

Notes for April 28

Discussion Questions

- Compare/contrast Bentham's Utility Principle (See footnote p. 483) with J.S. Mill's ('The creed which accepts as the foundations of Morals, Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness....[i.e.,] indeed pleasure and the absence of pain.' (Ch2 487) (Aim: Greatest happiness for the greatest number) Recall critiques in Odell's handout (against quantitative versus qualitative assessment vis-à-vis Bentham's criteria [484-485] and Mill's remarks [488])

No matter how oversimplifying or quaint Bentham's 'utility [hedonistic] calculus' appears to us now, there are many areas in the 'human sciences' (i.e., microeconomics, sociology, macroeconomics, etc.) which adopt a similar methodology, insofar as developing (albeit far more reliable and rigorous) quantificational schemes for notions like 'satisfaction,' 'happiness,' etc. I (sought) to provide a counterexample to such schemes by pointing out how elusive some 'external' (though central) factor like 'quality of life' can be to quantify. (I invoked my personal experience living for three years in Italy as a child, though we, my family and I, were materially worse off than middle-class American children¹, still growing up in a relatively small Italian town [Recco, Liguria] seemed far easier for a child than many pressures urban American children face.²)

But how does one quantify or even qualify a private experience like happiness? Aside from the criticisms from Odell's handout in this matter consider the following question: "How do I *know* if *my* experience can *compare* with someone else's *even for the same objective experience*?" This is akin to the problem of *qualia* encountered in the philosophy of mind. For instance, person A and B [assuming they're not colorblind] experience the subjectively a *quale* when they see 'green.' *But*, though they label such a color with the same name, how can one judge whether or not A's experience of green is the same as B's? The problem of *qualia* extends to issues such as experiencing pain, and of course, to that elusive notion of happiness.

¹ My father's Italian income was half of his American income, gas and electricity were far more expensive, Italy was undergoing a major political and economic crisis during those years (1976-1978) making daily life complicated, etc.

² I realize this anecdotal example is subject to much legitimate criticism. Nevertheless, I base my claims on the benefits children and citizens in general derived from the strong and friendly ties of that particular *community* that seem weaker in larger American suburbs. Obviously, however, there are many 'Reccos' across the US as well. My overall point however is that 'strong friendly communal ties' defy quantification.

Ultimately, a central criticism against the UP (whether formulated by Bentham – quantitatively and individualistically, or by Mill – in terms of the tension of degrees of quality and in terms of irreducibly communal, or public, issues) is that at the end of the day, happiness may prove to be just a *categorical* variable. Categorical variables cannot be ranked. For example, notions like ‘male/female,’ location, etc., are examples. To refer to Odell’s implicit critique of Mill, comparing the pleasures of having sex versus reading a book would be like trying to compare apples and oranges, (another example of an instance of a categorical variable.)

- Consider the film: “Assault on Precinct 13.” Would unshackling the cons be an example here of Mill’s ‘Expediency?’ (493) Consider also Mill’s remarks: “There is no ethical creed which does not temper the rigidity of its laws, by given a little latitude, under the moral responsibility of the agent, for the accommodation to peculiar circumstance; and under every creed, at the opening...self-deception and dishonest casuistry set it.” (494) Do you agree that the AU wins the boxing match against the RU? (O’Dell: RU -> AU)

Here in both sections, we pretty much re-hashed the AU versus RU. Basically, to summarize, the RU gets herself or himself into a bit of a slippery slope when tacking on ‘*ceteris paribus*’ conditions (‘all things being equal,’ Rule X should be followed.) For the greatest good for the greatest number *in the long run* can result *only if* most people, most of the time, follow rules. Aside from the non-trivial epistemic, logical, and metaphysical difficulties one encounters when trying to pin down some systematic or regular notion of ‘*ceteris paribus*.’ No two things [messy ethical cases or situations] are ever *truly* equal. To talk about equality in terms of something like an ‘average’ doesn’t help much either, for it begs the question for what notion of central tendency you’re advocating (arithmetic mean, median, mode, i.e. ‘most commonly occurring?’ etc.)

For example, in the ‘Precinct 13’ case the RU finds him or herself in a dilemma, since the objective Rule Utilitarian principle would hold one must follow most rules most of the time which tend to promote the greatest happiness *in the long run* for the greatest number. So unshackling the convicts may spell greater trouble, in the long (vigilantism, etc.) How does one hedge the exceptional cases here, without resorting back to AU, which holds that each and every situation is unique, as far as implementing the Utility Principle goes?

- Consider Mill: ‘The ultimate sanction of all morality...being a *subjective feeling*, I see nothing embarrassing to those whose standard is utility...the force he is really urged to is his own subjective feeling.’ (496) Consider the challenge RU presents in some of the dire scenarios presented.