



Training Exercises E3 (Consequentialism)

with Example Solutions

Issue 1: *Warming Up*

- (a) What is the general idea of consequentialism?
- (b) Describe maximizing, collectively satisficing, individually satisficing and equalizing forms of consequentialism. What are their differences?
- (c) What is the difference between hedonism and preference theory?
- (d) What are objective and subjective accounts of relevant consequences and what are their differences?

Issue 2: *Utility Monster*

Imagine that there is a so called *utility monster*. It loves to harm others, but no matter how much harm it does, the benefit it gets is always ten times higher than the harm it causes (no matter which axiology you assume).

- (a) For which forms of consequentialism is that problematic and why?
- (b) How could a consequentialist answer to this problem?

Sketch of a Solution 2:

- (a) This is a problem for all forms of consequentialism that maximize benefit minus harm, because then the harm caused is always outweighed by the utility monster's benefit. Thus, the right action is always the one that is to the benefit of the utility monster and to the harm of everybody else. This is very counterintuitive, though.
- (b) One solution would be to use a condition that has an equalizing or an individually satisficing component.

Issue 3: *Scheduling Problems*

It is Tuesday. You are a student assistant and it is part of your job to scan documents. Your professor said that you are to scan a certain book until Wednesday. In addition, you have an exam on that day

you need to study for and also your sister asked you to help her move today. You only have time to do one of those. You know that your sister has plenty of friends who can help her move and you are sure that enough of them will show up. Your parents, though, won't like it much if you don't help your sister. You and your sister do not get along too well, so both of you actually would prefer if you did not help with the move. The exam tomorrow is very important for your studies and if you fail it now, the only possibility is to retake the exam later, which will delay your studies by one more semester. This would mean a lot of inconvenience for you, as you cannot proceed with your life plan without having finished your degree. You think that there are good chances to pass the exam if you study today, but that you will most likely fail if you don't. Your professor will be a little angry with you if you do not hand in the scan in time, because he always gets angry about students who do not do their jobs properly. This will make you feel moderately embarrassed. Apart from this you cannot see any negative impacts, as you know that the scan is supposed to be for a seminar that only starts in a month time. You are reasonably sure that a few days of delay won't make any difference. You only have enough time to do one of those things: scan the documents in time, help your sister move, or study for the exam.

- (a) What is the right thing to do according to Expected Utility Preference Utilitarianism?
- (b) Can you tell what is the right thing to do according to Classical Utilitarianism given the above information on your decision situation?

Sketch of a Solution 3:

If you are asked to apply a normative theory, you need to take into account and explicitly discuss every part of the theory that you are to apply. In case of consequentialism, you have to take into account at least the kind of consequences, the condition and the relevant quality in your assessment of the case. For this you usually first identify the relevant consequences, second evaluate them according to your axiology and finally see which of those is favoured by the condition. The first and second step of this process are often combined for reasons of brevity. But no matter how you do that, you have to make each step as explicit as you can.

- (a) Expected Utility Preference Utilitarianism is a maximizing, preference theoretic, subjective theory.

We first list the *subjective consequences* and what we know about their utility (i.e. about the *preference satisfaction and preference frustration* in each case). You *expect* all of the following to hold:

not scanning the book If you do not scan the book, your preference to not feel embarrassed as well as your professor's preference to have students work reliably is frustrated. We don't know how strong these preferences are. Likely, no other preferences are involved.

not helping with moving The preferences of you and your sister (that you don't help) are satisfied, though your parents' preferences are not. We don't know how strong these preferences are, but given the scenario, we assume them to be quite weak or moderate at most. No other preferences are involved.

not studying for the exam If you do not study for the exam, it is likely that you will fail and that a lot of strong preferences of yours will be frustrated, since you cannot proceed with your life plan as you want to. It is also likely that not only your preferences are frustrated, but also your family's etc.

scan the book The consequences of not helping and not studying will obtain, and your preference to not be embarrassed will be fulfilled as well as your professor's preference that you work reliably.

help with moving The consequences of not scanning and not studying will obtain. Your sister's and your preferences that you do not help moving are frustrated, but your parents preference that you help are fulfilled.

study for the exam The consequences of not scanning and not helping will obtain. In addition, your preferences to pass the exam and to proceed with your life plan are likely to be fulfilled, as well as the according preferences of your family etc.

Overall, helping to move has the smallest expected utility. There, only your parents' preferences that you help your sister are fulfilled, while all the other preferences at stake are frustrated, including the likely preference of your parents that you are successful with your studies. From the remaining two options, studying for the exam has a better expected outcome than scanning the book, as you can assume that the sure frustration of your professor's preference and your preference to not feel embarrassed weigh a lot less than the likely frustration of your (and your family's) preference to continue with your life plan. Studying for the exam thus has the *maximal* expected utility. Thus, according to Expected Utility Preference Utilitarianism, you ought to study for your exam.

