

### Is the objection that Utilitarianism undermines integrity convincing?

In this essay, I will defend Mill's multi-level act-utilitarianism against the integrity objection. More specifically, I will defend long-termism against the integrity objection by using Mill's multi-level act-utilitarianism. Long-termism is a very common view in the 'effective altruism'-movement – that, when we are calculating which actions result in the most happiness, we should give the happiness of future generations the same weight as the happiness of the people alive today. First, I will outline Singer's "Drowning Child" thought experiment, with which he argues that a difference in the location of happiness is irrelevant, to illustrate the integrity objection. Then, I will explain when long-termism is integrated into utilitarianism, it is even more problematic according to the integrity objection. And lastly, I will show that this objection can be resolved with Mill's multi-level act-utilitarianism.

Consider the following thought experiment: you just bought a new, expensive suit for €500, and while you are walking to your job, you pass by a shallow pond with a drowning child. What do you do? Either you ruin your fancy suit and jump in to save the child, or you do not get into the water because you do not want to ruin your expensive suit.<sup>1</sup> Most people would do the former and would find the latter profoundly immoral. In other words, most people would sacrifice €500 to save a child. However, imagine now that there is a charity which you can donate €500 to and with that money, they are able to save a child from dying from malaria in Africa. Plausibly, we are less likely to donate to the charity than save the drowning child. Such charities exist, but why, if we just concluded that most people would sacrifice €500 to save a child, do not more people donate to those charities? Surely, Singer points out, proximity should not be important to our moral decision-making. Just because the child dying from malaria in Africa is further away from us than the child drowning in the pond, Singer argues, does not mean that their life should be less valuable than the life of the child closer to us. From an act-utilitarian point of view this is even more pertinent. One should be impartial to who experiences the happiness and it does not matter how far away they are from the agent.

What does the impartiality of who experiences the happiness mean for the act-utilitarian in the Global North? They should, in order to maximize happiness, devote their lives to developing the Global South, donate (almost) all of their income to charity, and every single second that they would spend on making friends and personal connections, unless it furthers their goal of improving the Global South, would be a waste of time. Bernard Williams would object here by arguing that this is way too demanding, utilitarianism would control every single part of people's lives. People deeply enjoy making, for instance, personal connections, and to take that away from people would undermine their integrity. This is what Crisp calls

**Met opmerkingen [ER1]:** Overall comment:

Thanks for this Olivier! You show real independence of thought in this essay and it is well-argued throughout. Your writing is generally very clear – well done overall. Some general thoughts:

-You used secondary literature particularly well in this essay which is a strong improvement on other essays. See my comments for where this could be made even stronger.

-I would have liked to see a few more sprinklings of what YOUR view is on page 2 of the essay. All your arguments are strong, but I found myself forgetting what your conclusion will be: build a case throughout and keep the reader in mind.

See comments in margins (which are all intended to push you further in your philosophical writing and not as heavy criticism of your work)

**heeft verwijderd:** is the view – it

**Met opmerkingen [ER2]:** This is super interesting. But I want to know why the Utilitarian might incorporate long-termism into their theory in the first place – otherwise I might think: oh well, I can just reject longer-termism then. A simple sentence to say something like "As I will outline, any consistent utilitarian should be committed to long-termism, however... when long-termism is integrated into utilitarianism, it is even more problematic according to the integrity objection."

**Met opmerkingen [ER3]:** Good introduction.

**Met opmerkingen [ER4]:** Or, put more philosophically, "according to common-place/everyday morality ..."

**heeft verwijderd:** Those

**heeft verwijderd:** actually

**heeft verwijderd:** then

**Met opmerkingen [ER5]:** Try not to leave it too long without referencing the philosopher you are drawing from – remind the reader of your source.

**heeft verwijderd:** ,

**heeft verwijderd:** o

**heeft verwijderd:** ,

**Met opmerkingen [ER6]:** Be precise: the reason is not that it's a waste of time, the reason is that it won't maximise happiness.

<sup>1</sup> (Singer, 1972, pp. 231–232)

the *rationality of personal concern*.<sup>2</sup> People value leading *their own* life and *having* friends. This dedication to developing the Global South undermines what it means to be human.

Met opmerkingen [ER7]: Nice paragraph.

However, people in the 'effective altruism'-movement, the philosophical and social movement that uses empirical evidence to determine the most effective way to improve the world (and overall happiness), would say that this is – at least to a certain extent – a sacrifice that they are willing to make. They argue that people should have more moral ambition. Why should morality not be difficult to live up to? They would bite the bullet and accept that they need to devote their life and career to improving the world. That they should sacrifice their own happiness in order to make the world – which was made unequal by previous generations – more equal (perhaps it would not even be a sacrifice of happiness because some people can get a lot of pleasure from being a noble person).<sup>3</sup> When the world is much more utilitarian, effective altruists argue that we will no longer have these moral obligations, and they will have the freedom to make deep social connections as those will then create the most overall happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Met opmerkingen [ER8]: Try and avoid broad claims like this: which philosophers, specifically?

