hare – convert interpersonal conflict of preferences into intrapersonal conflict
 - 2. Immoral preferences
 - 3. What preferences do we count? Direct, indirect, external?
 - 4. Needs v. mere preferences
- (iii) **Solution = preference management** 'Government House Utilitarianism'
- (iv) **Supererogatory acts**

e) Moral pluralism:

- (i) **Definition:**
Rightness/wrongness of an action = greatest aggregate good produced – greatest amount of intrinsically valuable things
- (ii) **Problems:**
 - I. How to agree on what = objectively valuable
 - II. How are we to measure and compare such radically different utilities – we need some non-arbitrary interpersonal measure

Virtue Ethics

1. **Moral character** and developing it according to the most important virtues – acting as a good person ought to – living up to the best of what we are
2. Virtue = **trait of character** – valued by society + justified in terms of morally acceptable values
3. Virtue = **end not the means** – it is the result of happiness/duty/practical reason
4. **Good life:**
 - a) **Happiness = final and self-sufficient end** at which all actions are aimed
 - (i) = fulfilment of the person which in turn depends upon the type of thing it is
 - (ii) **Human person** = unique in its capacity for reason – capacity to make free and conscious choices, therefore
 - b) **Good life = life of excellence in this capacity** = life of virtue
Therefore,
 - (i) virtuous activities = what constitutes happiness

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(ii) happiness = activity of the soul in accordance with virtue
– you only achieve it by not aiming at it directly but by excelling at that which is the key to you as a person

c) **Virtues ≠ given us by nature** – acquire them by exercising them – ‘states of character arise out of like activities’
– learn to exercise our character traits in a virtuous way = Golden Mean

d) **Golden Mean:**

- (i) Virtuous nature and therefore character can be **destroyed by excess or deficiency** of any particular character trait
- (ii) Key = how we **manage our passions and faculties** when we act
- (iii) Nature gives us our passions and faculties, but **we acquire our character**
- (iv) We are praised/blamed for the way our **character controls our passions**
- (v) **Virtue ensures these = good condition** and makes them work well – not too much nor too little

5. **Advantages/disadvantages:**

- a) concerned with the whole individual, not just with one aspect of how we make decisions i.e. principles or consequences
- b) in complex situations all we can rely on = our judgement and skills
- c) but interpersonal rules and procedures (deontological and consequentialist) = all we can rely on when we have no knowledge of others
- d) even those of good character can easily get the balance wrong
- e) Problem of cheats and those who take advantage:
 - (i) destroy the very thing that makes happiness possible
 - (ii) virtuous characters generate around them long lasting friendships
 - (iii) much better able to cope with deceit and cheating