Demandingness is Not a Convincing Objection to Utilitarianism

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Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that the claim that utilitarian morality is unrealistically demanding is not a convincing objection to the truth of utilitarianism. I divide the concept of 'demandingness' into three components. I argue that the 'harshness' and 'practical' demandingness objections are mostly aesthetic. In the course of discussing the 'theoretical' demandingness objection, I comment on doing vs. allowing harm, and conclude that one can be agnostic on this issue while still rejecting the theoretical demandingness objection.

1. Introduction

Among the most well-known objections to utilitarianism is that it is too demanding. Mackie identifies act utilitarianism as the "ethics of fantasy" (Mackie, 1977). This objection comes in three flavours, which I'll call the practical demandingness, harshness, and theoretical demandingness objections. Practical demandingness is the characteristic that, if utilitarianism is true, we ought to change our lives quite significantly; for instance, by donating a lot of money to charity. Harshness is the objection that utilitarianism views most people as deeply morally insufficient, perhaps even monstrous. To view people who are widely regarded as very moral as in fact deeply ethically insufficient seems objectionable. Theoretical demandingness is the objection that utilitarianism leaves no domain outside of moral concern, no 'safe haven' in which we are justified in having goals other than producing the greatest well-being for the greatest number. There is a really a fourth demandingness objection, which objects to how utilitarianism demands us to violate individual rights if it would lead to greater overall wellbeing. But this objection is more of a rights-violation objection than a demandingness objection, in the sense that I mean demandingness here. If a rights violation were committed in a circumstance that was clearly within the bounds of morality and was not too onerous on the person committing it, this would still be problematic to those who believe in individual rights. Whether rights violations can be justified is a large topic that is beyond my focus here.

2. Practical demandingness

If we view the project of ethics as to determine what is morally true,[1] the practical demandingness objection is not really an objection to whether utilitarianism is true. It is, at best, an objection to the usefulness of utilitarianism. It may be very inconvenient if utilitarianism is true, but this does not give a reason a priori to diminish its plausibility. However, the objection can still be a serious one indeed. In its strongest form, it implies that, even if we think

[1] This is at least the way it's envisaged by Mill in (Mill, 1861). Whether finding truth is exactly the project of ethics is beyond my scope. Notice that I am *not* saying that moral theories shouldn't cohere with our intuitions. The appropriate use of intuition in philosophy is complicated, and I have submitted a paper on exactly this topic to this edition of *Pense*.

utilitarianism is true, we should actually encourage people to use some other moral theory that is more palatable. This is the idea of 'esoteric morality' that Henry Sidgwick discusses.

I also have an empirical contention here: critics seem to have in mind an image of the utilitarian living a life of impoverishment and misery to help the needy. But take a moment to consider how unstable this would be, and how burned out such a naïve utilitarian would become. For you to do the most good in the world would probably involve going into government or a non-profit, or taking a high-paying job to finance such things. It would involve having supportive relationships to ensure your mental health and to discuss how you could maximise your impact and trying as hard as you could to excel in your studies. This does not sound so bad! This is not to say that doing the most good does not involve major sacrifices. It is to claim that human psychology is such that doing the most good is significantly more fulfilling – perhaps even more fun – than one would think[2]. However, this only addresses this objection in practice and not in theory. We could imagine a world in which altruism were not meaningful and fun but actually involved an ascetic life of misery. All I will say about this is that, in such a world, advocating utilitarianism would probably not be so valuable, but that this hypothetical should not be enough to shake the confidence you might otherwise have in utilitarianism.

2. Harshness

Utilitarianism is also criticised for being very harsh: since there is so much more good we could all be doing, it views most people as deeply immoral. At the very least, you may think that the word "immoral" loses its meaning in a moral theory in which almost everyone is deeply immoral. The amount of good that the average citizen of a developed country can do is staggering. For instance, malaria kills close to 1,000 children a day, and distributing bed nets can save someone from dying from malaria for around £3000 (GiveWell, 2019). The average British person could save a life or multiple lives this way every year with modest-to-no decrease in their quality of life. Utilitarianism views the fact that we fail to do this as a grave moral error. Indeed, one of the most uncomfortable aspects of utilitarianism is that it forces us to look inward at the potentially monstrous things we may be allowing. Will future generations look back on us in much the same way we look back on slave-owners? Put this way, it's not surprising that harshness turns so many off utilitarianism. But again, this reveals itself to be largely an aesthetic objection. The salient features of a moral theory are presumably what it tells us to do, and what ordering it produces of the best and worst actions. It's not even clear what it would mean for a moral theory to make a judgment on the goodness of humanity in absolute terms. If producing well-being in the world is good, then surely producing more well-being is better; the maximising component of utilitarianism is taking this idea to its logical conclusion. The best the proponents of the harshness objection can hope for is that there will be some amount of good after which we are no longer *obligated* to produce more good. This is the problem of supererogation, discussed in the next section.

