

## Cautionary Stories for the Utilitarian

1. ***The Problem of Incommensurable Values:*** To say that two values are *fully* commensurable is to say that they can be measured on a single standard—that there is an exchange rate between the two. For a fairly noncontroversial example, different currencies are commensurable. So many U.S. dollars equal so many British pounds; any more dollars would be worth more than that number of pounds, any fewer dollars would be worth less. When it is said that two values are not fully commensurable, it is being claimed that there is no exchange rate between the two values. This does not necessarily require that one is incomparably *more* important than the other such that one would never sacrifice any amount of one (no matter small) for any amount of another (no matter how large). Furthermore, it doesn't require that it is impossible to make *any* comparisons between differing amounts of each value. Different values may be only partially commensurable. Consider the example of:

*The Fairly Virtuous Husband.* Vern is approached at a party by the fabulously wealthy Stella, who is interested in a weekend fling with him. She invites him to spend the weekend at her “get away” in the Caribbean. Vern, being fairly virtuous, declines, explaining that he is happily married and intends to retain his virtue. Stella, who is not one to be denied, offers him ten thousand dollars to spend the weekend with her. At this point, Vern, being only *fairly* virtuous, is completely unable to decide whether or not to go. Seeing Vern's indecision, Stella says, “Fine, make it ten thousand and *one* dollars and now let's go”. Vern, is offended. He explains to Stella that if he couldn't decide between retaining his virtue and getting the \$10,000, making the offer \$10,001 certainly won't decide the issue. But Stella is perplexed: “If you were indifferent between \$10,000 and this ‘virtue’ you keep talking about then you should surely prefer \$10,001 to that ‘virtue’. After all, your indifference shows that you value your virtue exactly at \$10,000. (If you valued it more, you would turn me down; if you valued it less, you would accept.) Surely, you value \$10,001 more than \$10,000, so you should value it more than your ‘virtue’.” Whatever the philosophical merits of Stella's argument, Vern remains unconvinced.

Both money and remaining faithful to his wife (his ‘virtue’) are valued by Vern. But for him, they are not commensurable values—at least they are not fully commensurable. It may be that were he offered a million dollars he would willingly sacrifice his virtue, and were he only offered a hundred he would surely refuse. This shows only that his values are partly commensurable. What is needed to show full commensurability is that there is some amount of money which Vern values *equally* with retaining his virtue. That is, for any amount less than that, he would refuse the offer, for any amount more than that she would willingly accept, and for exactly that amount she would be indifferent (that is, value accepting and rejecting the offer equally). This is precisely what Stella is assuming, but it seems implausible that there is such a dollar value.

Mill offers us a list of various things which he claims have intrinsic value. But these things seem, because of their qualitative differences, not to be fully commensurable. We have no exchange rate for liberty and security, nor for a sense of dignity and the harmonious development of one's abilities. To the extent that these values are incommensurable, Mill's theory is unable to give us guidance when they conflict. Mill tells us to maximize the good, gives us a list of good things, but doesn't tell us what to do when the items on this list conflict with one another.

2. **Total vs. Average Utility:** Dean Doofus is concerned with the grade point averages of the fraternities of Watsamatta University. They are depressingly low. There are three fraternities, each with ten members. Adding together the GPA's of all ten members of each fraternity gives each fraternity a total of only 20 points. In order to try to raise this number Doofus offers the following deal: a ten thousand dollar grant to the fraternity that, after the next term, has the highest number when the GPA's of all its members are added. Sigma Max is the only fraternity that really understands how to exploit Dean Doofus's offer. They forget entirely about their classes, let their grades fall to rock bottom and spend all of their time recruiting *new* members. Not that these new members are doing all that well in school either. Each new pledge has a GPA of 1.0. But Sigma Max recruits so many mediocre students that it winds up winning the contest—by increasing their fraternity to 40,000, they have maximized the sum of their members' GPAs. They get the grant.

But Dean Doofus isn't happy. He claims that that isn't what he meant. He wants, he claims, the *average* GPA of the fraternities to go up. Pleased that he has struck on a way to block Sigma Max's strategy, he announces that another \$10,000 grant will be awarded at the end of the next quarter to the fraternity that has the highest *average* GPA—that is, he will add up all of the members' GPA's and divide by the number of members. This time another fraternity, Alpha Omega Halfa, sees a novel strategy for winning. They expel all of their members, including themselves, except for Stew Dent, the one person in the fraternity who had a perfect 4.0 GPA. They win the \$10,000 and, after cashing the check, Stew readmits all of them.

