

Best Way to Introduce Teachings?

Post by "Daniel Van Orman" of March 16, 2019 at 5:59 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As to holding the happiness of the entire world as equal to that of my own and my family and friends, that's equally clear - but in the reverse -- most people do not hold to that opinion at all except an abstract ideal that they know does not comport with reality.

Which is why Daniel, with all due respect to you, I have always found the idea of "the greatest good for the greatest number" to be nonsense, or worse.

That makes sense. 😊

It is an abstract ideal - driven by emotions rather than nature.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I'd like to add that it appears to me, on the basis of this discussion, that Utilitarianism is an attempt to "improve" upon Epicureanism by adding to it. . . .

I had thought that there would be more in common between the two philosophies but they actually seem quite divergent.

As I have mentioned before, I believe utilitarianism is an extension to Epicureanism. I hadn't realized how much original doctrine had been changed, but it seems the vast majority of the changes have been in ethics and views on deities/superstition.

There is much they have in common - we have just been discussing what major differences they have. I think there is far more common than not.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In fact, that seems to me to be much more of an artifact of Christianity or some other type of universalist religion than something that I observe to be true.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

the additions seek to bring together ideas which do not belong together

There is a theory utilitarianism started as a way to combine the most common beliefs of Christianity in a way which did not involve a god - a secular way to unite quarreling Christians.

I see the reasoning for this, but I think it is incorrect. Jeremy Bentham despised religion. For example, from 1809 to 1823, he spent exhaustive efforts criticizing religious beliefs - even the idea of religion itself.

In my mind, the ideas fit together perfectly. If one places "greatest happiness for the greatest number" at the center and asks, "How does X in utilitarianism help achieve that?", the answer (if you understand the concept X well enough) is usually very clear.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It seems to me that it's a prescription for the worst kind of totalitarian despotism which could only work by a small elite deciding what the "greatest good of the greatest number" is by fiat, and then enforcing that (by force) on everyone else.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

there's a rather famous short story by Ursula LeGuin that I recommend reading. It's titled "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"

Neither of those cases would truly create "the greatest happiness for the greatest number".

If the totalitarian despotism did truly make everyone happier, then it would be fine - it would be an exchange of freedom for happiness. However, a slave society would not be fine since the suffering of the slaves would be far greater than the suffering of the small elite.

In "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", the small child being tortured is acceptable since it magically saves and improves numerous lives at the expense of one (a common trend - martyrs, revolutionaries, etc.). In reality, those exchanges are much less emotion-jerking than the story makes it out to be. A different example, food drives require numerous people to donate to help a few, increasing total happiness, yet aren't seen as evil. Torturing people almost always causes more pain than it saves or produces pleasure. Even the case of sadism (taking pleasure in seeing others in pain), the pleasure of sadism is brief and low-level compared to the long and terrible pain of torture. Also, I think it is worth adding, any argument primarily reinforced by magical powers is very weak when there is such emphasis on basing arguments and principles on nature and the real world.

Before deciding I was a utilitarian, I explored both of these criticisms. My perspectives on these are below and in this thread: [Criticisms against Principle of Maximal Utility](#)

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.

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.