

# **Kvantifikator för en Dag**

*Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday*





# **What? More Better?**

## **(an Impudent Attack on Utilitarianism in General and Preferentialism in Particular)**

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### **Abstract**

Utilitarianism tells us to maximize the total amount of well-being in the world. I discuss whether there *is* a total amount of well-being in the world, given hedonist and preferentialist notions of well-being, respectively. My conclusion is that the prospects for preferentialism, in particular, are quite bleak.

### **FAQ (introductory)**

Q: What am I going to do in this paper?

A: First I shall present you with life span utilitarianism, after which I shall discuss what general conclusions one may draw from that fictional case. Then I shall discuss this result with respect to utilitarianism in general and to hedonistic and preferentialist utilitarianism in particular.

The upshot of it all will be a remainder that with regard to certain kinds of things there simply is no *total amount* of it.

Q: How old are my children?

A: Fourteen years of age—a girl of nine and a boy of five.

### **Presenting the straw man: life span utilitarianism**

Consider first an unorthodox version of utilitarianism, viz. *life span utilitarianism*. According to life span utilitarianism, the only intrinsically valuable thing is life—the longer a life, the better—, and, since it is a species of utilitarianism, it bids us maximize the total amount of this value.

Now we can easily generate the following version of the Repugnant Conclusion.

Suppose there are two worlds, Zut and Alors. In Zut people live to the age of 100 years; in Alors human beings are cloned by robots and only kept alive for a year. However, in Alors there will eventually have lived a quintillion infants and in Zut only a trillion people.

We are led to the conclusion that, though people live a hundred times longer in Zut, Alors is the better world—even given that the only thing that matters for the value of a world is how long people live!!!

So, we start by presupposing that value supervenes merely on the length of people's lives—the longer, the better—, and from there we conclude that a world where people live but for a year is better than one where they live to be a hundred years old.

Really now, being repugnant cannot be all that is wrong with this conclusion.

### **Examining the straw man**

What, then, is it that goes wrong in the Repugnant Conclusion of life span utilitarianism? Well, we began by assuming that the only intrinsically valuable thing is a long life—value supervenes on the length of lives. So, we calculate the value of each and every life in a given world and then add the results to get the sum total of value in that world.

The obvious unit for measuring value is the *valorie*, and for the sake of argument we shall use a rate of 1 valorie for 1 year of life. So, we have in Zut a trillion lives each worth 100 valories—giving a sum total of a hundred trillions of valories—, and in Alors a quintillion lives worth a valorie each—adding up to no less than a quintillion valories.

The problem with it is this: the first values that we calculate correspond to the length of each person's life; the sum total that we get when we add these values together, to the contrary, does not correspond to the length of any life. We assumed that value supervenes exclusively on the length of lives—but there is no length of life, no life span, for the sum total of valories to supervene on.

The original figures (one valorie here, a hundred valories there) represent the value of lives (*ex hypothesi* the only things that are valuable); but the total sum of valories (a quintillion valories here, a hundred trillions valories there) does *not* represent the value of anything: it is a mere number of valories, not a measure of value at all. For, to measure a value it must measure the value of something that can be valuable, and we supposed that the *only* thing that can have value is a long life—the longer, the better—, and neither in Zut nor

in Alors is there a life long enough to have a value of a hundred trillions or a quintillion valories .

The length of my life and the length of yours do not together yield any life span; you cannot add the length of one life to the length of another and get the length of a third or even the length of the two ‘together’ as it were. Even if, in some sense, my children are fourteen years old *together*, there is no life of theirs with a length of fourteen years.

What such figures as fourteen years (in the case of my children) or a hundred trillions or a quintillion years (in the Straw Case) represent is rather the total number of lived years in a population, irrespective of whether they have been lived consecutively, simultaneously, uninterruptedly, or by several distinct persons—the number of lived years in this sense (which may very well be a perfectly respectable sense) is obviously something quite different from the length in years of a life.

Of course, you could insist that it is the number of lived years in this sense, rather than the length of lives, that *really is* the morally relevant figure; only, then you must not hold that it is life spans as such that are intrinsically valuable: your axiology has to be revised to say that value supervenes not on the length of lives—the longer a life, the better—, but on the total number of lived years in a population or on something else—whatever it might be—that this total figure *can* represent.

### **Conclusions to be drawn**

What can we learn from the straw man case of life span utilitarianism? Well, the first general lesson to be drawn from it is simply that for some things there just is no total amount of them. The other lesson is that, if you want to be a utilitarian, you had better make sure that there *is* a total amount of whatever should be maximized.