- (b) You cannot tell as you do not know whether you will pass or fail the exam (you only know that you *likely* pass if you study and that you *likely* fail if you do not study) and whether the professor really does not need the scan urgently.

Issue 4: *Dr. Good*

Dr. Good wants to avoid any suffering and thus blows up the planet. Invent a form of consequentialism where this would be right and find at least one other (different, probably less drastic) scenario that shows a problem of such a form of consequentialism.

Sketch of a Solution 4:

Any form of consequentialism with a minimizing relation on pain (or preference frustration) has such problems. If you, for example, take an objective form of consequentialism that minimizes pain, it would be indeed best to end all beings that can experience pain, because that ensures that no pain will ever again be felt. Such theories are not plausible, though, as they entirely disregard any positive value (i.e. pleasure or preference satisfaction) and there arguably is no good reason to do so.

Another unpleasant implication of such a theory would be that many normal things (that we usually think of as morally unproblematic) would be labelled as morally wrong. It would no longer be right to get a tattoo, as this is initially painful. You would not be allowed to get children, as there is a lot of pain and inconvenience involved childbirth and the upbringing of children. For some women, this pain is probably greater than the pain of not having children. We normally think of this pain being outweighed by the enormous joy that comes with having children, but this does not come into the

equation any longer, since we only minimize pain.

Issue 5: *Bad Things?*

We likely (hopefully!) share the intuition that certain things are wrong most of the time (or even all of the time), including

- (i) murder
- (ii) assault
- (iii) cruelty towards animals

Answer the following questions for each of the above:

- (a) Use a maximizing account of utilitarianism to explain that, for most situations, actions of this type are wrong.
- (b) Can you come up with a (possibly counterfactual) scenario, where maximizing utilitarianism would allow the action? If yes, present such a scenario. If no, why not?

Sketch of a Solution 5:

- (a) In the case of murder, a life is terminated and with that all potential future pleasure and pain. If this life is worth living and would have otherwise continued for some time, this is a huge sum of utility. Also, if a person dies, a lot of grief is caused. Additionally, the more people are murdered, the more people are afraid that they or their loved ones become victims of murder. Overall, this does not outweigh the benefit of the murderer (if he even has any). All other cases work more or less similar.
- (b) Imagine a villain with a weapon that would put everybody every current and future being in the universe in a constant state of raging agony for eternity. He says to you that you can prevent him from using the weapon by performing a certain action. Assuming that you see even the slightest chance that he is not lying (subjective account) or if he is not lying (objective account), you ought to accept his offer, no matter what he demands you to do – even if it is one of the actions above.

Issue 6: *Bernhard Williams*

In the following, you will analyse two famous examples written by Bernard Williams.

- (1) George, who has just taken his Ph.D. in chemistry, finds it extremely difficult to get a job. [...] The results of all this, especially on [his] children, are damaging. An older chemist, who knows about this situation, says that he can get George a decently paid job in a certain laboratory, which pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George says that

he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical and biological warfare. The older man replies that he is not too keen on it himself, come to that, but after all George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, he happens to know that if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by any such scruples and is likely if appointed to push along the research with greater zeal than George would. Indeed, it is not merely concern for George and his family, but (to speak frankly and in confidence) some alarm about this other man's excess of zeal, which has led the older man to offer to use his influence to get George the job... George's wife, to whom he is deeply attached, has views (the details of which need not concern us) from which it follows that at least there is nothing particularly wrong with research into [chemical and biological warfare]. What should he do?¹

Williams text was written in the early 1970s. His second example did not age well at all, and we will rather paraphrase it instead of quoting it directly:

(2) Jim accidentally comes into a situation in which armed mobsters have tied twenty people up against a wall who failed to comply with the mob's unjust demands. The boss of the mob steps forward and announces that he will have all twenty people killed to incentivise others to comply with the criminal practices of the mob. The boss likes Jim for some reason. He offers Jim to shoot one of the twenty people himself. If Jim complies, the other nineteen will be spared and are free to go. If Jim does not comply, all twenty will be killed. Jim has no way to save all twenty and he knows that. The twenty people beg Jim to kill one of them, such that the others can live. Even though this is hard to believe, Jim has no reason to believe that the mobster boss is lying about his offer.²

- (a) What ought Jim to do according to Classical Utilitarianism? Assume that everything in the text is true and that Jim is not misled by the mob's boss.
- (b) What ought Jim to do from the perspective of a subjective, maximizing, hedonistic consequentialism, assuming that he has – contrary to the example! – good reason to believe that the boss wants to mislead him and would kill all twenty people anyway and just wants to enjoy Jim's horror when he kills someone.
- (c) What ought George to do according to Expected Utility Preference Utilitarianism?

Sketch of a Solution 6:

- (a) Classical Utilitarianism is objective, maximizing, hedonistic consequentialism. We first list the *objective consequences* and what we know about their utility (i.e. about the *pleasure and pain* in each case). We *know* all of the following to hold:

kill one person If Jim kills one person, the nineteen others will live. Maybe, Jim and the nineteen others will be traumatized.

¹quoted from *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, with J.J.C. Smart, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 93ff.

²inspired by *ibid*

kill nobody If Jim does not kill anyone, all twenty people will die. Maybe, Jim will be traumatized.

It is evident that the sum of pleasure minus pain is greater if Jim kills one person instead of killing nobody. Therefore, Jim ought to kill one of the twenty.

- (b) In this case, it depends. If Jim believes that all the horrors he will experience by needlessly killing one of the twenty are outweighed by the enormous joy the mobster boss has, then he ought to kill one. If it is the other way around, Jim ought to not kill one. Note that Jim expects all twenty to die in both cases, so their pleasure and pain are the same either way. So, their pleasure and pain cannot not make a difference here.
- (c) Expected Utility Preference Utilitarianism (EUPU) is a subjective, maximizing, preference theoretic theory. The *expected consequences* are as follows:

take the job If George takes the job, his preference to not develop biological and chemical weapons is frustrated. Also, the preference of the other candidate to get the job is frustrated, if he has such a preference. The preferences of George's family and of the older chemist are satisfied. Also, George would push the development much less forward than the other candidate, which would potentially lessen the impact of the weapon, or have as a consequence that certain weapons are not developed in the first place. This makes it plausible that if George takes the job, there will be less victims of the laboratory's weapons and/or the victims will be less drastically affected by it. So, if George takes the job, their preferences will be frustrated less than if he lets the other guy get the job. As we have to expect that the number of potential victims could easily be in the millions, their preferences probably are of most weight in our calculation.

do not take the job Here, everything is the opposite: The preferences of both George and the other candidate are fulfilled, but the preferences of George's family and the older chemist are frustrated. Also, the preferences of the potential victims are much more likely to get frustrated, as the other candidate is expected to be much more motivated to develop horrible new weapons.

Overall, George has to expect the overall sum of preference satisfaction minus preference frustration to be higher if he takes the job. Therefore, he ought to take the job according to EUPU.

Issue 7: *Gamification – revisited*

You saw the following case before on exercise sheet E1:

Tim is the manager of a supermarket. He ponders on introducing a gamification system in order to increase customer satisfaction. The system is supposed to work as follows: Every customer is asked to rate their cashier on a scale from 1 to 5 after checkout by pressing one of five buttons. The average of those ratings is calculated for every cashier and the employee with the highest rating gets a week of extra holiday as a bonus, while everybody else gets just their regular holidays. This results in them being a little less happy with their own number of days off than they otherwise would have been. Cashiers can always see their own average rating as well as the currently highest average, but not whom it belongs to.

1. Under which circumstances is Tim morally allowed to introduce the system? Under which circumstances isn't Tim morally allowed to do so? Evaluate these questions for

- (a) classical utilitarianism
 - (b) subjective, hedonistic, maximizing utilitarianism
 - (c) objective, hedonistic, equalizing consequentialism
2. Does your moral intuition that you had on exercise sheet G1 have consequentialist elements? Which elements from your intuition are not consequentialistic?

Sketch of a Solution 7:

The question here is quite vague and lacks some details that we would need. If you think that the case description has gaps which need to be filled, you can do so. If there are multiple plausible ways to fill a gap, then you should make a case analysis. (In the videos, I oftentimes mistakenly say “case distinction” – after the German “Fallunterscheidung” – instead of “case analysis”.) In order to be a good ethicist, you have to be able to competently fill gaps in the cases you are given and do appropriate case analyses if needed. A full analysis of the case would be significantly longer than this, because many more distinctions would be necessary in order to properly analyse the case. One can, for example, not just assume that none of the employees is suffering from a relevant mental illness, as mental illnesses are rather common and cannot just be excluded from the evaluation.

The exercise demands to consider the *objective* as well as the *subjective* counterfactual consequences. As the axiology of all variants of consequentialism under consideration is hedonism, the values of interest are *pleasure and pain*. Let's start by becoming clear about the relevant facts of the case.

My answers rest on the following assumptions: I assume that the introduction of the system will initially lead to additional stress for the employees. Also, there will be competition between the employees which results in an increased productivity and customer satisfaction. Hence, the introduction will cause some pain in the form of stress for the employees but pleasure for the customers and indirectly for Tim as the increased productivity and customer satisfaction will lead to a slightly higher profit making up for the losses induced by the additional week of vacation for one employee. I further assume that the employees do not suffer from any mental illness like depressions which could lead to a stronger reaction to the additional stress. I assume that “they do not have any disadvantages” means that there will not be any direct institutional penalties imposed by Tim. Nevertheless, given their average responses to losing and winning respectively, the system will cause some additional pain for the employees losing and some additional pleasure for the one winning. While the winner is also stressed during the game, I assume that winning and the additional week of vacation will overall lead to more pleasure than pain. Furthermore, I assume that it is possible that the system will lead to hostile work environment having adverse effects such as employees trying to improve their own position by manipulating the work of the others. Hence, it is possible that the introduction has adverse effects on the wellbeing of the employees, the profit of the company and customer satisfaction.

After setting the stage, we now apply the different theories.

Classical Utilitarianism

Classical utilitarianism is the claim that an action is allowed if and only if it maximizes pleasure over pain of the objective consequences. We do a case distinction on whether or not the introduction of the system leads to a hostile work environment.

(1) If the introduction leads to a hostile work environment, then decreased profits and customer satisfaction will lead to reduced pleasure and potentially also pain for Tim and the customers. In addition, the employees themselves will be stressed every day not only by the mere existence of the rating system but also by other employees manipulating their work and potentially unhappy and thus unfriendly customers. Given this scenario, only the winner has some benefit which however does not outweigh the additional struggles that come with the system. Overall, the introduction of the system causes more harm than pleasure, while the status quo would just remain if the system was not introduced. Therefore, not introducing the system has the maximal utility. Hence, Tim is not allowed to introduce the system, if it leads to a hostile work environment.

(2) If the system does not lead to a hostile work environment, the case is much less clear. Tim, the winner, and the customers have a benefit in this case. There are a lot of customers, so even if they only have a slight increase in pleasure, this will add up to a larger amount of pleasure. The winner has a lot more pleasure than they would otherwise have had. Overall, the stress caused by introduction of the system for the few the employees is plausibly outweighed by the positive benefits sketched above. Therefore, introducing the system has the maximal utility. Hence, Tim is allowed to introduce the system, if it does not lead to a hostile work environment.

We, however, do not know how humans react to such a system. It might as well be that systems like this put a lot of stress on the employees even in a friendly working environment. If this was the case and the pain caused by the additional stress would be high enough to outweigh the pleasure caused by the introduction of the system, then Tim is not allowed to introduce the system.

Overall: Tim is not allowed to introduce the system, if it leads to a hostile work environment or if the the additional stress caused would be high enough to outweigh the pleasure caused by the introduction of the system. Otherwise, Tim is allowed to introduce the system.

Subjective Hedonistic Maximizing Utilitarianism

Subjective hedonistic maximizing utilitarianism is the claim that an action is allowed if and only if it maximizes pleasure over pain given the subjective consequences. I assume that Tim has excellent epistemic access to the relevant facts sketched above as he knows his employees and business very well. Hence, he should anticipate the consequences as sketched above. While for classical utilitarianism the answer is conditional on the actual consequences, the answer for subjective hedonistic maximizing utilitarianism is conditional on the epistemic state of Tim, i.e., what is reasonable for him to expect. Again I distinguish two cases and reason exactly as above: (1) if the evidence available to Tim suggests that the introduction leads to a hostile work environment, then he must not introduction it; (2) if the evidence suggests otherwise, he is allowed to introduce the system, if he has good evidence that the system would not cause a lot of additional stress for the employees.

(This answer was shortened because it refers to the above solution and omits all steps that would be identical to the steps above.)

Objective Hedonistic Equalizing Consequentialism

Objective hedonistic equalizing consequentialism is the claim that an action is allowed if and only if it de facto reduces the inequality of the pleasure minus pain distribution over all affected individuals the most. Independent of whether the introduction of the system leads to a hostile work environment or not, the winner is has slightly more pleasure than the loosing employees. In case Tim does not introduce the system, the pleasure minus pain distribution stays as is. If the introduction does not

lead to a hostile work environment, then the resulting distribution will become more disparate as the non-winning employees will have less pleasure and Tim and the winner will have more. If the introduction leads to a hostile work environment, then the case is not as clear. Being the owner of the business and earning the profits, Tim has much more utility than any of his employees. In case the introduction leads to a hostile work environment, this may decrease Tim's utility more than the one of the employees leading to a more equal distribution of pleasure minus pain. If this is the case, then it is allowed to introduce the system, otherwise it is *prima facie* not allowed.