

Daily Application of Principle of Maximum Utility

Post by “Daniel Van Orman” of May 14, 2018 at 2:11 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

Applying this principle in one's daily life will require sacrificing one's own happiness to maximize the happiness of others. Following it, there are times when one will want to rest or enjoy a possession, but instead will give up their pleasure to give more to another. In other cases, one will labor or provide services to others to please them despite how those efforts may be painful.

Is it best to follow this teaching? If so, should it be applied only to an extent or followed limitlessly?

To focus this thread, please make sure your contributions are oriented towards applying this principle in one's daily life. Please save comments concerning the principle's overall validity for [the "Criticisms against Principle of Maximal Utility" thread](#) (i.e. talk about realistic scenarios here and about theoretical ones such as Robert Nozick's Utility Monster over there).

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A Word before Participating

Remember to be respectful and kind in your discussions here. Anything else would accomplish nothing and may prevent convincing others of your perspective as well as prevent the learning of all involved.

Remember to thoroughly consider others' words, even if you disagree. This is to your benefit since "the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner" (John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter 2).

Remember not to take offense to others' words. You may not know the reasons why they said something. If they said something, there must be reasoning they saw good enough to say it. Additionally, it may be you are misinterpreting it in a way even the person who said it would find offensive. If you disagree with someone, try to convince them of your perspective. If you cannot convince them, then feel sorry for them as that is their punishment.

Arguments for Maximizing Total Happiness

Position: One should be concerned for the happiness of others.

- Many Experience a Strong, Indispensable Feeling to Help Others and Cherish it

"the feeling of duty, when associated with utility, . . . would make us feel it congenial, and incline us not only to foster it in others . . . , but also to cherish it in ourselves" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 3

- Often Makes One Happy

People commonly say helping others brings them joy, therefore it can be a source of joy: "the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 4

"So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it." - Letter to Menoecus

- Makes Friends, Leading to a Happier Life

"Of all the means to insure happiness throughout the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends." - [Principal Doctrines](#), 27

"Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness." - Vatican Sayings, 52

- Society Runs on Sacrificing One's Happiness for Others and Society Gives more to each Individual than each Individual Sacrifices

Communities are created and maintained through people willingly sacrificing their own happiness to help the group. By cooperating in a society, each person gains more than possible alone.

As an example, consider a fort protecting against hostiles in the surrounding lands. No one soldier may defend each side of the fort nor stand watch twenty-four hours a day. However, the soldiers may coordinate to every side simultaneously and take shifts to be best protected, even if it means some must guard at 3am each day when they do not want to.

"This firm foundation is that of the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilisation" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 3

- Builds Good Habits and Avoids Bad Habits

"Don't avoid doing small favors, lest you seem to be the same with regard to greater things." - Selected Fragments, 214, <http://monadnock.net/epicurus/fragments.html>

"Let us completely rid ourselves of our bad habits as if they were evil men who have done us long and grievous harm." - Vatican Sayings, 46

- Humans are Social Creatures, Every Person is Born with an Inherent Need to Work with Others and Sacrificing for Others is Essential for That

People naturally feel they must interact with and cooperate with others to survive and prosper. This inherent need, at times, requires one to sacrifice their happiness for the group.

- Creates Peace and Contentment

"While we are on the road, we must try to make what is before us better than what is past; when we come to the road's end, we feel a smooth contentment." - Vatican Sayings, 48

- Avoids Self-Absorption, which may Cause Unhappiness and Loss of Direction

"When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 2

- Encourages Cooperation; One may Accomplish more with Others than Alone

"The wise man who has become accustomed to necessities knows better how to share with others than how to take from them, so great a treasure of self-sufficiency has he found." - Vatican Sayings, 44

"a person in whom the social feeling is at all developed, cannot bring himself to think of the rest of his fellow creatures as struggling rivals with him for the means of happiness The deeply rooted conception . . . tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between . . . [himself and] his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture make it impossible . . . he still needs to be conscious that his real aim and theirs do not

conflict; that he is . . . promoting [their own good]. . . . [This feeling] possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It . . . [is] an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 3

- Often Leads to Greater Security since Others may come to One's Aid

"The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life." - [Principal Doctrines](#), 39

- Increases Gratitude

Giving to others helps one appreciate what they have and receive.

"Not what we have, but what we enjoy, constitutes our abundance." - Epicurus

"The fool's life is empty of gratitude and full of fears; its course lies wholly toward the future." - Epicurus

Post by "Daniel Van Orman" of May 14, 2018 at 2:11 PM

Arguments against Maximizing Total Happiness

Position: One should not be concerned for the happiness of others.

I apologize for the lack of content in this section. I had trouble finding points to add.

- Unnatural

Typically, a person's natural instincts are to maximize their own happiness - not that of others! Why should one go against their nature and sacrifice their happiness for others?

"Happiness and bliss are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature." - Selected Fragments, 548, <http://monadnock.net/epicurus/fragments.html>

Utilitarianism teaches this principle must be taught as it does not occur naturally: "education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness

and the good of the whole" - John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter 2

- Sacrificing Happiness for Others is Based on Emotion, not Reason

Unless one cultivates emotional feelings driving them to sacrifice their happiness for others, there is no motivation for it. Creating this motivation is an attempt to make their own happiness derive from others' happiness, causing them to indirectly focus on increasing their own happiness. This is less effective for increasing one's own happiness than simply focusing on one's own happiness.

"And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure." - Letter to Menoeceus

"No one chooses a thing seeing that it is evil; but being lured by it when it appears good in comparison to a greater evil, he is caught." - Vatican Sayings, 16

- Causes Stress

Unnecessary worry concerning others may cause stress, lowering one's own happiness without helping anyone.

"All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but the desire is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm." - [Principal Doctrines](#), 26

- May Cause Anxiety or Depression

Worrying about and enduring failures when attempting to help others may deteriorate one's mental health.

"Unhappiness is caused by fears, or by endless and empty desires; but he who is able to rein these in creates for himself a blissful understanding." - Selected Fragments, 485, <http://monadnock.net/epicurus/fragments.html>

- Strains One's Time and Resources

Frequently spending one's efforts on others may lower or exhaust their time and resources.

"Some men want fame and status, thinking that they would thus make themselves secure against other men. If the life of such men really were secure, they have attained a natural good; if, however, it is insecure, they have not attained the end which by nature's own prompting they originally sought." - [Principal Doctrines](#), 7

- Restricts Freedom

Having to worry about actions which may negatively or not positively affect others may limit one's choices.

- Motivational/Psychological Hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain) is Traditionally about One's Self - Not Others

Many of the ancients spoke of hedonism as centered on one's self. Attempting to shift its focus toward others is violating its foundation.

"we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything" - Letter to Menoecus

"For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled." - Letter to Menoecus

Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2018 at 12:55 PM

Daniel: You've two threads essentially on the issue of "maximal utility" with a lot of detailed pluses and minuses from an ETHICAL point of view. I've been wondering about how to begin to sort these out and I just realized that since you are new to the group we don't have a shared background in principles of Epicurean physics and Epicurean canonic/epistemology. Unless we have a shared foundation from which to build, which those provide, we are left largely debating ethical assertions that have no way of being resolved. The Epicurean ethical positions rest on underlying positions about the nature of the universe and the nature of knowledge that we first need to check and verify in order to sort out positions. In order to get these threads off in the right direction I will post this same post (or a variation) in each of the threads. We can cover these points either separately (as there may be different contexts) or we can handle them in one place, and I will then backtrack and post links to where we discuss them.

But in general, before we proceed further, in order for us to best understand your positions on Utilitarianism and Maximal Utility, please drop back and let us know your positions on Epicurean physics and Epicurean canonic/epistemology. And of course in the broadest of terms I am asking - What views on the nature of the universe, the existence of supernatural gods, pre-birth or post-death existence of souls, existence of "ideals" elsewhere in the universe or "essences" in this one, whether knowledge is possible, the role of reason in knowledge, the relative status of the senses, anticipations, and feelings -- things like that. All of these will have a direct influence on one's opinions about ethical issues.

(And thanks also Daniel because your posts caused me to think about the issue and add this to the "Welcome New Participants" forum - [Request For New Participants](#))