What Is Utilitarianism?

1. **Hedonistic Utilitarianism (the 19th Century Version):**
   
   The **Value Claim**: Happiness is the only intrinsically good thing, and unhappiness is the only intrinsically bad thing.

   The **Action Claim**: Actions are morally right to the extent that they promote the good and diminish the bad. Actions are morally wrong to the extent that they promote the bad and diminish the good.

2. **Hedonistic Utilitarianism (a Modern Version):**
   
   The **Value Claim**: The value of a complete world-history is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering it contains. Pleasure adds to its value, suffering subtracts from its value.

   The **Action Claim**: An action is morally right when its outcome has greater value than the outcome of any of the alternative acts available to the agent. And the action is wrong otherwise.

Exercises and Questions

1. Suppose you’re a doctor working in a remote island community. Nobody is monitoring you. No one will remember what you do. And suppose you have a patient with a terminal illness who is in great, untreatable pain. You can painlessly euthanize the patient. Should you?
   
   ◦ Suppose the patient wants to be euthanized and consents to the procedure.
   
   ◦ What if the patient doesn’t want to be euthanized and doesn’t consent to the procedure?

2. Suppose you have enough blood to save either Alex or Bob, but not both. Alex is younger, healthier, and happier than Bob. Alex has a large, happy family and many friends. Bob is a loner. You give the blood to Alex.

   ◦ Suppose the blood comes from the Red Cross. Neither patient has any special claim to the blood.
   
   ◦ What if the blood belongs to Bob? You promised to set it aside for him if he ever needed it, and that you would never give it anyone else.

What Is the Greater Good?

Hedonic Utilitarianism says that the value of an outcome is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering it contains. But *how* is it determined?

Things that should be accounted for in determining the amount of pleasure and suffering:

1. The grade of pleasure / suffering.
2. The intensity of pleasure / suffering.
3. The number of people experiencing pleasure / suffering.
4. The duration of the pleasure / suffering.
**Question:** Does the *distribution* of pleasure / suffering across people matter in determining the overall value of an outcome? Is it worse, overall, if the suffering is concentrated in a small number of people?

Contrast the following two cases:

- **Case S₀:** One person suffers 100 units of pain for a day. Everyone else suffers no pain that day.
- **Case S₉₉:** Everyone suffers just 1 unit of pain for a day.

Off hand, it might look like *Case S₀* is worse than *Case S₉₉*. But is that correct?

The table below summarizes the cases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffering Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case S₀: 10³ people suffer 100 units of pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case S₁: 10³ people suffer 99 units of pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case S₂: 10² people suffer 98 units of pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case S₉₉: 10⁹ people suffer 1 unit of pain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It looks like *Case S₀* is better than *Case S₁*, and it looks like *Case S₁* is better than *Case S₂*. In fact, it looks like,

For any *k*, *Case Sₖ* is better than *Case Sₖ₊₁*.

This suggests that *Case S₀* is not worse than *Case S₉₉*. Is this correct? How should we weigh-up suffering across people?

**More Questions:**

1. How should we balance pleasure and pain off each other? Is taking 1 unit of pleasure away from someone just as bad as giving 1 unit of suffering to someone?

2. How should we balance the amount of pleasure and pain within a person across time? How do we compare the *quality* of life with the *duration* of a life. (QALYs: "quality adjusted life years").

3. Are there some things that we simply *should not do* whether or not they would bring about the greatest good?

**Organ Trade Puzzle:** It is morally permissible to donate one of your kidneys to someone who needs it. It is illegal (and immoral?) to *sell* one of your kidneys to someone who needs it (and is willing to pay for it). Why? What would the Utilitarian have to say about this?