Does morality consist in maximizing happiness?

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In this essay I will argue that morality does not consist in maximizing happiness. I make my case in the following way. First, I explain what it means to maximize happiness. Then I show why we might think that it constitutes morality. I do this by appealing to examples and to the history of moral progress. I then demonstrate that maximizing happiness leads to absurd results and, in some cases, moral regress. Finally, I conclude that morality cannot, therefore, consist in maximizing happiness.

The idea that morality consists in maximizing happiness originates with Bentham (Bentham 1994, pp. 306-312) and Mill's (1901) early Utilitarianism and the principle of utility. By this principle, every action derives its moral value from one thing only: how much it increases the sum total of happiness among all sentient beings (sometimes called *utility*). Hence, the goodness of an action is proportional to how much it increases this sum; its badness to how much it decreases it. The best possible action in any given situation is that which yields the greatest happiness to the greatest number; that which maximizes happiness, in my preferred terminology. When I refer to utilitarians, I have in mind those who support the principle of utility as stated above.

What exactly motivates this principle? Suppose we have a world composed of only a 100 people, of whom none are especially happy. Suppose you are given the choice of making either 32 or 6 of them happy. Intuitively, it is good to choose the 32. This intuition is one motivation for the principle of utility.

But is maximizing happiness really *all* that matters? Is it not good, for instance, to keep a promise even though it makes you unhappy? The utilitarian can reply that although promises are not valuable in and of themselves, they are valuable insofar as they maximize happiness. If you break a promise, the happiness of the person to whom you made it will decrease. Moreover, if you were known as untrustworthy, your colleagues and acquaintances would be less happy in your presence. Finally, promise-keeping is

essential for a functioning society, which in turn is essential to keep people happy. By breaking a promise, you devalue promise-keeping, and thus put people's happiness at risk. These three examples give us plausible reasons to think that you ought to keep even those promises that make you less happy. In fact, the principle of utility is impartial: it does not care whose happiness is improved, so long as the net improvement is maximized. This impartiality helps recover our moral intuitions about promises.

But consider again the goodness of keeping promises. Is it always good? Suppose you are stranded on a desert island with an old and dying pirate in possession of treasure (Smart and Williams 1973, pp. 62). Before his death, he makes you promise to give the treasure to a golf club. After his death and your rescue, you are implored to donate to Oxfam. Should you break your promise to help Oxfam save lives? To get around the aforementioned utilitarian arguments in favor of keeping promises, we assume that the pirate is now dead and that you kept the promise secret. Clearly, you would maximize happiness by donating to Oxfam. This also feels like the right thing to do. Again our moral intuitions agree with the principle of utility: we allow for exceptions to rules whenever they maximize happiness.

Finally, consider this argument, inspired by Smart (1973, pp. 62-64). Consider what a rejection of the principle of utility amounts to. It would have to say that sometimes we ought to choose something which does not maximize happiness. And sometimes we really do feel that this is right, as two of the upcoming examples will demonstrate. However, how are we to be sure that it is not our intuitions that are mistaken; that we are being selfish, squeamish, or dogmatic when we reject the actions that maximize happiness? This argument begs the question by presupposing that the principle of utility is right. And as Williams says (1973, pp. 102-104), it could only have force with someone who is already convinced that the right way of looking at questions of morality is by considering how to maximize happiness. But this is what we are trying to prove.

There is a way out of this circularity. We can check whether the principle of utility recommends abandoning the moral intuitions that we have indeed abandoned throughout history. Take the example of interracial marriage. Until around 1967, some Americans considered the prohibition of interracial marriage to be good, and met the suggestion of its removal with moral outrage. Since then, progressive societies have abandoned these moral intuitions. But it appears in retrospect that every moral intuition we have abandoned tended in its time to decrease the sum total of happiness. Certainly this is true of slavery, discrimination, and many terrible practices of our pasts. But this is

exactly what we ought to have done if morality consisted in maximizing happiness: we ought to have discounted the intuitions that prevented us from doing so. Moral progress seems to have consisted, so far, in doing just that — albeit on a societal, as opposed to personal, level. Hence, we may consider this a good reason to look at moral questions in terms of what maximizes happiness.

These three arguments lend credence to, but do not prove, the claim that morality consists in maximizing happiness. To show that they fail, I will demonstrate that that this approach to morality does not always concur with our intuitions, and that in some of these cases, abandoning them leads to moral regress.

Consider again the world composed of only 100 people and your choice to make either 32 or 6 of them happy. But suppose also that all 32 are men, while the 6 are split 50-50. Suppose also that none of them will ever learn of anyone else's level of happiness. Thus, unfairness cannot lead to unhappiness, because no one can know about it. Choosing the 32 still maximizes happiness. Moreover, since the principle of utility is impartial, it cannot distinguish between a case of equal distribution and one of unequal distribution. If morality consists in maximizing happiness, not only should we choose the 32 men, but we could not say that this is any worse than if half were women. But this seems absurd. We may or may not stretch ourselves to agree that the 32 men should win out, but we would certainly not allow this to seen as equally good as if the gender distribution were fair. But the principle of utility does not allow the 'separateness of persons' (Rawls 1994, pp. 337), so it gives us no way to make the distinction between these two cases in the first place. Fairness of distribution, that is, cannot even figure into our moral reasoning. Hence, we should not accept the way of looking at moral questions that is demanded by the principle of utility (Smart and Williams 1973, pp. 78).

Finally, I need to show that not only is it wrong to look at moral questions only in terms of what maximizes happiness, but that even if we do so, we will discover that this in some cases leads to moral regress. Consider this case, adapted from Rachels' Peeping Tom (2003, pp. 105). Imagine a world exactly like ours except that there is a man called Tom who gets immense happiness from photographing naked women. Tom also happens to have the power of invisibility, so he never gets caught, nor runs any risk of getting caught. He also happens to be very healthy, and is never in risk of any mental or physical repercussions of his addiction. Therefore, in this alternate world, everyone is just as happy as in our world, except that it contains one more person, Tom, who is very happy indeed. There is, in short, more happiness in Tom's world than in

ours. Tom's actions could only be bad if they lead to a decrease in the sum total of happiness. But since his victims never learn of his crimes, their happiness is the same as in our world. Moreover, there are, by design, no negative effects at present or in future on Tom's person, his victims, or society. Tom is, according to the principle of utility, doing the right thing by acting on his desires. But this seems absurd. And perhaps the greatest disgrace to the principle of utility is that it must hold that if Tom were to let himself get caught, he would be doing something bad because of the negative effects it would have on his own and his victims' happiness. But we think the world would be better off if Tom were caught, *even if that decreased the sum total of happiness*. Hence, the principle of utility must sometimes lead to moral regress.

We have seen why it is tempting to think that morality consists in maximizing happiness, and that sometimes it is important to factor in the change in the sum total of happiness to our moral evaluations. However, we have also seen that if this is all there is to morality, we will be forced to look at questions in ways we find unacceptable, and we will be lead to conclusions which we consider morally regressive. Therefore, it cannot be the case that morality consists in maximizing happiness.

Notes

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