

NEGATIVE UTILITARIANISM

PROFESSOR POPPER has proposed a negative formulation of the utilitarian principle, so that we should replace 'Aim at the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number' by 'The least amount of avoidable suffering for all'.¹ He says: 'It adds to the clarity of ethics if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness'.² However, one may reply to negative utilitarianism (hereafter called NU for short) with the following example, which is admittedly fanciful, though unfortunately much less so than it might have seemed in earlier times.

Suppose that a ruler controls a weapon capable of instantly and painlessly destroying the human race. Now it is empirically certain that there would be some suffering before all those alive on any proposed destruction day were to die in the natural course of events. Consequently the use of the weapon is bound to diminish suffering, and would be the ruler's duty on NU grounds.

On the other hand, we should assuredly regard such an action as wicked. On utilitarian grounds we might defend this judgment by pointing to the positive enjoyments and happiness likely to be found in a great number of the lives destroyed.³

Again, consider NU in relation to murder and abortion. Painless killing would be a benefit to the victim. True, (i) his dear ones might suffer, through (a) the sorrow occasioned by his death and (b) the possible deprivation accruing on the removal of a breadwinner; and (ii) without a rule against murder society might become chaotic and therefore miserable. As for (a), mourning as an expression of sympathy for the victim would be irrational; better to be glad that he will fear no more the heat of the sun nor the furious winter's raging, etc. (Religious people sometimes come near to this, but not for NU reasons: the dead one is enjoying the bliss of heaven.) And as to (b) and (ii), controlled murder would be quite all right, e.g. child-exposure (or rather, painless child-murder, like the humane disposal of unwanted kittens), provided this did not upset population balance, etc.: one could have a State-administered system of licences, for instance. Again, abortion, supposing that medical research could discover a harmless method, would be right on NU grounds. Furthermore, racial suicide, child-murder and abortion, while undoubtedly beneficial to the victims if painlessly carried out, might

¹ *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2nd. edn. revised (1952), vol. i, chap. 5, n. 6 (2).

² *Op. cit.* vol. i, chap. 9, n. 2.

³ Another thought less easily fitted into a utilitarian pattern is perhaps this: conscious existence is so remarkable in itself that it is wrong to deprive the unborn of the right to 'drink in daylight' (to use a colourful South Sea Pidgin expression). But the metaphysics of this feeling are odd.

be justifiable even if the methods *were* somewhat painful : the amount of toothache and illness in store for a man will usually far outweigh the brief misery of the stiletto in his back. In general, then, NU will be unconvincing wherever we are concerned with the cutting-off of life.

As indicated above, positive utilitarianism ('Maximise happiness') does better in these matters ; and incidentally it covers a large part of the ground covered by NU, since although a happy man does not suffer appreciably less when tortured, a tortured person, especially one of tender years, may well turn out to be less happy.

Admittedly, NU as a conservative political principle has some advantages, in that people more readily agree on evils than on goods ; but any clarity it brings to ethics is bought at the expense of allowing certain absurd and even wicked moral judgments. Admittedly also my example does not quite work as it stands against Professor Popper inasmuch as he propounds two other principles to set alongside NU, viz. (briefly) 'Tolerate the tolerant' and 'No tyranny'.¹ Presumably the benevolent world-exploder might be thought intolerant and/or tyrannical. But these two other principles are, I would maintain, capable of relatively straightforward justification, and are not therefore principles in the sense in which NU is. For example, tyranny, even if benevolent in one generation, leads to misery in the long run, etc. Professor Popper has given sufficient illustrations of why we should, under normal circumstances, resist tyranny passionately. But of course there is no *long run* to worry about if we are contemplating a benevolent world-exploder. In any event, even if we allow 'Tolerate the tolerant' and 'No tyranny' to stand as principles alongside NU, there will be a conflict between them and NU regarding our example. If we take NU seriously, surely we should over-ride the other principles. Would not our benevolent world-exploder be truly the saviour of mankind, and for that matter of the animals too ? The sincere proponent of NU can see a novel significance in the saying that those whom the gods love die young.

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¹ *Op. cit.* vol. i, chap. 5, n. 6 (2).