

1 Supplemental Notes for Consequentialist Ethics. You will find a general summary of these
2 ethical theories on the sheet Ethical Theory Review Sheet.

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4 I) Ethical Egoism (a brief supplement to what is on the Ethical Theory Review Sheet)

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6 Personal Ethical Egoism is a view according to which an individual claims that he/she ought do
7 what is in his/her long term self-interests but cannot tell others what they should do. This sort of
8 egoism fails as a basic requirement of a moral theory – namely, that it should be generalizable or
9 apply across the board. We expect that a theory about something applies to all individuals or
10 beings that are the same or similar in relevant ways. That is, if the Personal Ethical Egoist
11 believes that only consequences for self interest are the basis for deciding what he/she should do,
12 such a person has to set forth the relevant differences between him/herself and others such that
13 consequences for self-interest aren't the only morally relevant factor for them as well. It's hard to
14 see what the relevant differences are among human beings that would allow a PEE to claim that
15 ethical egoism applies only to him but not to others. After all, humans are the same sort of beings
16 (we have the same nature).

17
18 Universal or Impersonal Ethical Egoism requires that each person act in his or her own self-
19 interest regardless of the interests of others (unless it so benefits him/her). This does not prevent
20 people cooperating with each other even when there are different self-interests.

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22 Jones and Smith have differing self-interests:

23 A) what is in Jones's s-i is not in Smith's s-i.

24 Jones needs digitalis for a heart condition; but digitalis will kill Smith if Smith doesn't have a
25 heart condition. There need be no conflict here since Jones's pursuing the digitalis need not
26 harm or interfere with Smith's pursuit of her s-i.

27
28 B) Conflict arises between UEE's when, e.g., in pursuing Jones's s-i, Jones will act in a way to
29 harm Smith's s-i. In this case, since each person is morally obligated to pursue his/her own s-i
30 without regard to others except insofar as other people benefits one's own s-i, this sort of
31 situation leads to conflict. The ethical egoist can cooperate with people by basically negotiating
32 to constrain pursuing certain things in his/her s-i that conflict with others' s-i, if they will do the
33 same for themselves. In this way, cooperation among egoists can minimize conflict, allow people
34 to live in some sort of peace, which is generally in people's s-i. That is, one trades certain things
35 in one's self-interest for other things.

36
37 Cooperation among people is permissible for UEEs but only provided that the consequences of
38 the cooperation are beneficial to the individual.

39
40 However, if cooperation is not possible, then a serious problem arises in regard to UEE. Suppose
41 that both Jones and Smith need digitalis in the sense that each will die without it. Suppose also
42 that there is only enough digitalis for one person. Jones, a UEE, and Smith plan to go after the
43 digitalis. However, Smith asks Jones for moral advice. Since Jones holds UEE as a theory, Jones
44 should tell Smith that she should do what is in her own self-interest regardless of his s-i. But
45 doing so will directly lead Smith to a course of action that will harm Jones. That is, Jones will
46 violate UEE and do something immoral. However, if he either lies to Smith about what she

1 should do or says he doesn't know what moral principles she should follow, then he has
2 abandoned UEE as a moral theory and, thus, undermined his own moral justification for
3 obtaining the digitalis without regard to Smith's interests. These sorts of situations raise serious,
4 and many believe, fatal problems with UEE as a moral theory -- that is, a view which should
5 hold for all people.

6 7 8 II) Utilitarianism (supplemental notes) 9

10 1) Objection: Utilitarian's can't necessarily give reliable moral advice prior to an action. Since
11 only the consequences of an action make it good or bad, one can't really know whether an action
12 is good or bad until one knows the ACTUAL consequences of the action. If actions will likely
13 have long term consequences, then knowing whether one acted correctly can be delayed well
14 into the future. The utilitarian can simply say that the desires for moral guarantees prior to action
15 is not possible given that consequences are morally relevant. In addition, the Utilitarian can look
16 to the past to see the consequences of various practices: truth telling, lying, taking human life etc.
17 When we do so, we can make a good determination about the good and bad consequences of
18 actions and use that as the basis for deciding what to do in the present. This procedure is part of
19 rule-utilitarianism -- making moral judgments for a practice rather than just an individual action.
20 But these rules are always just guidelines since if in a particular situation the action brings about
21 good and bad consequences that differ from the same action in the past, then one would have to
22 make, or one should have made, an exception to the rule. Recourse to past actions won't work in
23 cases where actions are being contemplated for which there is no past precedent. This sort of
24 situation can easily arise in our age because of technological and other changes.