3. Theoretical demandingness

The theoretical demandingness objection says that a moral theory has no right to legislate on as many domains of life as utilitarianism does. Is there really no part of human life absent from the

[2] This is a major theme in Peter Singer's writings on Effective Altruism, such as (Singer, 2015). He presents evidence that altruism is, unsurprisingly, highly correlated with personal life satisfaction; for instance, having donated to charity in the previous month is associated with an increase in reported happiness equivalent to a *doubling* of income (Aknin & Barrington-Leigh et al., 2013).

demand to do as much good as possible? Suppose that, in the evening, you want to read a novel. But you also have access to a book about finance, which may help you to get a high-paying job which would allow you to donate large amounts of money to help the world's poorest people. In this case, utilitarianism says you ought to read the finance book, your own preferences be damned.

Behind the objection is the intuition that it is morally obligatory to do no harm but that performing altruistic acts above and beyond this (especially to strangers) is supererogatory. We suppose that, when you read your novel, you have not committed any terrible act for which you must try to make amends. You thus "deserve" time alone without an obligation to be altruistic. The first point to note about this is that we are not, in practice, starting from a position of moral neutrality.[3] Most of us do not cancel out the negative effects we have on the world. The average first-worlder eats factory-farmed meat, contributes to climate change and pollution, and exploits the developed world in a number of respects. But putting this aside and getting to the crux of the argument, morality *already* encroaches onto all domains of human life. No matter what we are doing, we still have obligations to do no harm and be respectful. So, the theoretical objection is really of the form:

P1. Morality is already relevant to all domains.
P2. However, there is a distinction between doing and allowing harm.
C. Therefore, if we have not done harm, a moral theory may not make prescriptions about what we should do in all contexts. Since utilitarianism is such a theory, it is false.

Regarding **P2**, I discussed above this distinction in the context of moral neutrality, that is, of not being morally obligated to do good for strangers if you have not done them any harm. But why should we draw the line of the obligatory at harms exactly equalling benefits? Why not at benefits equalling 1.2x the harms? Or 10x? Parity, while elegant, is just as arbitrary. We should thus have some bias against 'moral neutrality' as a coherent notion, and think more in terms of 'more good' and 'less good'.

You may have the intuition that simply allowing harm isn't morally wrong, but very few people have such an intuition that is impervious to degree. As in, suppose that you could save a million lives by doing a single push-up, but you are not in the mood to exercise. To not do the push-up would clearly be abominable, and yet this is only a more extreme version of our own inaction in failing to prevent deaths from malnutrition and disease, or to make other sacrifices following the demands of utilitarianism. Personally, I find that the most plausible view is that doing harm is just as bad as allowing harm, but to make a claim so strong is not necessary: so long as it somewhat wrong that we allow harm, and that we allow harm in virtually all contexts of our lives, then any moral system (including utilitarianism) is extensive in the way criticised. This takes the wind out of the sails of the theoretical demandingness objection.

4. Conclusion

I have outlined what I consider to be the best utilitarian responses to the three flavours of the demandingness objection. I think that these arguments succeed in showing us that the practical and harshness objections are mostly aesthetic, and that the theoretical objection could equally be levelled against many other moral systems. The feature of utilitarianism's demandingness that requires the most philosophical justification is the claim that there is no meaningful distinction

[3] This is not to say that there are not many decisions that are almost completely morally inconsequential. The clothing you wear on a particular day is a virtually morally neutral decision.

between doing and allowing harm. However, even if you find this implausible, almost no-one thinks that we have *zero* obligations to people whom we have not harmed and are not in relationship. Thus, theoretical demandingness is not a convincing objection regardless of our position on doing vs. allowing harm.

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