

Emotivism

AJ Ayer - Verificationism - "All true statements have to be empirically verified"

Ethical judgments, he thinks, are statements that fail to meet this criterion. Ayer's own view, called emotivism, denies that ethical statements are anything more than raw expressions of emotion- they have no more meaning than words like "Wow!" or "Yuck!" They simply express feelings.

Thus it makes no sense to say these statements are true or false -they are just expressions of feeling.

There's no moral difference between feeding a starving child and murdering him, either you like it or you don't. Pure expressions of emotion do not come under the category of truth and falsity. If Ayer is right, then moral improvement or education is impossible, because the words themselves are meaningless. One can't even have a meaningful moral dispute. The argument would be like one person yelling "Yuck!" and the other "Mmmm".

Problems:

- But the verificationist principle is self-refuting. The empiricist principle itself is not empirically verifiable and fails by its own standards. Ayer admitted this much later in his life.
- And even if true it would lead to an infinite regress. How do you verify the verification principle, and then verify the verification, etc. *ad infinitum*
- And Ayer's principle assumes materialism is true (reality is limited to physicality), but this needs to be proven not assumed.
- Just because emotions accompany ethical judgments doesn't mean there is no meaningful content
- And the assertion that ethical judgments have no correspondence to reality is also false, as we will see in natural law.

Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham – founder, John Stuart Mill also a promoter

Utilitarianism is grounded in the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number. This is determined by weighing the consequences of an action. Any action is to be evaluated on how much pleasure vs. how much pain it costs. In other words, moral values merely concern the extent of pleasure and pain - So all moral evaluation is a calculation of pleasure and pain. The moral goodness of an act is to be judged by its usefulness in maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain

Motivated by the Greatest Happiness Principle: "The greatest happiness in the greatest number"

Actions are right insofar as they tend to promote the greatest happiness and wrong insofar as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness

Utilitarianism assumes that units of pleasure and pain can be calculated

Problems:

The objections can be reduced to four: utilitarianism is indeterminable, incommensurable, logically leads to barbaric injustice, and there are counterexamples to the claim that gaining in net pleasure is always good.

- a. **Indeterminacy:** The radical indeterminacy of utilitarianism becomes apparent when one begins to inquire as to *whose* interests one should consider in the weighing of moral actions. Do we consider only actual persons, or do we consider the interests of unconceived potential persons (i.e. posterity)? Do unborn humans in the womb count? Also, are we to act in order to produce the *sheer largest* amount of good regardless of how it is distributed or should we act only to raise the *average* good or happiness? Patrick Lee who argues:

The point I wish to make is that there is an ineradicable indeterminacy in utilitarianism. There is no nonarbitrary way of removing the indeterminacies mentioned above. There is no utilitarian way to settle whether only actual persons should count or possible persons should count as well, or which distribution should be preferred. But a moral theory which is ineradicably indeterminate cannot reasonably provide moral guidance.¹

- b. **Incommensurability:** The incommensurability problem in utilitarianism arises when one considers just on what basis different goods are measured. By what objective criterion are some goods better or worse than other goods? In order to measure anything, there needs to be a common property (i.e. heat, depth, etc.) But “good” is not a univocal term; it is not a predicate like that.² In other words “good” alone will not do; a good *what* is needed. Various human goods are but constituents of the overall human good: i.e. the good of sleeping, the good of education, the good of health, etc. A good life is an aggregate of various goods incommensurable between each other. Germain Grisez notes:

As I said above, "happiness" means different things to different people. One can compare the enjoyment of drinking a Coke with that of eating a candy bar or the desire for the one with that for the other. But how many appetizing meals in a French restaurant give enjoyment comparable to that of a happy marriage? How many satisfactions of desires for particular objectives are comparable to the satisfaction of one's desire to be a good father, an excellent philosopher, or a faithful follower of Jesus?³

¹ Patrick Lee *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press 1996) 136.

² Peter Geach convincingly argues for a logical distinction between adjectives. “Good” is not a *predicate* adjective like “yellow” but rather an *attributive* one that supervenes on another predicate; i.e. one must be a good *something*. A predicate adjective is like “This car is *white*” while an attributive adjective is like “this is a *big* dog”. See Geach’s essay “Good and Evil” in *Theories Of Ethics* ed. Philippa Foot (Oxford University Press, 1967) Ch IV.

³ Germain Grisez, "Against Consequentialism," in *Proportionalism: For and Against* ed. Christopher Kaczor, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2000), 239. A similar line of argument comes from John Paul II “Moreover, everyone recognizes the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of evaluating all the

- c. **Injustice:** A savage injustice logically follows from utilitarian principles. Given that we must weigh interests and act accordingly – would it be permissible to conduct scientific experiments on a small group of unwilling innocents in order to arrive at a cure for a larger group? *Utilitarianism puts a price on everyone's head.* If such a view benefits the majority, it would indeed be ethically acceptable given utilitarian calculations. Race may very well be irrelevant in considering interests, but numerical superiority is quite pertinent and can have the same undesirable effects. Nazism could indeed be justified on such *numerical* grounds.
- d. **Net Gain in Pleasure is Always Good?** Is a net increase in pleasure always good? Think of a voyeur who has placed a video camera in a women's locker room. The women never find out, they never suffer, and the voyeur increases his pleasure. Take the example of the "fondling dentist" who fondles his women patients under anesthesia. Take the example of a man who molests infants. These are all examples where there is a net gain of pleasure, no suffering, and yet we still intuitively hold these actions to be wrong.

good and evil consequences and effects--defined as pre-moral--of one's own acts: an exhaustive rational calculation is not possible. How then can one go about establishing proportions which depend on a measuring, the criteria of which remain obscure? How could an absolute obligation be justified on the basis of such debatable calculations?" *Veritatis Splendor* 77