25
26 2) Objection: Utilitarian's may have to morally support the wrongful punishment of an innocent
27 person if it benefits the majority. Case: A white woman has been viciously murdered by a black
28 man in a town that has a great deal of racial hostility and tension. There is a serious danger of
29 riots and of white vigilante groups killing black people. The police apprehend a black man who
30 was near the scene of the crime, has a past history of violence but whom the police know to be
31 innocent of the crime. They have no idea of the identity of the real murderer. However, to
32 prevent riots and violence for the town, they frame the black man. He is convicted and sent to
33 prison. Since such an action promoted the advantage of the vast majority of the citizens in the
34 town, the objection is that the utilitarian must give moral approval to the actions of the police.
35 A common Utilitarian reply is that if such practices were widespread, they would become known
36 and would undermine the rule of law, thus leading to far worse consequences for people in
37 general than the riots that were prevented. The objection continues: even if this is correct and
38 even if one could show, apart from this consideration, that the false conviction would have lead
39 to more negative than good consequences, it doesn't seem that the consequences of an action are
40 morally relevant here. It is simply unjust to punish an innocent person for a crime he/she did not
41 commit. Justice commonly requires treating people according to what they deserve. It's wrong to
42 punish innocent people because they don't deserve to be punished, not because not punishing
43 them promotes general welfare. Similarly, one would object to the severe punishment of an
44 individual for a minor infraction in order to deter others (a possible utilitarian justification for
45 deterrence theories of punishment) since the punishment is utterly disproportionate to the offence

1 and, hence, unjust and underserved. The thrust of the objection is that notions of justice and
2 desert (what people deserve) are not founded on moral utility.

3 4 Act and Rule Utilitarianism:

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6 The distinction between these two versions of utilitarianism is to what extent can we form moral
7 rules. The act utilitarian claim that everyone should perform that action which will bring about
8 the greatest good over bad for everyone affected by the act. Act utilitarianism requires that we
9 consider each action on a case by case basis. It is only the actual consequences of an action that
10 are relevant for determining whether or not it is moral. Those consequences can only be
11 determined by considering actions in the particular situations in which they occur. The act
12 utilitarian rejects the idea of absolute moral rules since that assumes that actions always have the
13 same consequences regardless of the situations in which they occur. You can review the
14 selection on act utilitarianism in the read to see some of the problems and limitations with this
15 approach.

16
17 The rule utilitarian claims that everyone should follow those rules that bring about the greatest
18 good over bad for everyone affected by the act. The rule utilitarian basically argues that there is
19 enough similarity in human situations that moral rules can be formulated and followed. You can
20 review the selection on rule utilitarianism to see some of the problems and limitations with this
21 approach. Note, however, that the rule utilitarian can not hold to absolute moral rules: rules that
22 would universally mandate or prohibit a certain kind of action. Remember that for utilitarians no
23 actions are intrinsically right or wrong. Hence, rule utilitarians have to allow that there might be
24 exceptions to rules in particular situations. The reason is that the rule utilitarian cannot guarantee
25 in advance that the consequences of an action in a particular situation may not be different that
26 they have been in other situations. Hence, it is possible that we might follow a moral rule prior to
27 acting only to find out afterwards that it the action was wrong if the bad consequences of the
28 action outweighed the good ones.

29 The critic of rule utilitarianism argues that moral rules are useful only if we can formulate all of
30 the exceptions to the rule. If we can't we run the risk of following the rule in circumstances
31 where we shouldn't follow it (namely, where there are exceptions). But either we can't know all
32 of the exceptions in advance, or we have to specify so many exceptions that the rule is
33 effectively eliminated by all of the qualifications. (The reading on this gives a good discussion of
34 this matter).