Lecture 3: Utilitarianism and Kantianism

I. Utilitarianism: follows the Utility Principle: “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness.” J.S. Mill
   A. The happiness of everyone, not just the actor
   B. A form of consequentialism: only the results of an action are morally relevant, not what was done or how it was done
   C. Two early versions: those of Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) and John Stuart Mill(1806-1873):
      1. Bentham: an economist, moral/legal/political reformer:
         a) Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. ( Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation)
         (1) expresses psychological hedonism
         b) “[i]n every human breast... self-regarding interest is predominant over social interest; each person's own individual interest over the interests of all other persons taken together.” (The Book of Fallacies)
         (1) expresses psychological egoism, though utilitarians need not be committed to this
         c) "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.” (Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation)
         d) Calculus of Felicity: It's the quantity of pleasure that matters, “pushpin” is as good as poetry. If it makes you happy, then it's good
(1) Dimensions of the calculus: Intensity, duration, fecundity, extent, purity, and others
e) Legal and social institutions are to be based on their utility, how they promote pleasure and remove pain

f) Criticism: It’s a pig’s morality! The destruction of culture could result from such policies

2. John Stuart Mill:
   a) He’d rather be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied
      (1) Quality added to quantity
      (a) Quality determined by those with the widest experiences
   b) Also sees freedom of speech, and freedom in personal lifestyle choices as implied by the utility principle

D. Objections to utilitarianism:
   1. Trolley car examples (see Sandel video)
   2. Emergency room examples (see Sandel video)
      a) Reply: Act versus rule utilitarianism: consider, instead of individual actions, policies that lead to the greatest happiness in the long term, even if they don’t do so for some specific actions
   3. Motivation not considered
   4. Too difficult: too many sacrifices would be demanded of people in wealthier countries
      a) But the utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer puts his money where is mouth is

II. Kantianism
   A. Absolutist: some things one must always do, or always avoid
   B. Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804)
      1. Morality is to be based on Reason
      2. It is wrong to do something that leads to a logical contradiction
      3. Motivation is crucial
      4. There is only one legitimate motivation: to do one’s duty
         a) Compassion is not a right-making motivation
      5. Our duties: the Categorical Imperatives
a) Act only according to that maxim that you can at the same time will to become universal law
   (1) The Golden Rule
   (2) To violate this is to lead to a contradiction
b) Treat others as ends always and never as means only
   (1) Derived from the first (or so Kant says)

6. Objections:
   a) Cold hearted: compassion does seem to be morally praiseworthy
   b) The categorical imperatives are too vague to be of use
   c) Can pure reason really be the basis of morality?