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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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24.06 Utilitarianism 2 – Handout

We are talking about *hedonic utilitarianism*, a moral theory built on two claims:

- Value:** The intrinsic value of a world-history is determined by the amount of pleasure and suffering that it contains – pleasure adds to its value, suffering subtracts from its value.
- Rightness:** An act is wrong when its outcome has less intrinsic value than the outcome of some other act available to the agent, and right otherwise.

Value

When we calculate the *amount* of pleasure / pain in a world history, we must account for
the **grade** of the pleasure / pain
the **intensity** of the pleasure / pain
the **number** of people experiencing the pleasure / pain
the **duration** of the pleasure / pain

What weight should we give to each of these factors? One thing that you might think is that, at the extremes, differences in intensity and grade trump differences in numbers. Let *intensity level n pain* be the pain you experience in an electric chair set at n volts. You might think that it is worse that one person experience level 100 pain (excruciating agony) than that any number of people experience level 1 pain (the mildest of mild pain – comparable to an incipient hangnail.) Mill appeared to think something like this.

Here is an argument against this view: let S_0 be a state of affairs in which 10^0 people suffers level 100 pain for a day, S_1 be a state of affairs in which 10^1 people suffer level 99 pain for a day, ..., and S^{99} be a state of affairs in which 10^{99} people suffer level 1 pain for a day.

- P1** For any k , S_k is better than S_{k+1} .
P2 The *better than* relation is transitive: if a is better than b , and b better than c , then a is better than c .

C S_0 is better than S_{99} .

What weight should we give to pleasure vs. suffering? There may not be perfect formula.

Rightness

Should we always try to calculate the pleasure and suffering that will result from our doing one thing or another? – No, because sometimes calculating will be counter-productive, by utilitarian standards. Sometimes calculating will make the world worse.

- when we have to make a decision quickly.
- when other people care about how we make our decisions.