Flesh-and-blood utilitarianism (as opposed to straw varieties) tells us to maximize well-being in one sense or another. It should be clear however that in no sense available to a consistent utilitarianism does more well-being imply anybody’s being better off. Suppose the world is in an original state O, where everybody is tolerably and about equally well off, and that we have to choose between two possible future states of that world, on the one hand Whoopee, where everybody is much better off than in O, and on the other hand Pfooi, where everybody is considerably worse off than in O—only there are more people in Pfooi

than in Whoopee, all worse off than anyone in O but so many that the ‘total amount of well-being’ is nevertheless greater in Pfooi than in Whoopee. Utilitarianism tells us to promote well-being by realizing Pfooi, even though everyone in Pfooi will be worse off than everyone in the original state O and also worse off than everyone in the alternative possible future, Whoopee.

Now, if you really think that it is well-being in this sense that should be maximized, this conclusion is not likely to strike you as very repugnant; indeed, it really will not be much of a *conclusion* at all but rather a direct consequence of your definition of well-being: if, on the contrary, you find such a conclusion repugnant or unexpected in any way, that may be an indication that your intuitions about the ethically relevant sense of well-being clash with the concepts of well-being available to utilitarianism.

But this is not just a matter of intuitions about the moral relevance of this or that concept of well-being; it is matter of what concepts of well-being are or are not available to a consistent utilitarianism in the first place. To see that, let us consider the availability of hedonist and preferentialist notions of well-being to utilitarianism.

### **The Flesh-and-Blood Case of Hedonist Utilitarianism**

Hedonistic utilitarianism tells us to maximize the amount of pleasure or happiness etc. in the world. Now, *is* there such a thing as the total amount of pleasure in the world?

Well, not if more pleasure implies *greater* pleasure, i.e. not if more happiness implies *happier* people. If an increase in pleasure or happiness meant a more *intense* pleasure or happiness, then you could not add one person’s happiness to another’s and end up with a greater happiness, since the resultant figure would not represent the intensity of any pleasure at all (any more than the age of my son and of my daughter together add up to the age of anything).

Actual varieties of hedonistic utilitarianism do *not* employ such a concept of pleasure or happiness, however. Hedonist utilitarianism typically holds that happiness is two-dimensional: it can vary in duration as well as in intensity; you can have more happiness either by being happier or by being happy for a longer stretch of time. An experience of pleasure—a single, distinct, ‘piece’ or ‘item’ or ‘sample’ of happiness—, then, is something that *has* an intensity and a duration; but the amount of happiness or pleasure contained in

that experience is rather the product of its intensity and duration and distinct from both. The amount of happiness in an experience can be represented by a figure, but that figure represents neither the intensity nor the duration nor even an amount of happiness with a certain intensity and duration.

Amounts of happiness or pleasure, in this sense, have neither duration nor intensity *per se*. Of course, every actual instance or piece of happiness, every particular experience of pleasure, will have a certain intensity and a certain duration, but a certain amount of happiness as such has none. In this it is like land: any particular piece of land will have a certain shape and size, but a given amount of land of so many square metres does not as such have any shape or size.

Is there a total amount of happiness or pleasure in this sense? As far as I can see there is nothing to prevent it, no more than there is anything to prevent any number of particular pieces of land to add up to a total area of land.

A hedonist conception of well-being thus seems available to utilitarianism. So far (and we shall not go further) my only possible objection to it is a charge of moral irrelevance as regards a concept of happiness that claims to have more happiness where everybody is less happy.

### **The Flesh-and-Blood Case of Preferentialist Utilitarianism**

Things are different, I think, with preferentialism. Preferentialist utilitarianism tells us to maximize the amount of desire-fulfilment in the world. Now, *is* there such a thing as the total amount of desire-fulfilment in the world?

Preferentialism says that value supervenes on getting what one wants and that the precise value of getting what one wants depends upon how much one wants it; it is better to have a very strong desire satisfied than a quite weak one: if things go a way you don't mind, that's good; if things go the way you long for in the innermost depths of your soul, that's much better. So, the stronger your desire, the better its fulfilment.

It may be that only some subset of desires are morally relevant (e.g. preferentialism may say that only *rational* desires are relevant); but for these morally relevant desires it still holds that it is their strength that decides how good it is to have them satisfied. On the

preferentialist view, value supervenes on the strength of the morally relevant desires that are satisfied, whether any desire or just some kind of them count as morally relevant desires.

So, the value of satisfying a particular (morally relevant) desire depends just on how strong it is—the stronger the desire fulfilled, the better. Suppose you know just how strong each particular desire in the world is; you would then know just how much good it would do to have each particular desire fulfilled. Can you thereby know how much good it would do, totally, to have a certain set of these desires fulfilled?

No. For if you add the value of having one desire satisfied to the value of having another one satisfied, you will end up with a figure that does not represent a value, since that figure does not correspond to the strength of a desire. If the value of fulfilling desires supervenes on the strength of those desires, they must have some specific strength to have a specific value; but my desire to see my children live happily ever after and your desire to take a trip to Venice do not have any combined, total, strength. Each have a particular strength, but these strengths do not combine into a total strength pertaining to the two of them together. So, there is nothing for the value of the two of them, together, as a unit, to supervene on; so, they, together, have no value.