Dean Doofus is still unhappy. He thinks that the fraternities are intentionally misconstruing his intent. But he doesn't know how to state his intent so that he can preclude their tricks. He finally leaves Watsamatta University to come to O.S.U. where he resides to this day in Upham Hall and sets Traffic and Parking policies for the University.

If you understand Dean Doofus' problem, you understand the problem the utilitarian has with both the total and the average utility versions. One can maximize total utility without making anyone happier (indeed, even by making people less happy) so long as you make lots of marginally happy people. One can maximize average utility by doing away with unhappy (and even happy) people and leaving only the happiest person alive. (This assumes, of course, that the doing away with the others doesn't depress him. And why should it? He'll never have to wait in line, listen to a telephone sales pitch, or get a bad grade in a class.) But neither of these seems to be what the utilitarian really wants. If, to avoid these problems, the utilitarian requires us to maximize utility for those currently living, then his theory is seriously incomplete. It gives us no guidance (or the wrong guidance) in issues that involve different population sizes and future generations. Issues like: Should we use the income tax structure to encourage large families? How should we dispose of nuclear wastes?

3. **The Problem of Estrangement:** Utilitarianism requires us to produce the best consequences where consequences are evaluated impartially. But this seems to require that we maximize total utility even when this would require sacrificing our children and loved ones. Equally importantly, it means that when we are required to help our loved ones and show warmth and affection to them, it is *because* doing so promotes total utility. Now, imagine that Alfonse is kind and loving towards his wife and children. He often goes out of his way to help them and make them feel good. He seems to be a model of a good husband and father. In a tender moment, his wife, Bella, says to him, "Gee, you sure are good to me and the children. Why is that?" Alfonse replies, "I believe that one ought to benefit people whenever one can in order to produce the maximum utility in the world. I am around you and the children most often and so I am able to benefit you and the children more effectively than I can others." Some days later, Alfonse is

involved in a horrible car crash. Both his daughter and the daughter of the other driver are horribly injured and near death after the collision. Alfonse rushed to his daughter's side and saves her from dying. The other child dies before he can help her. His daughter asks him later, "Why did you save me instead of the other girl?" Alfonse answers, "The other girl was a little further from me when I gained consciousness and by the time I got to her she might have died anyway." His daughter and his wife feel somehow cheated. What he does, even when it benefits them, is not for their sake. He does it for total utility. If his daughter's position had been reversed with the other girl's, he would have ignored his daughter and saved the other girl. There is nothing about his wife and his daughter that prompts his actions except that they are more likely to offer the opportunity to promote total utility than are others.

It is charged that both Alfonse and his family are deprived of important human values: closeness, affection, love, *etc.*. But Alfonse is acting like the perfect utilitarian. Therefore, since utilitarianism requires us to sacrifice important human values, the theory is disutilitarian. Therefore, it is to be rejected.

The reply is difficult but, I think, correct. Alfonse is not acting as a good utilitarian precisely *because* he denies himself and his family these important human values. The utilitarian theory does not require that we *think* like impartial utility maximizers. It requires that we think in whatever way actually maximizes utility (impartially understood). For the reasons that the critic cites, this may not be the way Alfonse does. Perhaps, for utilitarian reasons, we should forget about trying to impartially maximize utility and encourage ourselves and others to be motivated by immediate sentiments of love and sympathy in order to avoid the problem of estrangement. This doesn't show that the utilitarian theory is false. (Indeed, these reasons only count if the utilitarian theory is true—remember, they are utilitarian reasons.) It may show that we ought not to believe the theory. But there is a difference between giving reasons for rejecting a theory and refuting a theory. To refute a theory is to show that it is *false*. Ordinarily, to do so is to give a reason for rejecting a theory. But there can be other reasons for rejecting a theory. It might be that a theory, even if true, should not be believed because believing in it would have bad consequences. This is what the critic of utilitarianism is really arguing, though he seldom recognizes it. He is not refuting utilitarianism; he is showing that if it is true then it might not be a good theory for us to keep in mind (because it might lead to adopting the sort of detached impartiality that produces estrangement).