

consequentialism

hedonism &
the experience
machine

the
distribution
of goods

obligations
to the
poor

the
trolley
problem

Do the ends
justify the
means?



Suppose that some actions are right, and some are wrong. What's the difference between them? What makes some actions right, and others wrong?

Here is one very simple, but also very plausible, answer to this question:

Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

Consequentialism says, simply, that we should judge actions by their consequences. Whatever will lead to the best overall outcome is what one ought to do.

A slightly different way to get the general idea is this: if I am deciding between doing action A and action B, I should try to figure out what the world would be like if I did A, and what the world would be like if I did B; and I should do whichever action would lead to the better world.

Consequentialism

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It is easy to construct intuitively powerful arguments in favor of consequentialism. Here is one:

The very simple argument for consequentialism

1. If one has the choice to bring about a worse outcome to a better outcome, one should never choose to bring about the worse outcome.
 2. One should always choose to bring about the best outcome. (1)
-
- C. The right action is always the one which brings about the best consequences. (2)

Calling this an argument is a bit of a stretch -- the first premise is pretty close to the conclusion. But still: isn't the first premise plausible?

Consequentialism

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A second argument can be presented via an example.

The drowning child

You are walking to class past St. Joseph Lake, and see a child drowning in the lake. If you don't go in to help the child, the child will die. If you do go in, your clothes will get wet. (You really don't like having wet clothes.) What should you do?

To most people, the answer here seems pretty obvious: you should go in and help the child. But why?

Obvious answer: the situation in which the child lives and you have wet clothes is better than the one in which the child dies and you stay dry. But that assumes that consequentialism is true.

Consequentialism

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Obvious answer: the situation in which the child lives and you have wet clothes is better than the one in which the child dies and you stay dry. But that assumes that consequentialism is true.

We can present this line of thought as an argument:

The best explanation argument for consequentialism

1. In the example of the drowning child, you should save the child.
2. The explanation of (1) is that you should act so as to bring about the best consequences.

C. The right action is always the one which brings about the best consequences. (1,2)

Consequentialism

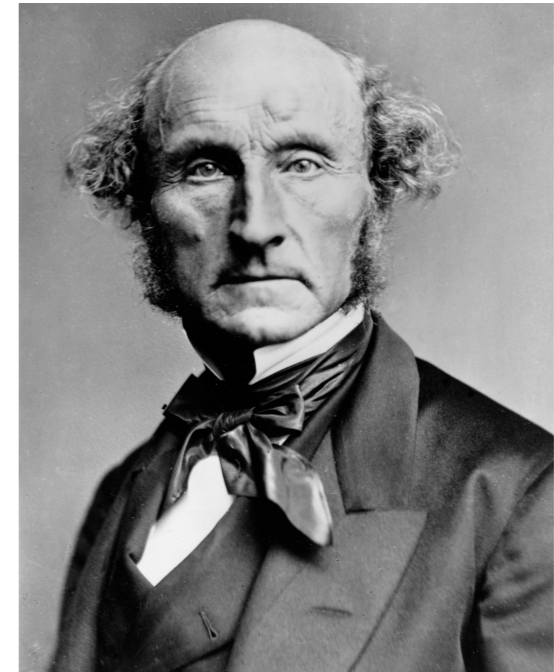
An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

Let's suppose that consequentialism is true. This raises two questions. The first is: what makes one outcome, or state of affairs, better than another?

To answer this question is to give a **theory of value**: a theory about what makes one state of the world better, or worse than, another.

Let us say that a **good** is something that makes a state of affairs better, and a **bad** is something that makes a state of affairs worse.

In the reading for today, John Stuart Mill gives the following statement of his theory of value — his view of which things are goods and bads.



“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals ... the Greatest Happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”

This view is sometimes called hedonism:

Hedonism

Pleasure is the only good
and pain is the only bad.

Suppose that this is true. Then how do we tell whether one outcome is better than another?

Here is a very natural answer. We 'add up' the pleasure, and 'subtract out' the pain. Whatever situation has the highest 'net pleasure' is the best.

In general, one might think, it is fairly straightforward to compare two different situations. One adds up the goods, subtracts out the bads, and determine the net good. On this view, one should always aim to maximize the [net good](#).

