

An Argument Against Utilitarianism

Jacob Roeland

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Professor Michael DeAremey

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Jacob Roeland

Professor Michael DeArme

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Utilitarianism, an idea introduced by Jeremy Bentham, says that every act should conform with “the principle of utility”. It must promote the most happiness or pleasure, with the least pain, for the most people. He applied this to large communities, which he defined as the sum of individuals. He incorporates intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity (remoteness), and fecundity (purity). These must be used when considering whether to do an act as well as for the initial pleasure and pain of the act. The sum of pleasures should be greater than the sum of pains for each person involved.

However, not all agree with utilitarianism. Three men in particular, Robert Nozick, Bernard Williams, and John M. Taurek, disagree with it. Nozick disagrees with it by way of a thought experiment, Williams cites two dilemmas with integrity, and Taurek utilizes situations surrounding a life-saving drug. In the end, all decided that either we are not utilitarianists or that certain aspects of it are not understandable.

In his famous “The Experience Machine” thought experiment, Robert Nozick questions whether we are utilitarianists and whether we actually act in a utilitarian manner when given the choice. The machine, which is designed by “superduper neuropsychologists,” allows one to experience anything they desire to: such as writing a novel, making a friend, skydiving, meeting the President, etc. While being in one of these machines, an individual would pick an episode for say two years. Once hooked up, one would forget that they were plugged in and simply “live” the

experience. After two years, the experience will end and they will exit the tank; if they desire, they may then pick a new experience for another length of time, and the cycle will repeat. It might be a little upsetting when one wakes from the experience, but surely ten minutes of distress is worth a lifetime of bliss, is it not? And why should you feel any distress at all if the decision is the right one?

Nozick says that given the opportunity we would not plug into the machine for several reasons. First of all is that we want to do. Experiences are passive events, something that has already occurred and cannot be changed. Nozick states that we do not want to experience meeting the president but rather we want to *meet* the president. We want to be able to say that we have actually *done* the thing that we have experienced. Nozick says, "It is only because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them."

Secondly, we want to be a certain person. Floating in a tank does not a person make. Hooked up to a machine, one cannot tell what a person is like, whether they are loving, caring, witty, intelligent, etc. It is not that it is difficult to tell, there is absolutely no way to tell. Some may argue that what we are like does not matter, that what really matters is how it is reflected in our experiences. However, who and what we are *is* important to us. It is not enough to worry about how our time is spent; we also worry and care about who we are.

Thirdly, we want no limits. Plugging into a machine and experiencing only what someone else has designed limits us to their imagination. This "world" is no deeper than the person who created it. In this simulated world, there is no contact with a deeper reality. Many desire to allow such contact for a deeper significance, such as with a religion. With an experience machine, this is robbed of them.

Fourthly, we want to live. As it has already been said, experiences themselves are passive, and we want to do. So maybe not an experience machine, but maybe we would use a transformation machine, a machine that could change us into whatever we want to be while still maintaining our own identity. However we would not use this machine either; it is not just our experiences that we want pure, we also want who we are to be pure. Consider a result machine, a machine that would produce in the world any result you would want produced and inject your own thoughts into action? Nozick does not pursue this thought but notes how disturbing it will be to have these machines run our lives and live for us. We do not want this. What we do want is to *live* our lives in contact with reality, something machines cannot do.

Nozick concludes “The Experience Machine” by saying that we are not utilitarianists because we want to do, to be, no limits, and to live. Instead of hooking our minds into The Matrix, we want to experience life unadulterated. Because we do want to live life, we do not act in a utilitarian manner in that we do not want the optimum amount of pleasure possible. We are not utilitarianists.

Bernard Williams co-authored a book with J. J. C. Smart entitled *Utilitarianism: For and Against* in which both authors take opposing sides with Smart arguing for and Williams against. In one section of Williams' essay, he gives two dilemmas, states what a utilitarian would decide, questions the decision and then argues against it.

In the first dilemma, George has a PhD in chemistry and is without a job. He is offered one at a chemical and biological warfare lab. George is not too keen on the work there and at first refuses. The man who offers him the job agrees that he is not too fond of it either but would rather George work there than another man, one who has no qualms whatsoever about the work

and will pursue it with much more zeal. What should George do?

In the second dilemma, Jim is in South American and happens upon a group of soldiers. They are a firing squad and are about to execute a group of Indians who are a part of a group protesting the government. Since Jim is a guest, the captain offers to let Jim shoot one man and let the rest go free. If Jim refuses, the captain will order his men to kill all 20. The villagers, families, and the men themselves beg Jim to accept. What should Jim do?

