

Governing Least: What's Really Wrong with Utilitarianism

One argument against utilitarianism is that no one actually follows it. I call this the Argument from Hypocrisy. A better objection, though, is that even *highly scrupulous* utilitarians don't comply with their stated principles; I call this the Argument from Conscience. In *Governing Least*, Moller powerfully develops a parallel objection: While utilitarians often urge self-sacrifice, they rarely preach *other*-sacrifice. But given their principles, they totally should! Moller's explanation is so well-phrased that I decided to reproduce a complete section.

Challenges to living with utilitarianism tend to focus on what I called options—the option we think we normally have to flout the overall good when we rather sleep in, or buy a subwoofer instead of donating to charity. But what really cuts ice are constraints on our actions. Singer and others emphasize that they can accept that they do not, as utilitarians, have the option to loaf about when they could help others, however much they fall short. But what is really hard about living with utilitarianism isn't self-sacrifice but other-sacrifice, paradoxically enough. This wouldn't be so if we were purely self-interested, but we aren't, and the prospect of exploiting others for the greater good thus terrifies us. Of course, it's rare that harming innocents will produce much good, but it's easy enough to come up with cases:

Grandma: Grandma is a kindly soul who has saved up tens of thousands of dollars in cash over the years. One fine day you see her stashing it away under her mattress, and come to think that with just a little nudge you could cause her to fall and most probably die. You could then take her money, which others don't know about, and redistribute it to those more worthy, saving many lives in the process. No one will ever know. Left to her own devices, Grandma would probably live a few more years, and her money would be discovered by her unworthy heirs who would blow it on fancy cars and vacations.

Liberated from primitive deontic impulses by a recent college philosophy course, you silently say your goodbyes and prepare to send Grandma into the beyond.

If this seems too outré to take seriously, we can try this instead:

Child: Your son earns a good living as a doctor but is careless with some of his finances. You sometimes help him out by organizing his receipts and invoices. One day you have the opportunity to divert \$1,000 from his funds to a charity where the money will do more good; neither he nor anyone else will ever notice the difference, besides the beneficiaries. You decide to steal your child's money and promote the overall good.

Recall that we've already set aside ecumenical views that side with deontic morality in practice. So it's no use to protest that the true utilitarian theory has some esoteric feature that lets us ignore the case, say because we should only follow rules with good consequences, and killing those around us to reduce hunger would have terrible consequences overall. The only views left on the table at this point are precisely those that are willing to contemplate that, at least in some circumstances, rubbing out Grandma and stealing from our children is the right thing to do. The problem, then, is that most people don't seem able to accept even that they ought to aspire to such behavior, let alone engage in it. Exploiting those we love isn't an ideal we fail to attain, it's the very antipode of the ideals themselves. Just consider contexts in which we are specifically seeking to articulate them, as when we instruct our children. Do revisionist utilitarians sit down their sons and daughters and implore them to steal from their friends when it is possible to do so undetected and to divert the money to famine relief? There are many books by revisionist utilitarians telling us that we ought to do more to live up to the demands of morality through self-sacrifice; the fact that there are so few urging us to engage in more other-sacrifice would be surprising

if revisionists really could take their philosophy seriously in practice.

Notice, again, that Moller is *not* invoking the Argument from Hypocrisy. "The problem, then, is that most people don't seem able to accept even that they ought to *aspire* to such behavior, let alone engage in it. " In other words, utilitarians don't preach other-sacrifice, but fail to practice what they preach. They barely even preach it! Suspicious, to say the least.