Hedonism

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In general, one might think, it is fairly straightforward to compare two different situations. One adds up the goods, subtracts out the bads, and determine the net good. On this view, one should always aim to maximize the **net good**.

This view can be stated as follows:

Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all
available options, it would lead to
the highest net good, and wrong
otherwise.

(You might wonder: aren't Consequentialism and Maximizing Consequentialism pretty much the same thing? As we will see, they are not.)

Hedonism

Pleasure is the only good and pain is the only bad.



Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the highest net good, and wrong otherwise.

Utilitarianism

An action is the right thing to do in certain circumstances if, of all the actions available in those circumstances, it would produce the highest net pleasure.

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Utilitarianism is a very clear and plausible-sounding view about ethics.

This is the view which is often summed up with the slogan that one ought always to act to cause the greatest happiness for the greatest number. It is a paradigmatically unselfish theory: no one's pleasures and pains are more important than anyone else's.

Utilitarianism

An action is the right thing to do in certain circumstances if, of all the actions available in those circumstances, it would produce the highest net pleasure.

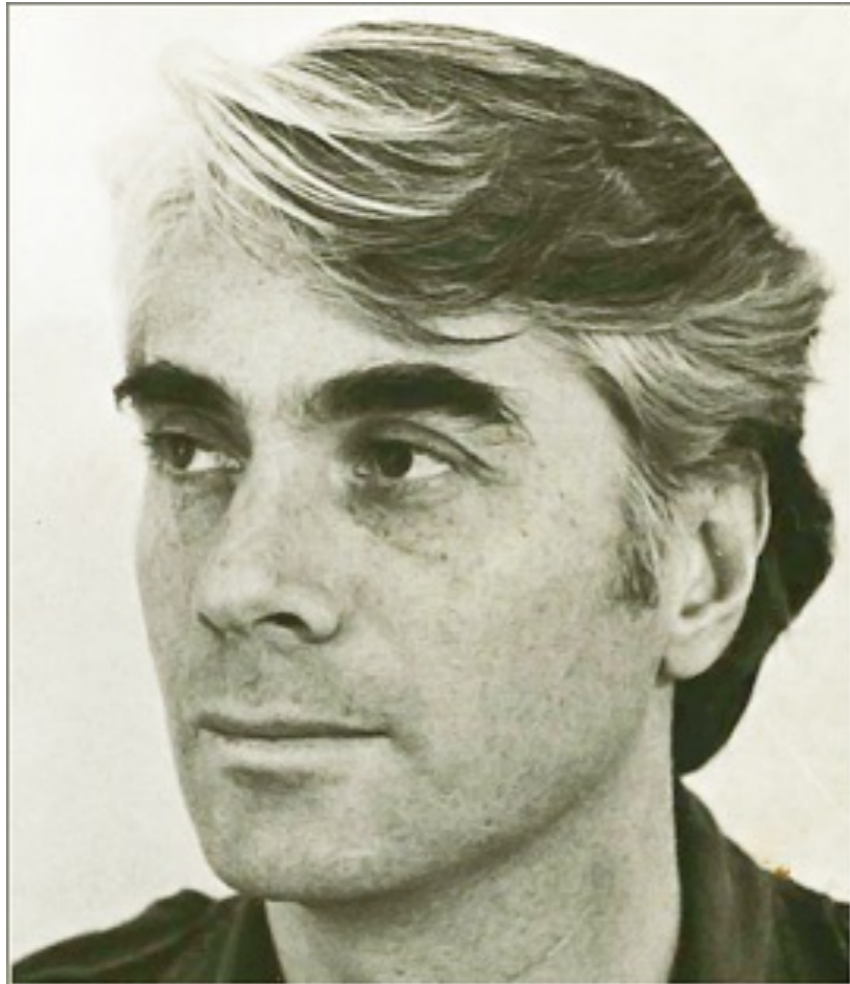
A historically influential objection to utilitarianism is that it is a 'doctrine fit for swine,' because it does not recognize the fact that, unlike pigs, human beings have goods other than mere pleasure.

Against this, Mill replies as follows:

“When thus attacked, the [utilitarians] have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable.”

What is Mill's reply to the objection?

A more serious challenge to utilitarianism can be brought out by Robert Nozick's example of the experience machine.