A utilitarian would reply that George should accept the job, and Jim should fire the shot. However, many would wonder if they are indeed the right decisions. With George, we wonder if that is the right answer at all. In Jim's case, we might wonder if it is obviously the right answer. Utilitarianism cuts out certain considerations, such as that each of us is especially responsible for what we do rather than what others do, an idea that is closely attached to the idea of integrity. Utilitarianism makes integrity, more or less, unintelligible and irrational, an interpretation that Williams agrees happens. We should forget about such things as integrity and how one feels in favor of the greater good.

Williams argues against this idea of placing our integrity aside for the “good of the world” and gives two counter arguments. The first being the counterweight argument saying that some arguments may act as a counterweight to utilitarian scales. For example, if George takes the job, it might affect future prospects. He might be disqualified or barred from better jobs due to his working at a biowarfare plant. He might also be affected by what others around him, including society at large, may think of him. He not being able to get a better job and the negative opinions of others may increase his pain and counteract any potential pleasure from accepting the job.

The second argument is based on the possible psychological effect. If an individual takes the utilitarian choice, it might affect them badly enough that it will cancel out the initial utilitarian advantages. For example if he feels regret from his choice, then all subsequent decisions and conduct are crippled because he thinks he has made the wrong choice. But if he understands what the outcomes are and has realized them, then he has not, from a utilitarian viewpoint, done the wrong thing. A utilitarian would say that these feelings should have no weight in any decision as they are irrational. They should not be encouraged; they are, after all, only one man's feelings.

These feelings have more weight in George's case than they do in Jim's. If Jim indulges in his feelings of not wanting to fire the shot, it could be described as a self-indulgent squeamishness. Utilitarianism says that his feelings are just unpleasant experiences of his. However if he regards these as such, he cannot answer the question—is this the right decision?—it poses. If Jim does come fully around to accept the utilitarian point of view, then he will simply regard these as unpleasant experiences. And once he does come to see them in that light, they cannot affect his decision or challenge it in any way since his feelings have no regard. Saying the reason that Jim would not accept because he is squeamish, is simply an invitation to consider the situation, and one's feelings, as a utilitarian.

The reason this “squeamishness” appeal is unnerving is that we are uncertain what utilitarian value our feelings have. We, in fact, cannot regard our feelings as merely objects of utilitarian value. Williams concludes his argument with this:

Because of our moral relation to the world is partly given by such feelings, and by a sense of we can or cannot “live with,” to me to regard those feelings from a

purely utilitarian point of view, that is to say, as happenings outside one's moral self, is to lose a sense of one's moral identity; to lose, in the most literal way, one's integrity...

John M. Taurek wrote an essay against using numbers to make utilitarian decisions entitled "Should the Numbers Count?" In it, he gives several situations having to do with a life saving drug and saving either one person or several and asks if one should consider how many would be affected when making a decision.

The general premise is such: one can give benefits to some people or prevent certain harms on certain people or the same on certain others; one cannot do both. Should the numbers matter? John says no. For example, say that six people need a life saving drug. One of them needs all of it; the other five only need one fifth each. Which group should get the drug?

Most would choose the five, and John does not understand why. What if David is a good friend of his, and he needs all of it while the other five are complete strangers? John would be more inclined to give the drug to his good friend. Most would agree with John's decision. Others might disagree but find his action excusable. Again, John wonders why? Why does him knowing and liking David make his death worse than the combined deaths of the five than if he did not know David or knew him but did not like him? John does not see why this fact makes a difference in what he is *morally required* to do.

Suppose that John was an army doctor, and he has enough of the drug to treat five of his fellow soldiers. David is a friend of his but is also a soldier from a different country than John. Would anyone think that the fact that he likes David nullify his moral obligation to give it to his five fellow soldiers? John says:

Generally when the facts are such that any impartial person would recognize a moral obligation to do something as important to people as giving this drug to these five would be to them, than an appeal to the fact that one happens to be partial to the interests of some others would do nothing to override the moral obligation.

However, since John would prefer to give it to someone else, it is permissible to do so. Why?

Either it is wrong for him to save David in such a situation or one must accept that a moral requirement to save the five other than David is non-existent. Some might argue that that what has been argued so far only proves their point that John does wrong to give preference to David.

Suppose instead that it is David's drug that has been prescribed to him. There are these five strangers who also need the drug. Do you try to convince David to give up his life-saving drug to save the life of someone else? The utilitarian answer would be comical if it were not so serious and outrageous. Picture what one of these strangers may say to David to try to convince him to turn over his drug.

