

Impartiality in Utilitarianism

— Experience Paper #3

I. Theory Discussion

Imagine that there is a perfect utilitarian society, with all the citizens firmly sticking to the maxim of maximizing the overall utility. Then, what is the main foundation of such ideal social structure?

People might say such society must be built based on precise measuring and calculation of utility, which is indeed its current distinction from the real society in which utility is usually a vague and abstract term. Technically speaking, however, such distinction can be gradually lessened by developing a universally accepted uniform-standard to evaluate utility.

The main issue that a perfect utilitarian society needs to concern, beyond specific means and regime, is how to achieve people's **impartiality** in front of **personal** and **collective** happiness. In *Escalator of Reason*, utilitarian Peter Singer argues that “We must reinstate the idea of living an ethical life as a realistic and viable alternative to the present dominance of materialist self-interest.”¹ Since there are many situations that people can sacrifice their own happiness or intimate people's happiness to achieve greater happiness for a greater amount of people, there lies a main obstacle for utilitarian society: human's **self-interested ideology**.

Economically speaking, human's self-interest is beneficial for the achieving of overall utility due to the less **deadweight loss** in the **free market** based on **rational man supposition** in economics. However, **impartiality** in the free market is even better if it is operated in a utilitarian way of **valuing consequences**. According to John Mill in *Justice: What's the Right Things to Do* by Michael J. Sandel, “we should maximize utility, not case by case, but in the **long run**.”² This viewpoint can justifiably be confirmed by game theory, since the Pareto Optimization could be achieved with a better long-term outcome of cooperative strategies in repetitive gaming:

¹ *Escalator of Reason*, Peter Singer, Page 10

² *Justice: What's the Right Things to Do*, Michael J. Sandel, Page 38

$$V(\text{TFT}, \text{TFT}) = T + \delta T + \delta^2 T + \delta^3 T + \dots = T \frac{1}{1-\delta}$$

In the formula that calculates the iterative utility(V) in gaming model with δ representing the possibility of cooperation, it is manifested that cooperation can yield more utility. Contrarily, short-term self-interested behavior would irreversibly break cooperation in gaming and lead to inferior Pareto Optimization.

Since impartial cooperation can yield more utility among individuals in society, a perfect utilitarian society requires every citizen to be omniscient, producing and exchanging utility with no preference. Thus, we can reasonably conclude that utilitarianism proposes that people should be impartial, by which society can yield more utility in the long run.

II. Personal Application

Today, I supposed myself living in a perfect utilitarian world, where I calculated utility with an impartial position.

I walked onto the financial road, coming across a red traffic light while there were absolutely no cars nearby. People waiting, the god of utilitarianism is giggling at such vain situation.

To go or not to go, what should I choose?

I stopped to contemplate the stake in it. If I chose to go across the street while the red light is on, I would save my time and utilize it to produce more utility by working on things later on, but it costs the society's norm. Waiting is the contrary situation.

Beside the consideration of opportunity cost that waiting could give me time to have a rest and going could exert a force on traffic regulations to be more flexible, I could see it in one main conflict: gaining my personal utility or protecting the society's utility?

Standing in front of the red light, I begin to think behind the veil of ignorance. If 'I' standing in front of the crossroad is just a person that have nothing to do with myself, an omniscient being, what is the right move?

My vision was suddenly dragged out of my body, soaring up to the sky, in front of the megacity with thousands of such crossroad. If everyone moves under such circumstance, not to mention the potential risk that cars can come out of nowhere, but the traffic regulation itself will become chaotic and trustless. The cooperation mode will be broken, and Nash equilibrium in traffic will irreversibly move to the terrible side.

Crossing street, as I suddenly realized, would be a tremendous hit to the social norm, especially in the long term.

Hence, with a relieved smile, I chose to stay in front of the void crossroad, and steadily walked across when the green light is on.

III. Reflection

In my view, my experience is accord with utilitarian good life, while the consideration of morality is not the value of virtue itself, but the better outcome of utility. In most cases, people choose to stick to the social norm due to the rooted morality, which is formed along historical changes and evolutions. But the core of utilitarianism is that such morality should be considered with clear logical deduction and examination of utility yielding. Thus, I consider the omniscient consideration with the impartiality that was illustrated above is the core to achieve utilitarian good life.