

# Imperceptible harms and benefits

## Kluwer Academic - Imperceptible harms and benefits

**PH103 - Reason, knowledge and values**  
Lecture 17 - Does it matter whether I make a difference?

Preliminary readings  
PLATO, CRITO 58A-B-C

- Crito trying to convince Socrates to escape
- Socrates' answer: It would destroy the laws of the city and society - What if everyone did
- How can laws and institutions have no power over private citizens? Citizens continue to obey the law, even if they know why everyone else doesn't. Why doesn't everyone do it? I won't!

DEER PARK, "FIVE MISTAKES IN MORAL MATHEMATICS: REASONS AND PERSONS," CH. 3, SECS. 27-30, PP. 75-95.

▷ Ignoring small chances

- Sometimes claimed that, below some threshold, extremely small chances have no rational or moral significance
- E.g. (deontic): My voting can often be justified in consequentialist terms. When I cannot prevent a terrible outcome by voting, I should not vote. (This is not to say that I should never vote.)
- Benefit (= possible benefit multiplied by the chance that the act will produce it)
- Expected benefit = expected value of benefit
- Expected value = sum of all possible outcomes times their probability
- Expected benefit = sum of all possible outcomes times their probability
- Small acts are often important, consider very tiny chances
- When our acts cannot affect more than a few people, this may be so. But this is because the effects are likely to be extremely low - the stakes are very high.
- Small acts should be given serious attention. But consider what happens when we may affect a very large number of people, or when the chance will be taken a very large number of times ... These large numbers roughly cancel out the importance of the chance

▷ Can there be imperceptible harms and benefits?

- Mistake: Ignore very small chances when they would either affect very many people, or would not affect anyone at all.
- ▷ The Drops of Water

Description: -

- Flood damage prevention -- Europe -- Mathematical models -- Congresses.

Flood control -- Europe -- Mathematical models -- Congresses.

Watershed management -- Europe -- Mathematical models -- Congresses.

Corn.

Utilitarianism

EthicsImperceptible harms and benefits

The Jarrold White Horse series

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