“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. ... Would you plug in?
What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?”

consequentialism

hedonism &
the experience
machine

the
distribution
of goods

obligations
to the
poor

the
trolley
problem

What must the utilitarian say about the relative goodness of the state of affairs in which everyone (or almost everyone) plugs in and the state of affairs in which no one does?

Suppose you face the decision whether to get into the experience machine. What would a utilitarian say about what you ought to do?

Suppose now that you face the decision of whether you should put **everyone** into the experience machine. (The machines are maintained by extremely reliable robots.) What would a utilitarian say about what you ought to do?

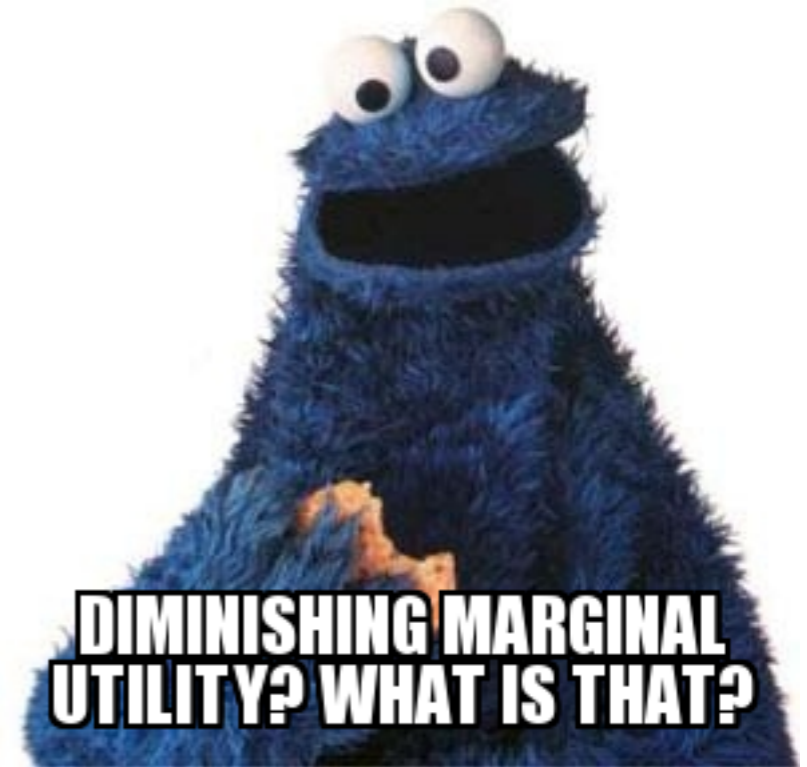
Does it matter if people ask you (or beg you) not to plug them in?

Is Nozick right that these consequences of utilitarianism are incorrect?

Here is a second challenge for the Utilitarian, which is based on another example due to Robert Nozick.

Imagine that there is a **utility monster** which gets more pleasure out of everything than any human does. No matter what things bring you pleasure, this thing gets more pleasure out of those things than you do.

Now suppose that you face a choice. You can either give some pleasure-causing thing to a friend of yours, or give it to the utility monster. Which course of action does the Utilitarian say you ought to pursue?



Recall that we presented Utilitarianism as the combination of two claims.

Hedonism

Pleasure is the only good
and pain is the only bad.

Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all
available options, it would lead to
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otherwise.

You might think that the examples we have discussed — the experience machine and the utility monster — are problems for hedonism, but not for Maximizing Consequentialism. Couldn't the Maximizing Consequentialist just say that there are goods besides pleasure, and bads besides pain?

Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the highest net good, and wrong otherwise.

Here are some other candidates for goods:

The extent to which the desires of agents are satisfied.

The extent to which the states of affairs contain beauty, or love, or friendship, or something else taken to be of objective value.

The extent to which the states of affairs maximize the well-being, or welfare, of agents.

Corresponding to each of these views about the good is a different version of Maximizing Consequentialism. For example, the first would yield the result that one should always act in such a way that maximizes the number of desires of people which are satisfied.

What would that view say about the experience machine?