Look here David. Here I am but one person. If you give me one-fifth of your drug, I will continue to live. I am confident that I will garner over the long haul a net balance of pleasure over pain, happiness over misery. Admittedly, if this were all that would be realized by your death I should not expect that you yourself, were you to continue to live, might succeed in realizing at least as favorable a balance of happiness. But here, don't you see, is a second person. If he continues to live he too will accumulate a nice balance of pleasure over pain. And here is yet

a third, and fourth, and finally a fifth person. Now, we would not ask you to die to make possible the net realized in the life of any one of us five. For you might well suppose that you could realize as much in your own lifetime. But it would be most unreasonable for you to think that you could realize in your one lifetime anything like as much happiness as we get when we add together our five distinct favorable balances.

Which is more absurd: trying to convince David that it is better for him to die than these five because the sum of their happiness would be more than his own? In deciding to keep the drug for himself, he understandably acts in a way that is most important to him. Furthermore, by refusing to give them the drug, David violates none of their rights as they do not have a legitimate claim to it.

It is morally permissible if it is David's drug. What if it is John's drug and it is more important to him than David lives than these five? He values David's life more than he values the lives of the five. If they tried to take the drug, John would be right in fighting them.

John then gives an argument how, in trying to decide which is right and which is wrong, that one must show a preference to either the five or the one, even if one does not have such a preference. It is not morally wrong to prefer what appears to be a better choice to one that is not. But since David is John's friend, John does have a preference, a natural one. He does not expect his decision to be shared by everyone. He does not say to the strangers that it is better for the one, David, to live than them because it is the right thing in itself that he should survive and they should not; just that David's survival is more important to John than is theirs.

Thus, in a situation where John is impartial to either side, his situation is not made better

nor worse by either side dying, and he is truly impartial, then each side should have an equal chance of survival. The numbers should still not count. Even in cases where it is fifty to one. John simply cannot see why mere numbers should change anything, as if they in themselves are of some significance.

In the case of a house fire where he can either save five objects or one, he will decide the same way he would decide for human beings. Each object would have a certain value. If it happens that all six are of equal value, he will naturally save the five because they are worth more together than the one. Humans, however, do not have an objective value. John emphasizes with all of them. He understands the loss not because it is anything to him, but that the loss means something to them. “It is the loss *to* the individual, not the loss *of* the individual” that makes him react this way. The five would lose nothing no greater than his life than if David lost his life. He explains this saying, “If I gave my drug to the five persons and let David die I cannot see that I would thereby have preserved anyone from suffering a loss greater than that I let David suffer.” and vice versa.

Taurek ends the discussion of the life-saving drug and moves onto one about suffering. Suppose that John will be spared a pain if a stranger will take a greater pain. It would be wrong and cowardly for John to ask him. If it was John and another that will suffer the same pain if the stranger will not take on a greater pain, it will still be wrong to ask. Even if it is a group of a hundred, it is still wrong to ask the stranger to take on the greater pain. Suffering is not additive in that way. There is no reason for the group to be spared due to one person suffering more just in a mere consideration of the numbers.

In conclusion, because it is morally permissible for John to give the drug to David, his

friend, there are no grounds for a moral requirement to save the five men rather than David. To choose between five and one, something must be preferential to one choosing either group. If John knows the one, David, John has a preference. David's survival is more important *to John* than that of the five. But if John is truly impartial, then each side should have an equal chance of survival. Mere numbers should not change anything as either side will suffer and lose the most to them, their life. Suffering is not additive in the way that a person should suffer a great amount of pain so that a group of people should not suffer a small amount of pain. Given all these statements, numbers should not be used in making decisions, contrary to utilitarianism.

While utilitarianism may seem attractive at first glance, there are many criticisms of it that have been brought out by the likes of Robert Nozick, Bernard Williams, and John M. Taurek. Such arguments include the fact that since we would rather live our lives than experience them, we do not necessarily want what is required to obtain eternal happiness, one of the main goals of utilitarianism. Williams shows us how utilitarianism deals with integrity, saying that it has no place in any utilitarian decision and that any feelings one may have regarding a decision should be ignored. And Taurek argued that numbers should not be a part of a utilitarian decision, again arguing against one of the main tenants of utilitarianism, which is the most pleasure over pain possible. Utilitarianism is a fine idea and a noble one. However, implementing a pure utilitarian doctrine in one's life is nigh impossible due to these issues.

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