In this, desires are just like years, or temperatures, or even incomes. Just as the age of my daughter and that of my son do not add up to the age of the two of them together, or the temperature of this room and that of the next do not add up to the total temperature of these rooms, or your annual income and mine do not add up to the *income* of ours—just so the strength (and the value supervenient on it) of one fulfilled desire and the strength (and the value supervenient on *it*) of another fulfilled desire do not add up to the strength (nor to the value) of these two fulfilled desires together.

If you add my children's respective ages you will get a figure that represents, perhaps, the total number of lived years shared between them. If you add temperatures, you will get a figure that represents I know not what. If you add my and your incomes, you will get a figure that represents an amount of money but not one that represents the income of either you or me or both.<sup>1</sup> If you add the value of fulfilling a desire with the strength of mine to the

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<sup>1</sup> You may think that there *is* a total combined income of ours, but in the relevant sense there isn't (unless you happen to be my wife). Let me explain why. I earn a certain amount of money, and so do you. Add these figures and they give a total sum of money. You may call this sum our "combined income", but in fact a 'combined income', in this sense, is

value of fulfilling a desire with the strength of yours, you will get a figure that represents the value of fulfilling a desire with the strength of mine plus the strength of yours: but by fulfilling our two desires, you will *not* fulfil any desire of that magnitude; so, by realizing the values of fulfilling our desires, you will not realize the value of fulfilling a desire of greater intensity; and, if value supervenes on the strength of the fulfilled desires, there is no total value of fulfilling two desires anymore than there is a total strength of those two desires.

### **To sum up**

Utilitarianism or, indeed, any theory that has the ethical or prudential or other value of actions, states of affairs, situations, or other things, supervene on the total amount of some value-making characteristic—any such theory must needs make sure that there *is* a total amount of that characteristic.

I have tried to show that for some things that come neatly packaged in discreet amounts there is nevertheless no total amount of them. Among such things, I would say, is the heat of passion, the intensity of desires, the strength of a preference.

Even though each preference may have a well-defined strength, any two distinct preferences do not have a common, combined strength—so there is no total strength of all desires in the world: you may wish things to be a certain way, I may wish them to be the same way, and Fatimah may strongly wish them not to be so, but there is no answer to the question how much that particular state of affairs is wished *in total*, by you and me and Fatimah *together*.

### **FAQ (conclusory)**

Q: But this is not how preferentialists do it! They don't *claim* that there is a total strength of all fulfilled desires, so how can I hold it against them that there isn't?

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not really an income at all: it is not an income of anyone—not my income nor your income nor even an income that is ours, yours and mine together. To be sure, it is the dollars-worth of my income added to the dollars-worth of yours, but this does not add up to the dollars-worth of any *income* but merely to the dollars-worth of a certain amount of money that is not itself an income at all. Get it?

A: No, utilitarianism do not normally tell us first to compute the total strength of fulfilled preferences or the total amount of pleasure in the world and then compute its value (although it happens that we are told to maximize the amount of well-being, which on a preferentialist view *is* having one's desires fulfilled). Mostly, we are asked first to compute the value of distinct experiences of pleasure or of distinct fulfilled preferences and then to add those values to compute the total value of things.

My point is simply that this procedure is illegitimate unless the properties that value supervenes on can be added, too. If value supervenes on the strength of satisfied desires—the stronger, the better—, then, for a number of desires to have a total, combined value, they have to have a total, combined strength, else (as a collective) they lack the very property that value supervenes upon.

Q: Perhaps preferentialism need not say that value supervenes on the strength of fulfilled desires, conceived in that individualist sense of mine. Can't we have a variety of preferentialism that says that value supervenes on the combined strength of desires? The fact that I would refuse this combined strength of desires the name of "a strength of desires" surely is no reason against the procedure.

A: Yes, of course, one might claim that the ordinary preferentialist way of computing the total value in the world is the correct one, after all. That would be tantamount to admitting that it is not really the strength of fulfilled desires that value supervenes on. Rather, one might then say, it supervenes on some property that is represented by the figure you get if you add the strengths of all fulfilled desires. This is, so far, so good. Only, there has to be some such property, and it has to stand a chance of being morally relevant. The existence of any such property is at least disputable, and its relevance to moral theory is, I think, unargued. For once, it seems that the burden of proof does not rest on me.

Q: Ahem ...

A: Ah, yes... This paper has benefited from comments and suggestions by Bengt Brülde, Björn Haglund, Frank Lorentzon, and Filip Radovic. It would have been quite a bit longer, if I had really listened to them.

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