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

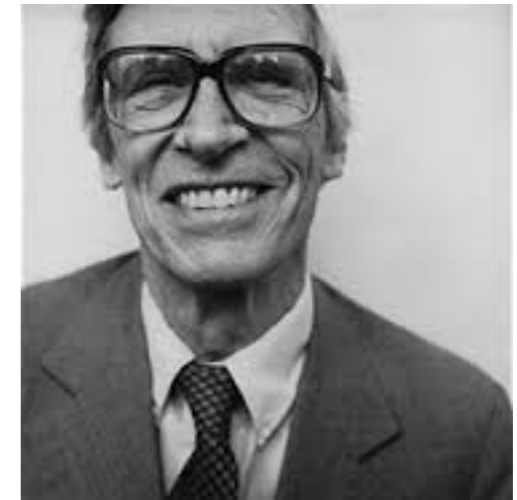
obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the highest net good, and wrong otherwise.

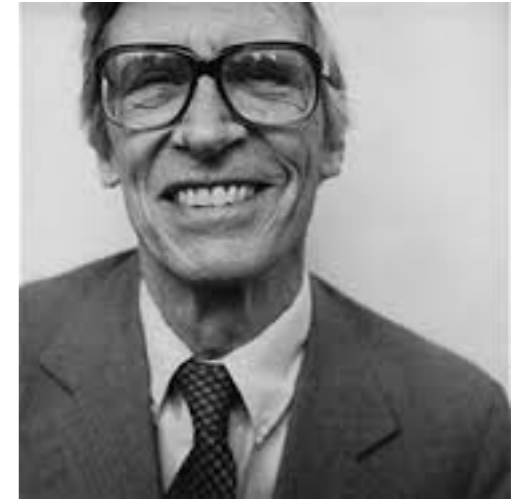
However, in the reading from John Rawls, we get a different sort of objection to Maximizing Consequentialism.



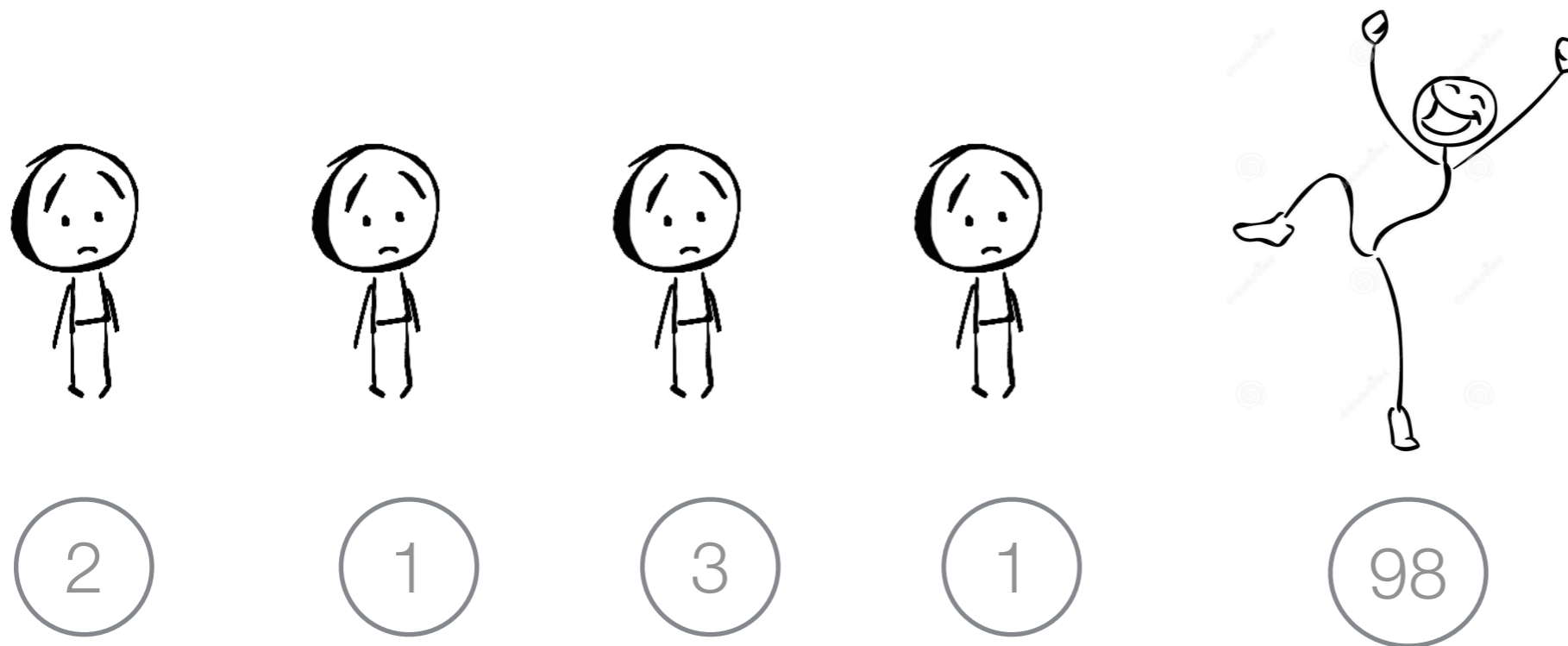
Rawls' objection is summed up with the concluding sentences of the passage we read:

“[Utilitarianism] is the consequence of extending to society the principle of choice for one man, and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one ... Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.”

To see what Rawls has in mind here, let's think about an example.



Suppose that we have a group of five people, whose 'goodness of life' — however we characterize goodness — is indicated by the numbers beside them.



Now imagine that I have the chance to bring about one of two states of affairs.

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the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

Situation A



0

0

0

0

942

Situation B



100

100

100

100

500

Which one, according to the Maximizing Consequentialist, should I bring about?

This is what Rawls means when he says that Maximizing Consequentialism fails to take account of the distinctness of persons. The Maximizing Consequentialist simply sums goods across persons, and thereby rules out the possibility that the goodness or badness of a situation can also depend on the distribution of goods across people.

Consequentialism

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Maximizing Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the highest net good, and wrong otherwise.

Does this sort of objection rule out Consequentialism generally?

It does not, because there is nothing to stop the Consequentialist from saying that what makes one situation better than another has to do with the distribution of the good, as well as the total net good. Many contemporary versions of Consequentialism are constructed in this way.

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

Summing up: utilitarianism is the combination of hedonism and maximizing consequentialism. We've seen that utilitarianism faces serious challenges. But those challenges don't seem to show that consequentialism in general (as opposed to specific versions of consequentialism) is false.

Let's now ask a question: if consequentialism is true, does that alone have any interesting consequences for what kinds of actions we ought to perform?

The answer appears to be 'yes.' To show why, let's focus on the question of what our obligations are to the very poor.

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

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About 25,000 people per day die of hunger, many of whom are children. That is about one person every 3.5 seconds. However, there is enough food on earth to feed everyone. It costs roughly \$1 to feed one of these people for one day.

So let's focus on this fact:

It costs roughly \$1 to
feed one child in Africa
for one day

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hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

So let's focus on this fact:

It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day

Let's bring in our basic statement of consequentialism:

Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

And bring in one further fact:

A Starbucks coffee costs \$3.

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hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day

A Starbucks coffee costs \$3.

Consequentialism

An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

One can prevent three children from starving for a day by donating the amount of money you would have spent on a Starbucks coffee.

A situation in which you drink a Starbucks and three children die is worse than a situation in which three children live and you do not drink a Starbucks.

It is wrong to buy a cup of Starbucks coffee.

the anti-Starbucks argument

1. It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day.
 2. A Starbucks coffee costs \$3.
 3. One can prevent three children from starving for a day by donating the amount of money you would have spent on a Starbucks coffee. (1,2)
 4. An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.
 5. A situation in which you drink a Starbucks and three children die is worse than a situation in which three children live and you do not drink a Starbucks.
-
- C. It is wrong to buy a cup of Starbucks's coffee. (3,4,5)

Despite its name, the anti-Starbucks argument is obviously very general; it shows that much of the spending in which people in affluent societies engage is wrong.

Is the argument sound?

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

Despite its name, the anti-Starbucks argument is obviously very general; it shows that much of the spending in which people in affluent societies engage is wrong.

Is the argument sound?

There are also less obvious applications of basically the same form of argument.

