

Philosophical Utilitarianism

The term “philosophical utilitarianism” was introduced in 1982 by T.M. Scanlon as a name for the view that the fundamental moral facts are facts about well-being (Scanlon 1997, 271). All other moral facts, including facts about what one is morally obligated to do, are explainable by appeal to facts about well-being. Philosophical utilitarianism is, Scanlon says, a “philosophical theory of morality” – meaning that it aims to explain morality in a way that makes it clear why morality is to be taken seriously at all, rather than merely systematizing our already-held moral beliefs. Since just about everyone recognizes well-being as something to take seriously, philosophical utilitarianism has some intuitive plausibility.

Alternative accounts of philosophical utilitarianism have been offered. In later work Scanlon says that philosophical utilitarianism is the view that “the only account of morality which is metaphysically credible and gives it the authority which it claims for itself is one according to which moral judgements are judgements about the promotion of human well-being” (Scanlon 1992, 7). According to this statement, philosophical utilitarianism is a view about accounts of morality, not itself an account of morality. Stephen Darwall takes himself to be restating Scanlon’s view when he says that philosophical utilitarianism is the view that “rightness and moral goodness can be reduced, through analytic or synthetic definitions, to the good, which is similarly identified with happiness” (Darwall 698). John Skorupski similarly takes himself to be following Scanlon in defining philosophical utilitarianism as consisting of the following three principles: “(1) all that counts morally is the well-being of individuals, (2) no one individual is to be singled out as counting for more than others, (3) all that matters in the case of each individual is the degree to which his or her well-being is affected” (Skorupski 194). While

many utilitarians would be content to identify well-being with happiness, as Darwall does, and to say that no individual counts for more than another, as Skorupski does, we may separate these accretions from the primary philosophical utilitarian view that well-being is the sole fundamental moral property.

Philosophical utilitarianism is to be distinguished from act and rule utilitarianism, which are criteria for the moral permissibility of actions. Philosophical utilitarianism is a more abstract principle that provides some of the intuitive support for such criteria. If the fundamental moral facts concern well-being, it stands to reason that our obligation is to make people as well off as possible. (See Freeman 1991, 283, for a suggestion about how to derive act utilitarianism from philosophical utilitarianism.) Nevertheless, no particular utilitarian criterion of right action follows straightaway from philosophical utilitarianism. Philosophical utilitarianism also does not presuppose any particular view about the nature of well-being; whatever well-being is, it is fundamental to morality, according to philosophical utilitarianism.

Philosophical utilitarianism is closely related to welfarism. In fact, welfarism is sometimes understood as the view that the fundamental moral facts are facts about well-being (Keller 2009). Others take welfarism to be the view that well-being is the sole intrinsic good (Sen 1979). One could be a welfarist in the second sense without being a philosophical utilitarian, since there could be some fundamental moral facts that are not facts about what is intrinsically good. Thus one might believe that nothing but welfare is intrinsically good, but that what we ought to do is determined not just by facts about intrinsic goodness (i.e. welfare) but also by facts about natural rights. However, any argument that there are intrinsic goods other than welfare will also be, *a fortiori*, an argument against philosophical utilitarianism. Thus, the

philosophical utilitarian must contend with extant arguments against welfarism (e.g. those in Sen 1979; see “Welfarism” in this encyclopedia).

According to Scanlon, the main competitors to philosophical utilitarianism are intuitionism, or “the philosophical thesis that morality is concerned with certain non-natural properties... that we can identify occurrences of these properties, and that we can recognize as self-evident certain general truths about them, but that they cannot be further analysed or explained in terms of other notions,” (1997, 270), and contractualism, or the view that “an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any system of rules for the general regulation of behaviour which no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement” (1997, 272). This is puzzling, because intuitionism, so defined, does not tell us what the fundamental moral facts are; rather, it tells us what kinds of properties moral properties are, how we come to know truths about moral properties, and that the properties cannot be “analysed.” And contractualism, so defined, is merely a sufficient condition for wrong action; it does not tell us what the fundamental moral facts are either. Thus neither of these views has the form of a philosophical theory of morality. What, then, are philosophical utilitarianism’s competitors? It would be difficult to list them all. Among the sorts of facts that one might take to be fundamental to morality are facts about rights, duties, desert, justice, human perfection, virtue, autonomy, and (perhaps Scanlon’s view) justifiability of a certain sort. One might be a pluralist about the fundamental moral facts, and say that there is more than one sort of fundamental moral fact.

What might the philosophical utilitarian say to defend her view against these alternative theories? Why think that well-being, rather than one or more of these other things, is fundamental to morality? Well-being has some features that one might find attractive when

looking for something fundamental to morality. There is little disagreement about whether there is such a thing as well-being; it is “metaphysically credible,” as Scanlon says (but see Moore 1903, section 59, for a skeptical view). Well-being is an easy concept to grasp, making it well-suited to be a primitive concept in a moral theory. Although there are different views about what constitutes well-being, there tends to be agreement about a great many particular cases. For example, the hedonist will say that someone who gets lots of pleasure and not much pain is well-off; the desire satisfactionist will say that someone who has many satisfied desires and few frustrated ones is well-off; but the pleased person will also usually be one whose desires are satisfied. Furthermore, when we discover that some action will lead to a loss of well-being for people, we seem to have arrived at a fundamental basis for criticism of that action; we need no further explanation for why a loss of well-being would count against the action. As Scanlon says, well-being is “authoritative.”

The philosophical utilitarian can argue that other contenders for fundamentality lack some of these virtues. For example, many are skeptical of the existence of natural moral rights, which Bentham famously called “nonsense upon stilts” (Bentham 2002, 330). Appeals to duty, without supporting justification, are typically highly unsatisfying; we can seemingly always explain why someone has a duty to do something by appealing to other facts, such as facts about individual well-being. Thus duty does not seem like an appropriate candidate for fundamentality. The suitability of human perfection to ground moral facts has been called into serious question (e.g. in Kitcher 1999). Judgments about who deserves what, and whether someone is virtuous, are often contentious; resolution of disputes about these matters seems to require an appeal to some more fundamental moral facts. All these points are of course highly debatable. It might be argued that there are several kinds of facts that have a legitimate intuitive

claim to be the sorts of facts that could be fundamental to morality, and there is no way to decide at such an abstract level which view is correct.

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