

Criticisms against Principle of Maximal Utility

Post by “Daniel Van Orman” of May 14, 2018 at 2:14 PM

"The said truth is that it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong." - Jeremy Bentham

As with any philosophy theory, the Principle of Maximal Utility may be criticized and defended in numerous ways - connections to ideas, example scenarios, emotional or logical reasoning, and so forth. This is the thread for that.

Below are quick summaries of very common arguments concerning this principle and responses to them. Please note that many of these arguments also apply to Epicureanism.

Before Continuing

Please understand the deciding factor for most of these arguments is simply one's personal opinion. Please remain respectful of each others' beliefs and understand people are trying to do their best, even if they are misguided.

Many of the arguments below concern four foundational principles of utilitarianism. These principles uphold the maximal utility principle and seek to help one apply it. Be sure you understand these principles to best communicate:

Hedonism

Pleasure (anything which creates pleasant, nice, or good feelings) is the only good and pain (anything which creates unpleasant, nasty, or bad feelings) is the only evil in life. Every decision one makes, whether consciously or unconsciously, is made to pursue pleasure or avoid pain. It is everyone's moral responsibility to be the happiest they can by maximizing their pleasure while minimizing their pain.

Simplification: "What matters is that you are happy"

Consequentialism

The moral correctness of an action depends on its predicted and actual results (consequences). A good action produces good and uplifting outcomes, whatever they are defined to be. An action which produces bad outcomes, even if done with good intentions, is still immoral.

Simplification, in the Extreme: "The ends justify the means"

Impartiality

When determining the most morally correct action, one should use objective criteria - never prejudice, hatred, bias, or other non-objective reasoning. Every person's interests should be considered as equally, even though individuals are not equal because of talents, skills, personalities, and other attributes.

Simplification: Do not judge others based on prejudice and/or bias.

Commensurability

The morality of an action or set of actions can be determined through combining their outcomes, through using some consistent system to compare, total, average, or otherwise combine outcomes. The best actions produce the most good.

Simplification: "Please, let me make it up to you"

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Robert Nozick's Utility Monster

What if One Person Loves Something more than Others? Can They Take Away Others' Property?

Utility Monster

Theoretically, a person (a "utility monster") who loves resources of any kind with such exceedingly gargantuan love could justify taking resources from all other people. After all, those resources would create more utility if the utility monster used them than if anyone else used them. Note: this argument applies to all consequentialist ethics which focus on maximizing a variable.

The most common response to this is: why is that such a bad thing? Nozick never explains why a utility monster would be a bad thing, he just creates a bad-sounding scenario with no point.

Examining why one would think the utility monster is bad, it is easy to see it built purely on emotion (it is simply demonizing some scenario) and fails entirely if put into any realistic scenario. One such realistic scenario could be numerous people across the world donating their resources to help those in Africa and other impoverished nations. This is good as the impoverished enjoy the resources more than those donating the resources. The impoverished would be similar to utility monsters, who take resources from numerous others for their own pleasure. While in theory, this sounds bad, it clearly is not as it helps the impoverished greatly while requiring only relatively minor sacrifices from those who donated the resources.

Additionally, a utility monster which always gains immense pleasure from taking resources from others and never decreases in the pleasure they gain would never exist in reality. While there may be some who gain immense pleasure from resources, diminishing marginal utility (a concept from economics) would cause the pleasure generated to decrease until it is equal to the pleasure it would generate for everyone else – making it unnecessary to sacrifice to give resources to what used to be the utility monster. To give an example for this, if a poor, hungry, homeless person lived in a wealthy country, the wealthy should help the person as the person would appreciate the resources far more than the wealthy. As the person is cared for, diminishing marginal utility would take effect and the benefit they would gain from the wealthy's donations would decrease until it would no longer be worth donating to the person (since the person would be well taken care of). The point when the donations stop would likely be when the person is nearing the wealthy's own standard of living.

Sadism

If a terrible person gains more pleasure from causing suffering than pain is generated, then their destructive actions could be justified under utilitarianism. Would not their acts of torture and mayhem produce more pleasure than pain overall?

Sadistic pleasures could never justify the pain it inflicts. Sadistic pleasure is low level and temporary while the pain inflicted is not (see teachings on higher pleasures below).

Additionally, the pleasure gained would never in reality be more than the pain inflicted. Justifying such pain would require unrealistically massive benefits, which would never be obtainable. Sacrifice is only justified if it brings a net positive change in utility and making up for great or widespread pain would require enormous and long-lasting benefits - which sadism will never bring. Not to mention, decreases in utility are never justified under utilitarianism, thus sadistic acts are never justified as they cannot generate more overall utility.

But what if a very depressed or guilt-ridden person wants a sadist to torture them to death? I think the question becomes: what benefit would their death bring compared to therapy treatment or some other alternative? If the person is a dangerous criminal who cannot stop hurting others and thinks being tortured to death is a just punishment, then perhaps execution of some kind (electric chair, harvest for organs, etc.) is the best choice. I believe it would be very unlikely for the best option to be handing the person to a sadist. (If execution still sounds immoral, then please see the "Distastefulness" section.) If the person may learn to contribute to society, then therapy treatment is better as it makes them happier and enables them to make society happier.

Love of Destruction

Since people may gain pleasure from destructive means, pleasure cannot be the highest good.

While people may gain some pleasure from destructive actions, the actions most often lead to greater pain and a reduced capacity to gain or feel pleasure. This does not mean pleasure is not the highest good, it means people may pursue pleasure in a bad way - just as one could pursue any ethical goal poorly.

Using pleasure as the highest good still denounces destructive actions in similar ways as most other ethical systems do. Destructive actions are morally incorrect since they cause pain and can reduce pleasure for all involved, even over an extended time period.

Morally incorrect actions, which are destructive and reduce pleasure overall, tend to bring much pain to those committing the actions. They may suffer from worry, fear of being caught, shame, and low self-esteem. Also, their memories may bring frequent reminders of past wrongs and guilt.

These actions tend to reduce one's capacity to gain or feel pleasure. They imprison one with sufferings (such as addiction or lost opportunities/freedoms). They prevent one from enjoying higher pleasures (see teachings on higher pleasures below). For example, one cannot enjoy a

loving family if their actions do not allow for a stable home or for family members to grow closer to one another. Immoral actions also create feelings of hatred in the actor and others, making it difficult to make restitution and work with others. Resultant feelings of revenge or a grudge (which causes pain by itself) can drive one toward making bad choices, causing more pain for all involved.

Most of the happiness which destructive actions bring (if it does bring any happiness) is very weak and temporary. It does not bring joy, only lower pleasures (see teachings on higher pleasures below)