Let's begin with this fact:

A Notre Dame education costs \$140,000 more than an average education in a state university

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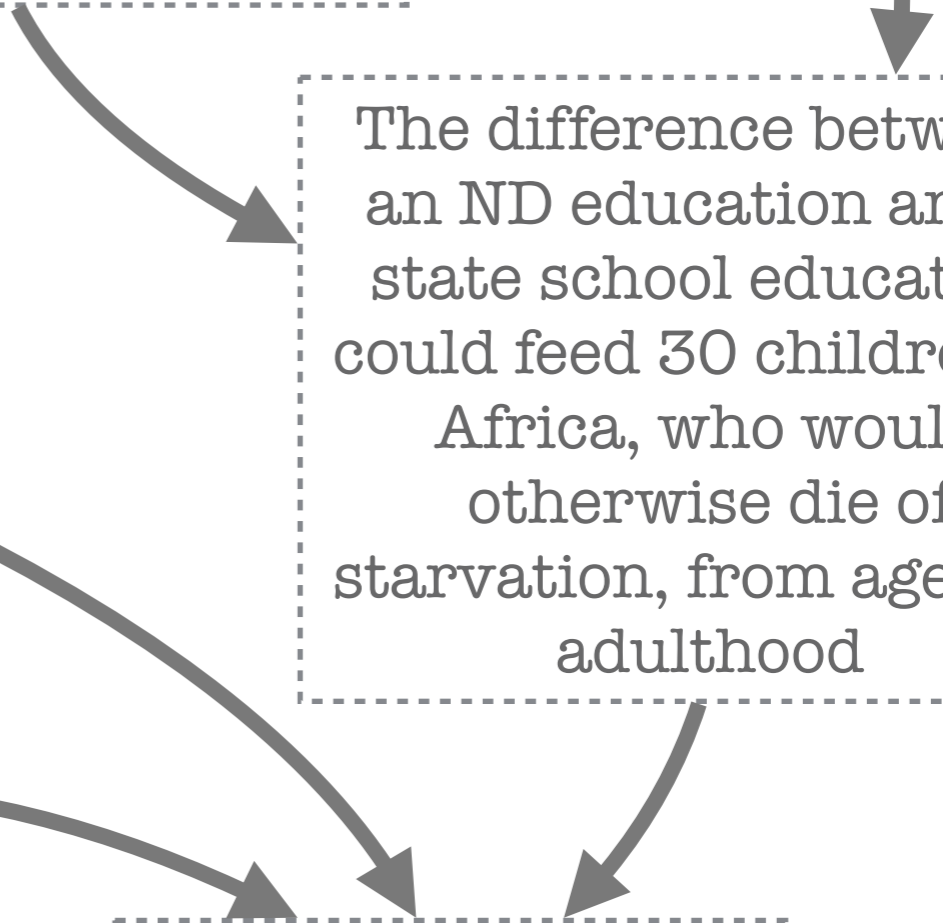
It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day

Consequentialism
An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.

The difference between an ND education and a state school education could feed 30 children in Africa, who would otherwise die of starvation, from age 5 to adulthood

A situation in which you attend Notre Dame and 30 people die is worse than a situation in which 30 people live and you attend a state university.

It is wrong to attend Notre Dame.



the anti-Notre Dame argument

1. It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day.
 2. A Notre Dame education costs \$140,000 more than an average education in a state university.
 3. The difference between an ND education and a state school education could feed 30 children in Africa, who would otherwise die of starvation, from age 5 to adulthood. (1,2)
 4. An action is right if, of all available options, it would lead to the best outcome, and wrong otherwise.
 5. A situation in which you attend Notre Dame and 30 people die is worse than a situation in which 30 people live and you attend a state university.
-
- C. It is wrong to attend Notre Dame. (3,4,5)

Is this argument sound?

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

We began with the idea that consequentialism is a plausible way to think about what one should and should not do. We then introduced some more specific forms of consequentialism, and saw that some objections can be raised to those. But these objections did not show that the basic thesis of consequentialism itself is false.

We've just seen that surprising consequences can be derived from this basic thesis.

The last series of arguments which we will discuss is an attempt to show, not that some specific form of consequentialism fails, but rather that this basic thesis is false, and so that any consequentialist approach to morality should be rejected.

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One general feature of consequentialism is its indifference to **how** consequences are brought about. What matters when deciding what to do is what one's various actions will bring about, not what those actions are.

