
Utilitarianism & the Afterlife

The paradox of a pleasant
hereafter

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The goal of Utilitarianism is to lay out a moral philosophy to provide us a way of living, and a way of making difficult moral choices correctly(Mill, 2001) in circumstances which are uncommon enough that experience has not, or cannot, prepare us for the solution. But in doing so, Utilitarianism must confront the same moral challenges confronted by all moral philosophies, including the consequences of belief in the afterlife(Hasker, 2005).

The afterlife has provided a complex moral challenge for many moral philosophical frameworks throughout the ages, from Buddhism to Christianity. Buddhism posits that *life is suffering*, and that the ultimate goal of living is really to escape living altogether by achieving nirvana, or at least, a better life in the next reincarnation(Becker, 1993). Christianity similarly puts this life into a comparison with another better alternative, in this case, the possibility of an infinitely better afterlife in heaven with god and the angels(Pohle, 1920). In both cases, the philosophical frameworks have been forced to incorporate specific prohibitions against suicide in order to avoid the apparently logical conclusion that death is preferable to life, and we would do well to get ourselves there as quickly as possible.

Mill, in arguing for Utilitarianism, does not specifically address this question, perhaps because Mill himself gave the afterlife little personal credence(Wilson, 2009). However, writing to a largely Christian Western audience, like Christianity, and a deep-seated historical affinity for belief in reincarnation(Haraldsson, 2005), Mill and his followers must be prepared to address this potential concern.

There is nothing inherent in Utilitarianism that requires that the calculations of utility should apply only to this life, since according to common beliefs of the afterlife, our behaviour here on Earth certainly has consequences for our disposition in the hereafter. And if one rejects the possibility of an afterlife, no conflict arises: there is only this life to consider, and surely it must be a good thing to extend that life as long as possible, as long as it is predominantly still contributing positively to the overall positive side of the balance sheet, so to speak. But, when an afterlife is introduced, if the afterlife is

permitted to be weighed against the present life, apparently strange contradictions become possible, depending on the characteristics assigned to the hereafter.

For instance, if we consider the Christian conception of the afterlife (or something vaguely similar), where there is a heaven offering eternal rewards for good behaviour, and eternal damnation for bad behaviour (particularly on the Catholic view), does it not appear to serve utility if once the person achieves a certain level of moral perfection that they should die in order to secure that reward? Christianity has addressed this concern by prohibiting suicide (Pohle, 1920) (and making it a damning offense punishable by an eternity in hell) for someone attempting to speed their eternal reward. However, if we consider the overall utility of a people, would not designating a handful of “scapegoats” to kill the mostly likely heavenbound before they mess it up be an overall plus to utility if the utility of eternal rewards in the afterlife are to be taken seriously? And indeed, does not the problem become more acute if one accepts the efficacy of the Catholic confessional? Should it not be the appropriate thing to do be for priests to kill their confessants as soon as their penance has been completed while their sins are forgiven and their souls are still clean?

Worse yet, does it not suggest that the most innocent, the children, would be best served by being executed at an early age?

Nor does reincarnation protect against this concern entirely. According to the Buddhist philosophy, since “life is suffering” (Becker, 1993), should not the Utilitarian argue that escaping this life of suffering in the expectation of a better reincarnation not demand that the improvement in one’s lot not justify suicide, or murder? Particularly if the risk on continued living is to damage the chances of receiving that improved reincarnation or enduring additional suffering.

Of course, one would require some kind of guidelines for when such a utility-motivated killing was appropriate, but these guidelines would depend very much on one’s views of the afterlife. If

Utilitarianism is meant to be a scientific and testable approach to a moral system, the introduction of a non-testable utility calculation clearly introduces a paradox.

To address the apparent paradox of murdering the best people in society under the rubric of improving the overall utility calculation, Utilitarianism will need to make some explicit claims.

One possible way of dealing with this concern is to specifically require that considerations of the afterlife not be taken into effect for purposes of utility. That this might be the case is not obvious, and so some kind of argument will be needed. And since we are all going to die eventually some day, it must not be too general a claim about the negative utility of simply dying.

Another possible way to address this problem is to explicitly claim that for those that function as the scapegoats, the utility *sinks* as it were, that their loss of utility is larger than any possible utility gains by those whom they send to their eternal reward. This would probably require some fuzzy math: by claiming that the utility gains of heaven were finite and punishments for this particular act were infinite and unforgiveable (the tactic employed by Catholics to prevent suicide(Pohle, 1920)).

A third potential solution is to argue that the afterlife is inherently inferior to this life, for instance, in the manner of Tartarus to the Ancient Greeks (explicitly not the Elysian Fields). While it may or may not be explicitly unpleasant, it is a situation not as pleasant as remaining alive, and so would be a negative net effect on utility to go there too soon.

A fourth possible solution might be to explicitly make a claim as a part of Utilitarian philosophy that there is no afterlife. This is perhaps the least radical of the scenarios outlined so far. In the absence of a religious moral structure, Utilitarianism is a favourite of the non-religious. While this might serve to narrow the appeal of Utilitarianism, it will provide a justification for not considering the afterlife in utility calculations that is not entirely *ad hoc*, and it would comport well with Mill's own beliefs(Wilson, 2009).

However, the argument Mill, I suspect, would mostly likely favour, is to simply argue that utility calculations can only be applied to this life for reasons of testability. He wanted this theory to be a

scientific approach to morality that would provide a framework for making general and testable claims, as science does (Mill, 2001). It is often argued that science cannot test the claims of religion because religion is, by definition, inherently untestable: likewise is the afterlife. For this reason, Utilitarianism can only apply to this life, and utility calculations cannot extend beyond the grave without invoking theological explanations beyond the scope of this theory. While some may find this the most satisfying and non-confrontational, it nonetheless leaves unsolved the issue of the contradiction within the Utilitarian theory generated by the introduction of a positive afterlife, and therefore, leaves it open to possible criticism.

The introduction of a positive view of the afterlife presents specific problems for the Utilitarian theory, whenever the utility calculation leads to the conclusion that the afterlife is preferable to the present life. These considerations will need to be addressed in some fashion by the Utilitarian theory or by individual Utilitarians so that paradoxical claims such as murder increasing utility can be avoided.

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