**Teleological Ethical Theory**

In last week’s lecture, I concentrated on the deontological theory of ethics, and I pointed out the difficulty many of us have in straying far from such a theory, if indeed we ever do. There is a certain comfort in having the rules spelled out for us and in “knowing for sure” the right way to act at all times. The teleological theory of ethics seems shallow by comparison. Chapter Four concentrated on the utilitarian theory which seeks to maximize good results over bad. The text also concentrates on the notion that the teleological theory looks to maximize the best results for society as a whole. In one application of the utilitarian theory, that which extends the theory to the political arena and matters of government, that is true. But the basic theory is one that originates with the idea that all of us individually seek to achieve pleasure and avoid pain.

I have a difficult time in getting students to understand that utilitarianism is not interested in the greatest good for the greatest number at a personal level. If you get a tax rebate check, is your first inclination to use it to enhance the greatest good for the greatest number? No, you probably look to pay some bills or do something nice for your family.

If you turn the notion of utilitarianism to government and hold that the purpose of government is to create laws that maximize the good for the most people, you are using a utilitarian concept and applying it to society.

But *individuals* still act out of self-interest. Even when they apply the concept of utilitarianism to society, they are acting out of self-interest. The majority of individuals are creating rules that protect their own self-interests, and, of course, they are excluding a segment of society by doing so.

You and I get together and decide that we want to keep what possessions we have attained. To do so, we create a law that holds stealing from another is a crime and assigns a penalty to those who do. Did we act with the "greatest good for the greatest number" in mind? No, we acted to deter someone from stealing what was ours. Does our law result in the greatest good for the greatest number? Yes, but that is not the motivation behind it.

We simply realized that without laws, in the words of the philosopher Hobbes, life would be "nasty, brutish, and short." So to protect our own self-interests, we create laws. There is no altruistic thought in our heads when we decide to do so.

So the text is correct when it asserts that "utilitarianism" as a *social* philosophy acts to create the greatest good for the greatest number, but the individual utilitarians who banded together to act in that manner were all acting out of their own self-interest.

Of course, one problem with this theory should be obvious: what constitutes “good results,” and can we find a definition of the good upon which everyone would agree? What constitutes happiness? Does what makes you happy apply to me? Regardless, it is all too easy to dismiss the utilitarian argument, and in this lecture I want to tell you why.

Naturally, we go back to the Greeks, this time to a philosopher known by the name of Epicurus. Epicurus lived in the time frame following the deaths of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but he knew Plato’s works, and he studied in Aristotle’s school. The original formulation of the teleological theory of ethics was hedonism, which states that one should always act so as to maximize one’s happiness. What I remember most about Epicurus is the way he defined happiness. He said that happiness was the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul. Think about it. Isn’t that sort of a nice goal to have in life? Of course, his name is now synonymous with fine dining—an “Epicurean delight.” My wife used to dine once a month with ladies who knew each other in their Government jobs for over 30 years, and they called their evening out “Epicurean Night.” Oh well!

Jeremy Bentham (1745-1830) was the father of modern day utilitarianism, and he developed a complex formula for deciding which action to choose over another. One has to take into account such things as whether the action will result in a long term pleasure once the immediate pleasure is gone, how intense the pleasure is, how long it lasts, how certain it is, how likely it is to be followed by more pleasure, and so on. In the late 1970s, West Point had a cheating incident, and a study group was formed to find out what had gone wrong and what, if anything, was basically wrong with the way the Military Academy conducted its business. I was a member of the academic subcommittee on that study, and I remember sitting in on a class where the professor was leading a class discussion of Bentham’s philosophy. Try as he might, the professor couldn’t take Bentham seriously, and that was the message the students were getting as well.

After the class was over, I sat with the professor and asked him the goal of our government. “Well,” he thought, “it is to pass laws and regulations that allow our citizens to enjoy certain rights.” We went on with this line, of course, until we finally established that maybe, just maybe, these rights included to a large measure “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And maybe the goal of government as we knew it was to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people possible. I then asked him if he knew that Bentham’s embalmed and dressed body was wheeled into the meetings of the University College London so that he could continue to preside over the affairs of the University. (And it is today, as far as I know. Of course I didn’t tell him that Bentham founded the university and put some stipulations in his will!)

But even if we forget the end of happiness for a minute, doesn’t it seem reasonable that the consequences of our actions should count for something? I mean, good intentions are fine, but if the conclusions of our intentions don’t turn out the way we hoped, have we acted morally? Go back to what I called Kant’s “Practical Imperative”—that one should never treat a person merely as a means *only* but as an end in itself. Kant is known as the great deontological philosopher, but isn’t there an end implied in the practical imperative? We are, in fact, required to treat others with respect because of their status as humans and for no other reason. We belong to that family of humans, too, and the consequence of that fact is that we act in a way that brings credit to our inclusion in that family. That is why Kant feels that we achieve no moral worth for performing actions that benefit us in some way: we don't lie to get out of something. We tell the truth because telling the truth is part of what we are as humans and what defines us.

Having said this, now let us return to the utilitarian end of happiness. The utilitarians feel that they accurately describe the way people do, in fact, act. According to them, people *always* act from self-interest, and you’ll remember that even Kant wondered whether totally selfless action was possible. But utilitarians go further. They not only say that they describe the way people do act, but they translate that into saying that is the way people *should* act. Nor will you win an argument with a utilitarian by offering an act that you claim to be selfless, because the utilitarian will turn it around on you.

Years ago, my mother lived some three hours away in a small town in Virginia. My wife would remind me that “we really should go a visit her—it’s been months since we did.” Now, I would much rather have played golf, but I knew she was right. We would spend the day visiting. Were I to hold this action as an example of acting selflessly “from duty” (to use Kant’s term), the utilitarian would say, “No, you deceive yourself. You actually put up with a short term discomfort to promote a greater happiness for yourself. Had you not gone to visit your mother, your feelings of guilt would have caused you greater discomfort in the long run than going to visit her.” You can’t win this argument with a utilitarian!