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PubPol 580: Reading Notes for Class 6 (Sept. 24, 2009)

We'll be discussing utilitarianism next, and it will continue to be one of the principal approaches to moral reasoning that we apply to cases as the course progresses. In some respects, it will seem familiar to nearly all of you, since the process of weighing pros and cons, costs and benefits, utility and disutility is one with which we're all familiar. Since utilitarianism has been the most prominent theory in the Anglo-American world for more than a century, it is one that everyone should wrestle with and evaluate.

It has been my experience that although there are clear parallels between utilitarianism and benefit cost analysis (which most of you come to believe in while at the Ford School), most students do not embrace utilitarianism as the most compelling way to resolve moral problems. That's fine, but at least for this class I urge you not to be too quick to dismiss utilitarianism. It has a relatively simple and transparent logic, a clear way of arriving at a conclusion (at least in theory), and has genuine moral bite (it puts human welfare at the center of making judgments; it has strong egalitarian tendencies if we assume, as most do, that marginal utility declines with the amount of whatever we're talking about)-the world would almost certainly be a much better place than it is if utilitarianism were the norm (but that doesn't mean utilitarianism always produces the right answer). Given the prominence of utilitarianism in modern thought, if in the end you decide you aren't a utilitarian, then you should be able to articulate why.

Brock's chapter provides a good general introduction to utilitarianism. It also introduces some of the long-standing puzzles about utilitarianism, such as act vs. rule utilitarianism, supererogatory actions, what utilitarianism has to say about population size issues, etc. You needn't dwell too long on most of these issues. The act/rule distinction is worth paying attention to, but most of the others you can safely leave to the philosophers. These issues have been around for a long time and there isn't much prospect that someone will make them go away anytime soon. One can be a utilitarian in evaluating public policy without waiting for these matters to be resolved. Don't get too hung up on trying to find killer (hypothetical) examples that show utilitarianism to be wrong (e.g., that it suggests slavery is wrong only because it has, on balance, bad consequences). Such examples are a staple of the philosophical literature, and appropriately so. But I think we'll have a more interesting discussion if we stick to utilitarian reasoning in the realm of public policy.

The First Half of Thursday

We will begin on Thursday with a discussion of Peter Singer's articles. Peter Singer is one of the most well known utilitarians writing today. He probably writes more for lay audiences than any other philosopher. He has lots of controversial views (many not shared by fellow utilitarians), but he is a good exponent of the basic logic of utilitarianism.

For over 30 years Singer has been articulating the utilitarian argument that rich individuals/nations have a moral obligation to help poor individuals/nations, and that this moral requirement is in force so long as the marginal utility given up by the "givers" is smaller than the marginal utility gained by the "receivers." (He takes disincentive effects

into account, so he can't be faulted on that count.)

Singer's challenge provides a good test of whether you are a utilitarian. Are you convinced? If not, why not? Experience in the class suggests that most students aren't convinced by this argument; articulating why has proved to be a harder task. If you're not prepared to follow Singer's moral advice, come prepared with your "25 words or less" statement about why.

The second Singer article is a recent one addressing health care. This allows you to see how his brand of utilitarianism works on a domestic example.

A few more general comments: Utilitarianism has some particular features that you should think about as we encounter it throughout the term:

1. Because professional roles often properly assign great weight to assessing consequences, utilitarianism is particularly well suited for thinking about public policy.

2. Being a good utilitarian requires you to be a good forecaster of the future. Because this is difficult, utilitarians will often disagree about the right course of action. This is one area where there are synergies between utilitarianism and economics. Economics is often useful for forecasting consequences when policy changes, so the methods of economics can be helpful to a utilitarian (who will go beyond economics to assess consequences in terms of welfare, not just dollars).

3. Does utilitarianism offer a satisfactory account of justice? John Stuart Mill thought it did. John Rawls, for one, didn't think so, arguing that by looking only at aggregate consequences it can lose sight of the moral distinctiveness of individuals.

4. A utilitarian can't shy away from interpersonal comparisons of utility as a means of determining aggregate utility. For the most part, economists avoid interpersonal comparisons on the grounds that mental states can't be expressed reliably (or even coherently) in units that one can add up. But when you read an economics text and see a social indifference curve (as you often do in explanations of comparative advantage in international economics, for instance), then you're reading someone who thinks the notion of interpersonal comparison is a coherent enterprise. As you think about some examples for the discussion of utilitarianism, think about the project of interpersonal comparisons. Friends seem to pull it off when they weigh their different preferences for which movie to go to when they don't have the same first choice. Parents seem to perform interpersonal comparisons when they make decisions about priorities for their children when they can't do everything they'd like to. Judgments get much more difficult when there are many people involved and you don't know them, but there is a big difference in this task being hard and it being incoherent.

5. (Future) consequences are all that matter in the moral calculus of utilitarianism. For some, this means that utilitarianism cannot account successfully for issues like punishment and retributive or compensatory justice. These usually involve tailoring an appropriate response to something that happened in the past, and a theory that tailors its response by

focusing only on the future consequences for the parties involved and on (dis)incentive effects for others seems to some to miss the strong moral intuitions that underlie our thinking about these issues.

6. A relatively common type of policy debate concerns cases in which one side supports a policy because of its aggregate benefits and the other side opposes it because of a different (non-consequentialist) moral consideration. Needle exchange programs are one example. Proponents of needle exchanges claim (and have decent evidence to back it up) that these programs decrease the spread of disease (including hepatitis and HIV). Opponents claim that such a program condones IV drug use. One opponent says that it amounts to saying that "it's O.K. for drug users to continue using drugs and kill themselves because it's cheaper for the government." Another compares needle exchange programs to the Tuskegee "experiment." A similar debate occurred last year about mandating the HPV vaccine, with proponents pointing to the health benefits and opponents concerned about the vaccine leading to increases in teen sexual activity. We'll look at another one that might fall in this in the second half of Thursday's class.

The Second Half of Thursday

We'll all gather in 1230 for the first half of the class. Then we'll split into the same groups as last time and a student in each group will make a presentation.

This part of the day's class will give you the opportunity to "think like a utilitarian" so that you can (1) understand what it means to assess a policy solely in terms of its consequences for human welfare and (2) ask yourself whether utilitarianism adequately addresses all the considerations that you think ought to be taken into account in deciding between right and wrong in this case.

Here's the topic that the presenters will be talking about:

"In 1992, the state of Georgia's Department of Human Resources (DHR) received a federal government waiver to conduct a demonstration called the Preschool Immunization Project (PIP). Its aim was to examine the impact of requiring recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children with preschool-age children (defined as 6 years of age and under) to provide proof that their child's immunization status is up-to-date (UTD) at the time of recertification. The sanction proposed for not doing so was the elimination of AFDC benefits that would normally be provided for that child." (from the Abt report on the project)

Carry out a utilitarian analysis of this proposal. That means figuring out its likely consequences, evaluating them from the standpoint of human welfare, and asking whether on balance such a program will increase aggregate welfare.

In doing this you'll quickly realize that the answer depends on some empirical questions—changes in immunization rates, non-compliance rates, etc.—that have to be estimated. For this exercise it's way too much to expect you to dig up estimates, but the fact that such

information is critical demonstrates how much empirical information matters to being a good utilitarian. So the presenters don't need to actually get a final bottom line utilitarian judgment—it will be enough to show what the important elements of the such an analysis are and to talk about what a utilitarian would do if s/he had time and staff to do all the necessary work.

Once we've talked like utilitarians for a while, we'll switch to talking about the non-utilitarian considerations that matter in this case and whether they might lead us to a different conclusions about this program.