

The Sentimental Utilitarian

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The hallmark of a good moral theory is that it agrees with and improves upon our sense of what is moral. For many moralists, the rightness of an action is predicated on the quantity of good that comes from that action. To this effect, Jeremy Bentham once stated, “Create all the happiness you are able to create, remove all the misery you are able to remove . . . and you shall find . . . peace and joy in the sanctuary of your soul” (Oxford Dictionary). Though frequently attributed to utilitarianism, the greatest happiness principle is not unique to the utilitarian tradition. In his 1728 *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, Irish philosopher Frances Hutcheson advocated a theory of moral sentiments that argued for a theory of good as pleasure, evil as pain, and a “universal good which tends to the happiness of the system of sensitive beings” (35).

In this paper, I will argue for a utilitarian theory that synthesizes elements of utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism. To do this, I will argue that these theories are compatible and can be synthesized into a greater theory that maximizes the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages of both. I will begin by showing some historical theories that may be compatible with utilitarianism, specifically the moral sentimentalism of Francis

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Hutcheson. I will then explain why moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism cannot be sufficient moral theories on their own. I will then argue for a hybrid moral theory that combines elements of these two theories to remedy the failings of each. I will then conclude by showing how my theory remains distinctly utilitarian by critiquing Massimo Reichlin's criteria for defining utilitarianism, and I will show that his criteria for a utilitarian theory do not supply an adequate objection to my theory.

Utilitarianism and Moral Sentimentalism

Throughout the history of ethics, many philosophers have accepted consequentialist theories of the good that seem to be compatible with utilitarianism. For any theory to be utilitarian, it must accept a consequentialist theory of the right that consists in maximizing the object of its theory of the good. Historically, hedonistic utilitarians confined their theory of the right and the good to the greatest happiness principle, which held that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, [and] wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (55). Yet, theories that do not advocate the greatest happiness principle can still be utilitarian. Instead, for a theory to be utilitarian, that theory need only define its prescriptive theory of the right in terms of the maximization of its conception of the good. Thus, if an ethical theory shares this characteristic with utilitarianism, it seems reasonable that both theories may be compatible and can improve upon each other.

Although a utilitarian theory need not accept the greatest happiness principle as its theory of the good, it is reasonable to assume that other ethical theories with similar notions of the right and the good may be compatible with utilitarianism. Philosophers such as Plato and Epicurus argued for theories of the right in terms of civic or hedonistic good, respectively. However, their theories fail to prescribe the maximization of that particular good. Conversely, the natural lawyer Richard Cumberland argued for a moral theory that appeared to share this criterion. In his 1672 *Treatise of the Laws of Nature*, Richard Cumberland argued:

The good of all rational beings is greater than the like good of any part of that aggregate body; that it is truly the greatest good: and that in promoting the good of this whole aggregate, the good of individuals is contain'd [sic] and promoted . . . as [to] contribute to the common happiness. (239)

Even though Cumberland's theory may deserve additional consideration, the primary historical theory that I am concerned with that meets this criterion is moral sentimentalism.

Moral sentimentalism, or moral sense theory, is a response to difficulties that previous moralists had in defining morality in the rationalist tradition. In motivating this philosophical tradition, philosophers such as Shaftesbury, Frances Hutcheson, and David Hume rejected the idea that the moral law could be learned from reason alone. Instead, according to these moralists, moral judgments should be based on our sentiments or emotions, while reason ought to be used "to secure the right applications of [those] affections" (Shaftesbury 492). To do this, the sentimentalists proposed that an internal moral sense of right and wrong defined morality, and this sense was able to identify approval or disapproval in any ethical situation.

Despite the various theories of moral sentimentalism, the moral sense theory that is most compatible with utilitarianism belongs to Hutcheson. In his essay on *The Origin of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good*, Hutcheson suggests that the "Author of Nature . . . has given us a moral sense, to direct our actions, and to give us still nobler pleasures [when] we are intending the good of others" (10). Building on this idea, in *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Hutcheson argued:

In comparing the moral qualities of actions, in order to regulate our election among various actions proposed, or to find which of them has the greatest moral excellency, we are led by our moral sense of virtue to judge thus: that in equal degrees of happiness, expected to proceed from the action, the virtue is in proportion to the number of persons to whom the happiness shall extend . . . so that, that action is best, which procure the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers; and that, worst, which, in like manner, occasions misery. (515)

Therefore, although other moral theories may partially share the criterion for utilitarianism, Hutcheson's moral sentimentalism seems to particularly meet this criterion. Since both Hutcheson's sentimentalism and utilitarianism prescribe actions directed toward the maximizing of similar theories of the good, it seems reasonable that these theories are compatible.

Shortcomings of Moral Sentimentalism and Utilitarianism

Despite the attractiveness of moral sentimentalism in its simplicity, it falls short because following the moral sense alone leads to moral decision-making that is too subjective. In many cases, individuals' sense of rightness may be completely different from those around them. In such cases, what people believe to be the moral sense leads them to act dissimilarly while acting on moral feelings. Given the same situation, one individual may feel that a white lie may be justified for some given end, while another may feel that such a lie would never be permissible. Though it may be true that all possess a moral sense, appealing to the moral sense alone for moral judgments often results in a subjective and/or a relativistic view of morality.

Despite this failure in moral sentimentalism, a strict utilitarian theory of morality is still an insufficient alternative. The primary problem with utilitarianism is what J. J. C. Smart called the "difficulty about probability" (37). For strict utilitarians to discern the morality of a given situation, they must be confident that their actions will produce the greatest aggregate happiness. Yet, it is often impossible to assign numerical probabilities to any particular event to show which will produce greater happiness (Smart 39). Despite raising this objection against his own act-utilitarianism, Smart fails to adequately address it. In response to this, Smart argues that "all that we can do is assign various probabilities to the various possibilities of an action," and by doing so, "we can be driven back toward a calculus" (39). However, what ought to be the criteria for assigning these probabilities? It does not seem that past experiences of utility can always be likely indicators of future utility because there are too many variables to correlate between past and present events. It seems, therefore, that sufficient criteria do not exist; it also seems that such criteria will not be found in the future. Despite his possible solution, even Smart concludes that "it is not usually possible to assign numerical values to a particular event" and that "the utilitarian position as presented has a serious weakness" (40).

One might argue that adopting rule-utilitarianism might solve these problems by circumventing the act-utilitarian's need to calculate probabilities by instead acting according to rules. For most rule-utilitarians, a moral "rule is justified if its inclusion into our moral code would create more utility than other possible rules (or no rule at all)" (IEP). As such, for the rule-utilitarians to adopt a rule, they must be able to show that the probability of following that rule would yield the greater aggregate utility. Yet, when examined, this task seems even more impossible than the one of the act-utilitarian. How could the rule-utilitarian propose criteria for assigning probable outcomes of compliance to a rule that would govern all

outcomes for all situations? I assert that this task is even more impossible than assigning probabilities for the act-utilitarian. Therefore, should either the act or rule-utilitarian be able to find an accurate way of performing the Herculean task of calculating probabilities, utilitarianism might be saved, but as this task is currently impossible, the utilitarian morality on its own is irreparably flawed.

A Synthesis of Utilitarianism and Moral Sentimentalism

Despite the failures in both moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism, when synthesized together, these two theories can improve each other where each theory falls short. As such, I will introduce a hybrid of moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism that improves both theories.

Before explaining how utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism improve one another, I will respond to the objection that utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism are simply incompatible. Mill most convincingly states this objection in the first chapter of *Utilitarianism*. According to Mill:

The difficulty [of ascertaining what is right or wrong] is not avoided by having recourse to the popular theory of a natural faculty, a sense or instinct . . . Our moral faculty . . . supplies us only with the general principles of moral judgments; it is a branch of our reason, not of our sensitive faculty; and must be looked to for the abstract doctrines of morality, not for [the] perception of it. (50)

In response to Mill's objection, I assert that either reason alone or the moral sense alone is insufficient to derive moral judgments. Although Mill may believe that reason is sufficient for determining the rightness of actions, Hume rejects this notion. According to Hume:

It appears evident that, the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. (565)

Because of these contradictory assertions and their accompanying justifications, I propose that the disjunction that moral judgments come exclusively from reason or sentiments could be a false dichotomy. If reason or sentiments by themselves are insufficient to derive moral judgments, it seems reasonable that moral judgments could be reached from a combination of the two. As such, moral judgments that are derived from reason must accord with our moral feelings, which themselves are derived from the moral sense. Our moral feelings must likewise accord with our moral

judgements. In this way, utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism can be compatible. When a moral judgment is reached by appealing to the moral sense, it can only be valid if the same moral judgment can be derived by a utilitarian calculus. Therefore, if reason or sentiments by themselves are both insufficient to qualify moral judgments, these faculties must work together to validate moral judgments and determine moral rightness.

Despite this, I do not argue that all utilitarians ought to be considered moral sentimentalists, nor should all moral sentimentalists be considered utilitarians. Yet, as evidence that a utilitarian could accept such a synthesis, Henry Sidgwick suggests in his *Methods of Ethics* that a synthesis of these two theories is more possible than most have previously thought. According to Sidgwick, "Utilitarianism . . . was not to supersede but to support the morality of Common Sense" (86). Although Mill may not personally believe that moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism could be compatible, Sidgwick saw no problem in synthesizing these two theories.

In order to support this claim, I further argue that utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism are compatible because they can reconcile problems found in each theory. As shown above, Hutcheson's sentimentalist theory prescribes using the maximization of the good as the necessary criterion for judging the rightness of an action. As such, utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism seem to differ only in the method by which this goodness is to be qualified. While the utilitarian may appeal to rational utility calculations and the sentimentalist may appeal to the faculty of the moral sense, both theories attempt to qualify moral rightness as a maximization of their conception of the good. Thus, because both utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism on their own fail to meet the desired end, I propose that the mechanisms of utility calculations and the moral sense could work together to reconcile the problems found between these two theories.

The primary problem that moral sentimentalism reconciles in utilitarianism is the "difficulty about probability." As explained above, reducing act or rule-utilitarianism to a strict calculus exponentially increases the demandingness and decreases the practicality of the utilitarian morality. Yet, as Hutcheson observed, the moral sense naturally "directs our actions . . . to the good of others" (10). As such, by using the moral sense, utilitarians may, with license, act in accordance with the moral sense to help them feel their way to the greatest common good.

It might be objected that acting on the moral sense to determine the outcome with the greatest good is no longer a utilitarian decision. In this case, the utilitarian principle is rejected, and a decision is made strictly on passion or emotion. Yet, in response to this argument, I have already shown that moral sentimentalism is compatible with the utilitarian morality because both theories have shared concept of the maximization of

the good. As such, falling back on the moral sense should not be problematic for utilitarians. According to Sidgwick,

Many moralists who have maintained as practically valid the judgments of right and wrong which the Common Sense of mankind seems intuitively to enunciate, have yet regarded General Happiness as an end to which the rules of morality are the best means, and have held that a knowledge of these rules was implanted by Nature or revealed by God for the attainment of this end. (85)

Moreover, I would argue that human reason is too weak to adequately comprehend “the real connexion [sic] between the true principle and the right rules of conduct” (Sidgwick 86). In many cases, the ability for the rightness of an action to be determined by probabilities alone is manifestly impossible, and the best recourse for the utilitarian is to fall back on rules of customary morality approved by the moral sentiments. Therefore, acting on the moral sense to determine the outcome with the greatest good is not only utilitarian, but also it may be the best method to overcome the “difficulty about probability.”

Building on this argument, Sidgwick rightly observed, “Common Sense is unconsciously utilitarian in its practical determination” (454). When most people act, customary morality often directs them to prioritize their sense of the good in determining what is right. As such, people often act as an unconscious utilitarian when they make moral decisions based on the goodness that results as the consequences of their actions. When asked to rationally explain why a certain act ought to be done, people frequently respond that their sense of what is morally right is rationally vindicated by some kind of utilitarian reasoning. This suggests the moral sense naturally directs people to act in accordance with the utilitarian morality by acting naturally to maximize the utility of others. Thus, when most people act in accordance with the moral sense they unknowingly but consistently act utilitarian, despite not knowing or accepting the utilitarian morality. Therefore, the moral sense not only approves of the universal good, but also naturally directs people to the consequentialist notion of maximizing that good.

In addition to the ways moral sentimentalism improves utilitarianism, utilitarianism can help solve abnormalities in the moral sense. Although Hutcheson and others argued that the moral sense directs primarily to the common good, it is easily recognized that not all persons’ moral sentiments are identical. Recognizing this problem, Sidgwick wrote:

The Morality of Common Sense . . . seem[s] unsatisfactory to the reflective intellect . . . [because its] current

formula is not sufficiently precise for the guidance of conduct, while at the same time difficulties and perplexities arise in the attempt to give it additional precision, [but] the Utilitarian method solves these difficulties and perplexities in general accordance with the vague instincts of Common Sense, and is naturally appealed to for such solution in ordinary moral discussions. (425)

As such, utilitarianism improves upon moral sentimentalism by giving it a sufficient ground of rational normative reasons for the morality prescribed by the moral sense. Because both utilitarianism and the moral sense direct people to maximize the good, it follows that a utilitarian justification ought to be able to be given for all actions prescribed by the moral sense. Thus, Sidgwick observed:

It remains to supplement this line of reasoning by developing the positive relation that exists between Utilitarianism and the Morality of Common Sense: by showing how Utilitarianism sustains the general validity of the current moral judgments, and thus supplements the defects which reflection finds in the intuitive recognition of their stringency; and at the same time affords a principle of synthesis, and a method for binding the unconnected and occasionally conflicting principles of common moral reasoning into a complete and harmonious system. (422)

Just as moral sentimentalism is the shortcut to determining probabilities in a utilitarian calculus, the utilitarian process of calculating utility is the rational foundation for our trust in the moral sense. As such, the utilitarian morality grounds the dictates of the moral sense with rational normative reasons. Therefore, when the dictates of the moral sense agree with a strict utilitarian calculation, an action can be said to be right in proportion to the quantity and quality of the good produced from its consequences.

Response to Reichlin's Criteria

Despite these improvements to both utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism and Sidgwick's endorsement of my theory, many utilitarians would reject my thesis because my theory no longer meets the basic criteria for a utilitarian theory. In his paper on "Hume and Utilitarianism," Massimo Reichlin of Vita-Salute San Raffaele University argued that for a theory to be considered utilitarian it must meet four qualifications: "1) A consequentialist theory of the right, 2) A hedonist theory of the good, 3) Some kind of impartiality in evaluating consequences, and 4) An

essentially prescriptive, rather than merely explicative attitude” (1). Yet, if these are the necessary criteria for defining utilitarianism, then it follows that many of the ideas I have suggested to be integrated into utilitarian thought cannot be feasible. As such, I will examine Reichlin’s criteria to show how my theory meets all of Reichlin’s criteria except for one which, while it invalidates my theory, also invalidates many established utilitarian theories. In doing so, I will propose changes to Reichlin’s criteria to allow for more utilitarian thought, including the improvements I have proposed to utilitarianism via the theories of the moral sentimentalists.

Reichlin’s first criterion for a theory to be utilitarian is that that it must accept a consequentialist theory of the right. In response to this, I would argue that my theory is manifestly consequential. Even if Reichlin has a flawed idea regarding Hume’s sentimentalism, his misunderstanding of Hume is immaterial to my synthesis of utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism. In my theory, I propose that the moral sense is sufficient to identify and judge the consequences of any proposed actions or rules. Even if some moral sentimentalism is not consequential, my proposed theory is strictly consequential because it judges actions entirely by their ability to maximize an accepted notion of the good. In this case, the moral sense approves of actions because they maximize the good, not just because the actions are intrinsically good in themselves. Therefore, even if some moral sense theories are non-consequential, when synthesizing sentimentalism and utilitarianism, the moral sense only becomes an instrument in determining the best consequences of any action or rule.

Reichlin’s second criterion for a theory to be utilitarian is that it must advocate for a hedonistic theory of the good. Although this may have been true of classical utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill, many modern utilitarians are not hedonists. Many notable philosophers such as R.M. Hare and Peter Singer are preference utilitarians who believe that we ought to maximize utility by respecting the preferences of others. Ideal utilitarians such as G.E. Moore flatly reject hedonism and label Mill’s and others’ equating of pleasure and happiness as a naturalistic fallacy. Still others, like Karl Popper, have accepted a view of negative utilitarianism and believe that “there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure” (602). Even John Stuart Mill has been labeled by Smart as a kind of “quasi-ideal utilitarian” because he advocated for different levels and intensities of pleasure and pain (13).

Therefore, Reichlin’s second criterion to define utilitarianism fails because it does not include most seminal utilitarian philosophers, with the exceptions of Bentham and Mill. Furthermore, on Reichlin’s account, it seems unless a moral theory accepts a purely hedonistic theory of the good,

then that theory cannot be considered utilitarian. Contrary to Reichlin, a theory should be able to be utilitarian independent of its theory of the good. No serious student of philosophy would deny that non-hedonistic utilitarians such R.M. Hare or G.E. Moore are not in fact utilitarians. Therefore, my synthesis of moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism can remain agnostic to any particular theory of the good while still remaining utilitarian.

Reichlin's third criterion for a theory to be utilitarian is that that it must show some kind of impartiality in evaluating consequences. It might be argued that any theory that is associated with moral sentimentalism cannot be impartial because the moral sense always judges actions from a personal point of view. Though this criticism might be true of moral sentimentalism at the intuitive level, when acts are judged at the critical level many moral sentimentalists have argued that objective morality can only be achieved when acts are judged by an impartial spectator. According to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, all actions "as well as all the other passions of human nature, seem proper and are approved of, when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, [and] when every indifferent bystander entirely enters into, and goes along with them" (81). Yet, the problem of impartiality is not unique to moral sentimentalism. Recognizing this problem in determining utilitarian rules, Richard Brandt advocated for an ideal observer that could rationally and impartially choose rules that would maximize long-range utilities. As such, both moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism have similar methods to ensure impartiality when critically determining objective morality. Therefore, when synthesizing moral sentimentalism and utilitarianism the roles of the impartial spectator and the ideal observer are combined in order to maintain impartiality in determining the morality of all acts and rules.

Reichlin's final criterion for a theory to be utilitarian is that it must necessarily be prescriptive, rather than merely descriptive. Using this criterion, one might argue that utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism cannot be compatible because utilitarianism is prescriptive, but moral sentimentalism is merely descriptive. Yet, when examining this argument, it is clear that classical moral sentimentalism is manifestly a prescriptive theory. Although some moral sentimentalists might argue that the moral sense only approves and disapproves of certain facts, other moral sentimentalists would argue like Joseph Butler, that the moral sense "offers itself to show us the way we should walk in," and it "shows us what course of life we were made for" (Butler). Some moral sentimentalists may not advocate a prescriptive moral theory, but it is clear that many sentimentalists, like Hutcheson, would accept a prescriptive moral theory that advocates for

the greatest good of others. Therefore, it could be true that some strains of moral sentimentalism may not be prescriptive, but prescriptive theories of moral sentimentalism, such as those of Hutcheson, are compatible with utilitarianism.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism are compatible moral theories. As evidence of this, both utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism are compatible because both theories define the rightness of an action by how well it maximizes a given conception of the good. Although strict utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism seem to fail on their own, when synthesized together, they can produce a greater theory that maximizes the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages of both. On their own, these two theories are inadequate to make valid moral judgments, yet, when synthesized together this problem can be mediated. Although strict utilitarians such as Reichlin may argue that my ideas disqualify my theory from being utilitarian, when modifying his criteria to accept more utilitarian thought, it becomes apparent that allowing for other accepted utilitarian theories makes allowance for my theory to be utilitarian as well. Therefore, it seems reasonable that utilitarianism could be improved by allowing influence from moral sentimentalism.

The hallmark of a good moral theory is that it agrees with and improves upon our sense of what is moral. By accepting a moral theory that synthesizes utilitarianism and moral sentimentalism, we can bridge the gap between these two theories and produce a stronger theory that encapsulates the strengths of both.

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