

Criticisms against Principle of Maximal Utility

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Teachings on Higher Pleasures

"There is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 2

Not all things which cause joy are equal – some, such as intellectual pursuits and charitable attributes – are so superior they are worth more than any amount of a lower pleasure.

A pleasure is superior to another if one would not trade the superior pleasure for any amount of the inferior pleasure. This is because one "can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence" (John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 2). An intelligent person would not trade their wisdom, knowledge, and ability to learn to become even the happiest animal. A kind and charitable person would not become cruel and sadistic for any amount of wealth.

Exceptions to preferring superior pleasures occur as people make mistakes and temporarily trade a superior pleasure for an inferior one. As John Stuart Mill teaches, "Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good." (Utilitarianism, Chapter 2)".

People can lose their desire for higher pleasures. Often, this occurs since they do not have time nor opportunity for higher pleasures. Additionally, one may addict themselves to lower pleasures. The addiction remains as one only has access to lower pleasures or lower pleasures are the only ones they are capable of enjoying.

John Stuart Mill explains this concept, "many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying" (Utilitarianism, Chapter 2).

Hypothetical Acceptance of Unequal Distribution of Happiness

Are slave societies justifiable?

Utilitarianism focuses on total happiness – not individual happiness. Focusing on total happiness does not account for an uneven distributions of happiness. What if slavery increases total happiness most?

Any action which is legitimately helpful is good under utilitarianism. Most criticisms concerning this concept are centered on unhelpful actions, which no one should approve of. For example, a slave society would never actually produce more happiness than a free society, therefore utilitarianism would never endorse it and would always oppose it.

Slavery causes more pain than pleasure as it always hurts the slave more than it benefits their masters. It also slows their country's progress towards greater happiness. John Stuart Mill teaches a sacrifice is only good if it succeeds in generating more overall happiness: "The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted" (Utilitarianism, Chapter 2). Slavery is not a good sacrifice and never will be.

Possible Exceptions for Everything Nothing Forbidden

The maximal utility principle never strictly forbids any type of action. For the right reasons, even mass killings could be considered morally correct. Would a sadist be justified in tormenting others? (See "Sadism" subsection under "Robert Nozick's Utility Monster".)

No type of action is strictly forbidden since it is impossible to know whether a situation exists where any action truly is the best choice possible. Exceptions to general teachings only exist when following one good moral principle violates another. These exceptions are allowed since they enable one to use rules and good judgement to find better choices, even if those choices would not be better under normal circumstances. This creates more happiness for everyone than absolutely forbidding certain actions can.

Not all actions are allowable in any given case. General rules exist to guide people toward better choices. These rules encourage or discourage actions based on whether those actions tend to have good or bad results in the long-term in the vast majority of cases. Exceptions must be made, even rarely, to help others the most, and these exceptions occur when rules prevent good decision-making instead of help it.

Most actions people believe should be forbidden are nearly impossible to justify under utilitarianism. One must have very good and clear reasons to justify doing something which is

normally very bad to do. The actions are only justified if they truly are a good decision to make - if their results in their specific situation truly will help everyone become happier overall.

Do Rights Matter?

Since every action can be justified, do rights even matter?

Why are rights valuable in the first place? Rights are valuable since they contribute to happiness. Utilitarianism values them because of this fact. If a right destroys happiness, then it is not valuable but destructive and should not be supported (pseudo-rights, such as the right to own a slave, fall into this category). Actions violating rights are supported if they truly produce more happiness than following the right would (such as a policeman violating the right to private property by entering someone's home to save a life).

Bernard Williams' Jim and the Indians

Negative Responsibility (accountability for inaction when one could have prevented harm to others) and Integrity

Jim and the Indians

Below is a quick summary of Bernard Williams' Jim and the Indians.

Twenty Indians protest against their government, ending with military capturing and sentencing them to public execution. Jim, a foreigner, arrives just before the execution. Since Jim is an honored visitor, there is a special occasion. The military captain offers the opportunity for Jim to kill one of the Indians and spare the rest. If Jim refuses, there is no special occasion and all twenty will be killed. Jim panics and is uncertain about what to do. He has never even held a gun before; he feels nervous and does not want to hurt anyone. The local villagers beg Jim to kill one of the twenty. What should Jim do?

Negative Responsibility

Utilitarianism supports negative responsibility, which states one is responsible for what they do not prevent if they could have prevented some evil action. Following this principle, utilitarianism states Jim should kill one of the Indians to prevent the captain from killing all of them; after all, one dead Indian is better than twenty dead Indians. However, does this not reduce an ethical problem into simple mathematics, essentially turning morality in equations and people into robots? (See the "Blind Obedience" section.)

Additionally, people should not be held responsible for what they did not do. Why should Jim be responsible for the deaths of nineteen Indians if he refuses to kill one? The captain is the one who gave the order to execute - he is responsible for the deaths of all twenty. In fact, the only power Jim has to prevent the deaths is the power the captain gives Jim. It is entirely up to the

captain to decide who lives and who dies.

If a parent neglects their child, leading to the child suffering from hunger and severe weather despite the parent having surplus food and a good house, does it make sense to say the parent is not responsible for the easily preventable and terrible things happening to their own child? This is why negative responsibility is important; it states one should be held responsible for how they did not help and uplift others when they could have. If one is held accountable not to do evil, then why not to do good or prevent evil? It seems ridiculous to claim one is ethical when they would actively refuse to sacrifice to uplift and support others. Negative responsibility is enforcing that one should actively help others the best one can.