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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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24.06 Utilitarianism I – Handout

Hedonic Utilitarianism – the 19th Century Formulation:

Happiness (pleasure / satisfaction) is the one and only intrinsically good thing, and unhappiness (pain / dissatisfaction) the one and only intrinsically bad thing.

Actions are morally right to the extent that they promote the good and diminish the bad, morally wrong to the extent that they promote the bad and diminish the good.

Hedonic Utilitarianism – a Modern Formulation:

The value of a world-history is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering that it contains – pleasure adds to its value, suffering subtracts from its value.

An action is right when its outcome (the world history that will result if it is taken) has greater value than the outcome of any of the alternative acts available to the agent, and wrong otherwise.

Exercises – Have you Done the Right Thing, By Utilitarian Standards?

You have been temporarily assigned to work, alone, at a remote medical outpost. Nobody is monitoring you. The local population will not remember the decisions you make.

- 1) Your patient has an incurable illness. She has said goodbye to her family. She is in great pain. She wants to be painlessly euthanized. You do it.
- 2) As above, but this time she does not want to be euthanized. She says it is ‘against her religion’. You euthanize her anyway.
- 3) You have blood to save Alfred or George, but not both. Alfred is younger and healthier. He has a larger, happier family. You give the blood to Alfred.
- 4) As above, but this time it is George’s blood. You promised to set it aside for him in case he needed it. You promised you would NEVER give it to anyone else. You give it to George.

Now suppose you are working at a hospital in Boston. Have you done the right thing, by Utilitarian standards, if you behave as above?

Problems

- Does it say that we should constantly be drinking beer / taking morphine?
- Can we ever really know what action will have the best outcome?
- Aren’t good people sometimes motivated to do things other than maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain?