Utilitarianism & Valuing Lives

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What Is Utilitarianism?

1. **Hedonistic Utilitarianism (the 19th Century Version):**

   THE VALUE CLAIM: Happiness is the only intrinsically good thing, and unhappiness is the only intrinsically bad thing.

   THE ACTION CLAIM: Actions are morally right to the extent that they promote the good and diminish the bad. Actions are morally wrong to the extent that they promote the bad and diminish the good.

   > What is it for something to be ***intrinsically*** good or bad? Contrast an intrinsically good thing with something that is merely *instrumentally* good. Something is merely instrumentally good if it is good but only because it brings about something else that is good. **Example:** Gross-tasting cough syrup.

2. **Hedonistic Utilitarianism (a Modern Version):**

   THE VALUE CLAIM: The value of a complete world-history is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering it contains. Pleasure adds to its value, suffering subtracts from its value.

   THE ACTION CLAIM: An action is morally right when its outcome has greater value than the outcome of any of the alternative acts available to the agent. And the action is wrong otherwise

   > Outcome = The complete world-history that *would* result *were* the action taken.

Exercises and Questions

1. Suppose you're a doctor working in a remote island community. Nobody is monitoring you. No one will remember what you do. And suppose you have a patient with a terminal illness who is in great, untreatable pain. You can painlessly euthanize the patient. Should you?

   > ○ Suppose the patient wants to be euthanized and consents to the procedure.
   >
   > ○ What if the patient doesn't want to be euthanized and doesn't consent to the procedure?

2. Suppose you have enough blood to save either Alex or Bob, but not both. Alex is younger, healthier, and happier than Bob. Alex has a large, happy family and many friends. Bob is a loner. You give the blood to Alex.

   > ○ Suppose the blood comes from the Red Cross. Neither patient has any special claim to the blood.
   >
   > ○ What if the blood belongs to Bob? You promised to set it aside for him if he ever needed it, and that you would never give it anyone else.

3. Suppose you are a doctor working at Mass General. According to Utilitarianism, does this change what you ought or ought not do in these cases?

What Is the Greater Good?

Hedonic Utilitarianism says that the value of an outcome is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering it contains. But *how* is it determined?

> Things that should be accounted for in determining the *amount* of pleasure and suffering:
>
> 1. The *grade* of pleasure / suffering.
>
> 2. The *intensity* of pleasure / suffering.
>
> 3. The *number* of people experiencing pleasure / suffering.
>
> 4. The *duration* of the pleasure / suffering.

Question: Does the *distribution* of pleasure / suffering across people matter in determining the overall value of an outcome? Is it worse, overall, if the suffering is concentrated in a small number of people?

Contrast the following two cases:

> *Case S_0:* One person suffers 100 units of pain for a day. Everyone else suffers no pain that day.
>
> *Case S_{99}:* Everyone suffers just 1 unit of pain for a day.

Off hand, it might look like *Case S_0* is worse than *Case S_{99}.* But is that correct?

Imagine that to suffer 100 units of pain is to be in complete agony. And to suffer 1 unit of pain is very mild discomfort.

Suffering Cases

Case S_0:	10^0 people suffer	100 units of pain
Case S_1:	10^1 people suffer	99 units of pain
Case S_2:	10^2 people suffer	98 units of pain
... ...	... ...	... ...
Case S_{99}:	10^{99} people suffer	1 unit of pain

In general, in Case S_n, 10^n people suffer $(100 - n)$ units of pain for a day.

It looks like *Case S_0* is better than *Case S_1*,* and it looks like *Case S_1* is better than *Case S_2*.** In fact, it looks like,

> For any k, *Case S_k* is better than *Case S_{k+1}*.

This suggests that *Case S_0* is not worse than *Case S_{99}*. Is this correct? How should we weigh-up suffering across people?

*It is better for *one* person to suffer 100 units of pain for a day than for *ten* people to suffer 99 units of pain for a day.

**It is better for *ten* people to suffer 99 units of pain for a day than for *one hundred* people to suffer 98 units of pain for a day

More Questions:

1. How should we balance pleasure and pain off each other? Is taking 1 unit of pleasure away from someone just as bad as giving 1 unit of suffering to someone?

2. How should we balance the amount of pleasure and pain within a person across time? How do we compare the *quality* of life with the *duration* of a life. (QALYs: "quality adjusted life years").

3. Are there some things that we simply *should not do* whether or not they would bring about the greatest good?

Argument that the 1 Should Suffer:

P1 For all k, Case S_k is better than Case S_{k+1}.

P2 Betterness is transitive. (If x is better than y, and y is better than z, then x is better than z.)

C Case S_0 is better than Case S_{99}.

Organ Trade Puzzle: It is morally permissible to donate one of your kidneys to someone who needs it. It is illegal (and immoral?) to *sell* one of your kidneys to someone who needs it (and is wiling to pay for it). Why? What would the Utilitarian have to say about this?