One consequence of this general feature might be stated like this:

Act/omission indifference

Whether I bring about some state of affairs by doing something or failing to do it is morally irrelevant.

Some aspects of this principle are quite appealing. For example, the principle refuses to let people stand idly by as others suffer, on the grounds that one is not the **cause** of that suffering. One whose failure to act leads to suffering is, according to consequentialism, just as responsible for it as one whose action leads to that suffering.

But some troubling consequences of this principle are brought out by the following example, due to Judith Jarvis Thomson.



David is a great transplant surgeon. Five of his patients need new parts—one needs a heart, the others need, respectively, liver, stomach, spleen, and spinal cord—but all are of the same, relatively rare, blood-type. By chance, David learns of a healthy specimen with that very blood-type. David can take the healthy specimen's parts, killing him, and install them in his patients, saving them. Or he can refrain from taking the healthy specimen's parts, letting his patients die.

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

What does the consequentialist say that David ought to do in this case? What ought he to do?

This sort of case might lead you to think something like this: killing someone in order to save the lives of others is never morally permissible.

If this were true, this looks like it would be trouble for the Consequentialist, since it is hard to argue that killing someone, especially when it saves the lives of others, can never lead to an outcome which is, overall, the best of the available options.

But, as some of Thomson's other examples show, matters are not quite this simple.

Consider one of her examples involving a trolley car:

Edward is the driver of a trolley, whose brakes have just failed. On the track ahead of him are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right, and Edward can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately there is one person on the right-hand track. Edward can turn the trolley, killing the one; or he can refrain from turning the trolley, killing the five.

Is it permissible for Edward to turn the trolley? If so, wouldn't this be a case in which it is permissible — perhaps even obligatory — to kill one person in order to save five lives?

But then why might it be OK for Edward to turn the trolley, but clearly not permissible for the doctor to cut up his healthy specimen?

One might try to explain the difference here like this: Edward is choosing between **killing one and killing five**; either way, he is killing someone. David is choosing between **killing one and letting five die**, and this is something quite different. We have a stronger duty to avoid killing than to prevent people from dying.

consequentialism

hedonism & the experience machine

the distribution of goods

obligations to the poor

the trolley problem

But it is not clear that this is the right explanation of the difference between Edward and David, as is brought out by the example of Frank.

Frank is a passenger on a trolley whose driver has just shouted that the trolley's brakes have failed, and who then died of the shock. On the track ahead are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right, and Frank can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately there is one person on the right-hand track. Frank can turn the trolley, killing the one; or he can refrain from turning the trolley, letting the five die.

Here it seems as though Frank is faced with a choice between letting five die, and killing one — so his choice seems, in this respect, just like David's (the surgeon's). But it seems as though it **is** morally permissible for Frank to turn the trolley, even though it is **not** morally permissible for David to cut up the healthy specimen.

More complications are introduced by yet a third trolley example:

George is on a footbridge over the trolley tracks. He knows trolleys, and can see that the one approaching the bridge is out of control. On the track back of the bridge there are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. George knows that the only way to stop an out-of-control trolley is to drop a very heavy weight into its path. But the only available, sufficiently heavy weight is a fat man, also watching the trolley from the footbridge. George can shove the fat man onto the track in the path of the trolley, killing the fat man; or he can refrain from doing this, letting the five die.

Many people think that it is not permissible for George to push the fat man. But why is this any different from turning the trolley to kill the one on the right hand section of the trolley tracks? After all, in both cases, you are killing one rather than letting 5 die.

One thought is this: the fat man has a **right** not to be pushed onto the tracks in a way that people standing on trolley tracks **don't have a right** not to be run over by trolleys.

This sort of thought also promises to make sense of the example of David the surgeon; perhaps healthy specimens have a right not to be cut up, but that dying patients in need of transplants have no right to be saved.

This way of thinking about these cases is very different than the way of approaching them suggested by Consequentialism. According to this view, we should think about what we ought to do by **first thinking about the rights and obligations of the people involved** and not, at least in the first instance, about which action would bring about the best outcome.

If you think we should go in some direction of this kind, you should think about how best to reply to the simple but strong arguments for consequentialism with which we began.