Met opmerkingen [ER9]:

Met opmerkingen [ER10]: This sounds like a good point and one that shouldn't be in parenthesis.

heeft verwijderd: And that, when

heeft verwijderd: they

Another common idea in the 'effective altruism'-movement is long-termism.<sup>5</sup> According to this idea, the happiness of people in future generations is just as important as the happiness of the people alive today. Therefore, for any action, the moral agent should take the effect that the action has on future generations into account.<sup>6</sup> We should not only be impartial to where the happiness is experienced in the world, but also to when it is experienced. However, because the amount of people living in the future is near infinite, the happiness of the people living today would be, in comparison to that of future generations, negligible. According to this view, it would be justified for the current generation to live in extreme agony to make sure that people in the future would live 0.0001% better because even this very small increase of happiness, when multiplied with the near infinite amount of people who will experience it, will exceed the happiness that the current generation would get from not living in agony. Or the different way around: the threat of artificial intelligence. Even if there is only a miniscule chance that Artificial Intelligence poses an existential threat, because of the disastrous consequences if things actually would go wrong, we should dedicate our lives to making sure that it will not happen.

heeft verwijderd: However, another

Met opmerkingen [ER11]: Good! Put these philosophers in the body of the essay

heeft verwijderd: this is

heeft verwijderd: an

Met opmerkingen [ER12]: This point is a little confusing, rephrase it to bring your point out more clearly.

This means that we should not only devote our lives to solving inequality until the world is less unequal, at which point, it would be justified to make social connections, as that is what would then maximize overall happiness. But we should instead devote our lives to the cause of improving the world into eternity, because, compared to the happiness of future generations, the happiness of the people alive at any given point will always be negligible

heeft verwijderd: . A

<sup>2</sup> (Crisp, 2009, p. 145)

<sup>3</sup> (Crisp, 2009, p. 148)

<sup>4</sup> (Crisp, 2009, p. 149)

<sup>5</sup> Thinkers such as Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord defend this view.

<sup>6</sup> (The Long-Term Future | Effective Altruism, n.d.)

compared to the happiness of future generations. This would certainly be a very sad world to live in, and because this would go on into eternity (as it will always be possible to improve the future by a miniscule amount: a one after a very large amount of zero's), no one would actually be happy.

A very common counterargument given to the idea that we should devote our lives to preventing existential threats with very small, non-zero chances is 'Pascal's mugging' – an example of this would be the risk of artificial intelligence.<sup>7</sup> It tries to illustrate the problems when one tries to deal with the properties of infinite payoffs with an incredibly small probability in morality. Consider the following scenario: you get mugged on the street and the mugger tells you that they have access to an alternative dimension and that they will kill everyone in that alternative dimension unless you give them your wallet.<sup>8</sup> The probability that what the mugger says is true is very, very small, but the potential result of not giving him your money is near infinite. Despite the infinite result of giving the mugger your wallet, most people would tell the mugger to stop bothering them and would not give the mugger their wallet.

What are the philosophical implications then for long-termism? Should long-termism generally be rejected, or is there a way to take future generations into account with long-termism without having to deal with the problem of infinity? A multi-level act-utilitarian could argue that there is a way to deal with the long-term. Firstly, as I showed, fully incorporating long-termism into utilitarianism would create issues. It would actually reduce happiness because everyone would be obsessed by improving the future and would neglect their own happiness and the happiness of the people around them. Therefore, a multi-utilitarian would argue that instilling a customary morality which would still account for some integrity into people would be the best outcome. Usually, allowing people to make social connections while simultaneously making sure that people value future happiness will lead to the best outcome. According to Crisps reading of J.S as a multi-level act-utilitarianism, Mill would have no problem with long-termism, because of its emphasis on not only the greatest happiness principle but also on customary morality. Only using the greatest happiness principle would not lead to the greatest happiness, but by using customary morality, Mill is able to circumvent this problem.

An effective altruist would agree with this. Effective altruism urges us to be more morally ambitious, but also recognizes that it should be sustainable.<sup>9</sup> After all, when people get burned-out, they can no longer improve the world.

**Met opmerkingen [ER13]:** I think an example of how a single action can improve the lives of future generations would make this point clearer.

**heeft verwijderd:** Firstly,

**heeft verwijderd:** a

**Met opmerkingen [ER14]:** Again, but the philosopher's name in the body of the tekst.

**heeft verwijderd:** would

**Met opmerkingen [ER15]:** What kind of integrity? A short sentence is needed to say what multi-level is, is also needed if you're going to defend this position.

**heeft verwijderd:** – this could still be quite a lot more ambitious than it is today –

**heeft verwijderd:** Mill would argue that his

**heeft verwijderd:** m has

**Met opmerkingen [ER16]:** Ok, you've moved a bit quickly here and I am not sure what the steps in your argument are! We can discuss in tute.

<sup>7</sup> (Bostrom, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> I have slightly changed the scenario from the original because I think this makes it clearer and more closely parallels the example of artificial intelligence.

<sup>9</sup> (Helen Toner, n.d.)

In conclusion, although the ‘where?’ and the ‘when?’ of happiness are irrelevant, this does not mean that one should fully commit to single-level act-utilitarianism in every part of their life, as this would undermine their integrity. A multi-level act-utilitarian would recognize this and understand that, usually, it is permissible to have different commitments because this would, in the end, result into the greatest general happiness.

**Met opmerkingen [ER17]:** I think this is a little underdeveloped in your essay as it stands. A clear definition of what you’ll mean by integrity would help I think!

### Bibliography

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**Met opmerkingen [ER18]:** Your third and final sources are not peer reviewed! Look for peer-reviewed sources. The only online web-page/popular source which is safe to use this one

<https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>