

PHI 1700: Global Ethics

Session 16

April 3rd, 2019



Normative Ethics:

Consequentialism (Pt. 2)

Last class we learned that

- **utilitarians think we should determine what to do using the *Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP)*:**



- “actions are *right* in proportion as they tend to promote *happiness*,” where *happiness* = “*pleasure, and the absence of pain*”,
- “...*wrong* as they tend to produce the *reverse of happiness*,”

- ...clarifying that the **pleasure/pain that matters** is not our own, but **that of *all* the people potentially affected by our action.**

– **Hence, utilitarians are focused on promoting the greater good.**

- Committing to utilitarianism also means committing to social & political efforts that promote the greater good.



➤ *Some objections to utilitarianism we considered:*



- **We can't expect to make everyone euphorically happy**

– Mill's reply: Sure, but that's not the goal of utilitarianism; the aim is a more modest level of happiness for the maximal number of people

- **Utilitarianism doesn't take into account the motive/intention behind someone's actions**

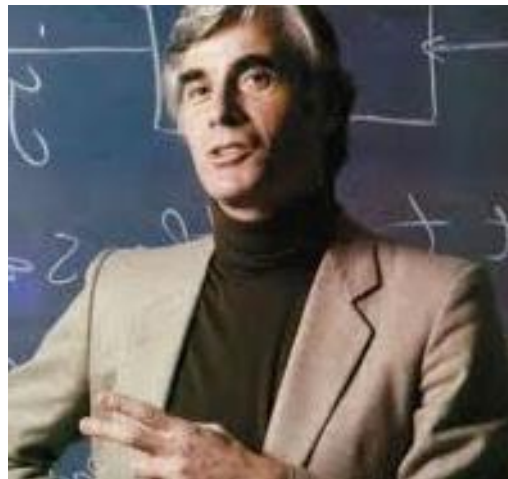


– Mill's reply: the motive really doesn't matter; good intentions are meaningless if they don't actually bring any good into the world

- **People can't know in advance what the consequences of their actions will be**



– Mill's reply: people can know in general what the outcome of that type of action is, & make an educated guess about what will result from a specific action



- But **yet another worry** is that a **society where everyone's happiness is maximized would *not* be a morally ideal society.**

Robert Nozick (1938 – 2002, USA) demonstrated the problem with weighing happiness too heavily with a famous thought experiment called ***The Experience Machine***.

- If Mill is right that the best actions promote the most happiness,
 - then someone's moral obligations to us are complete if they can make us as happy as possible.
 - *But is being maximally happy what we ought to be aiming for?*
 - Nozick suggests we'd actually be dissatisfied if we only focused on maximizing happiness.



Nozick proposes **the thought experiment** as follows:

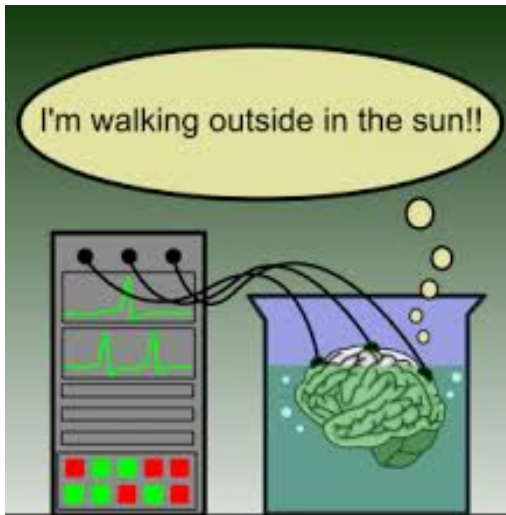
– “Suppose there were *an experience machine* that would give you any experience you desired.

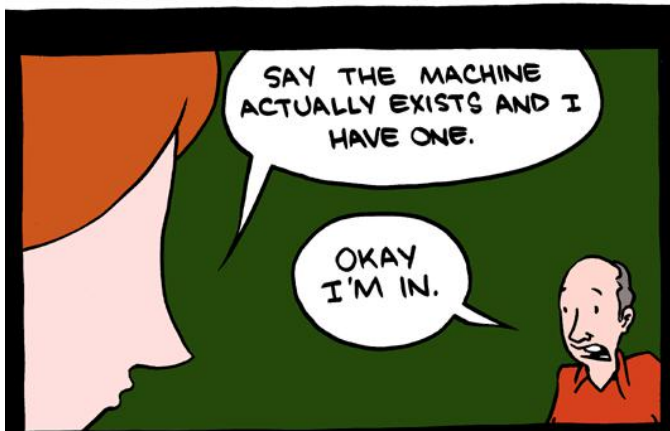
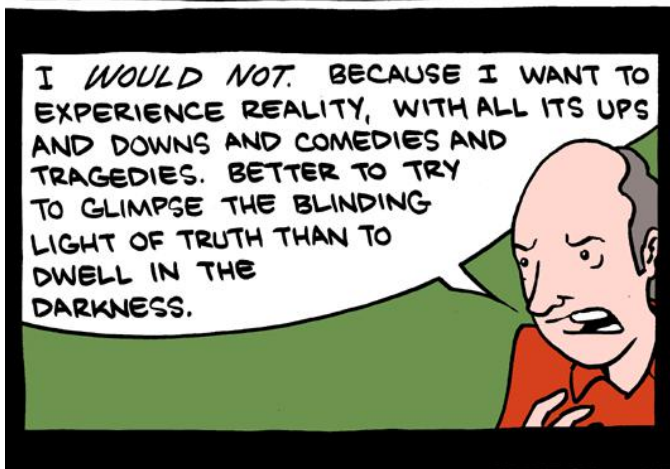
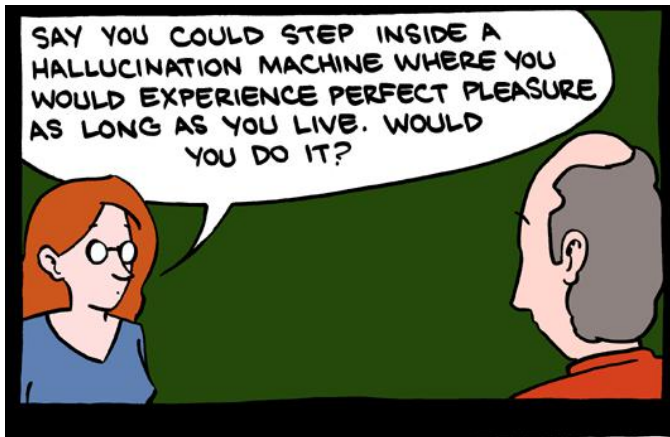


» Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book.

- You can pick and choose [your simulated life] from [a] large library or smorgasbord of [desirable] experiences...
- All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.

➤ ***Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?"***





“The key question this thought experiment raises is *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?*”

- Nozick suggests that “perhaps what we desire is to live...ourselves, in contact with reality.”
 - ...we want to be a certain way, to be a certain sort of person.”

Hence, a **constraint on utilitarianism might be that:**

- **right actions** not only fulfill people’s desires for pleasure & freedom from pain,
- but also **fulfill people’s desires to live their lives authentically & autonomously,**
 - i.e., by acting on their own behalf, in accordance with their personal preferences and aspirations.

So: **some challenges that arise in trying to promote the greater good** are:

- **Different people have different ideas about what constitutes a happy life.**
 - Someone who wants to impose social/political policies to make everyone happier may be criticized for **paternalism**:
 - believing they know what's best for other people, instead of trusting those others to choose what's best for themselves
- **People want to be able to choose for themselves how to live** (or at least to feel that they are in control of their own happiness)

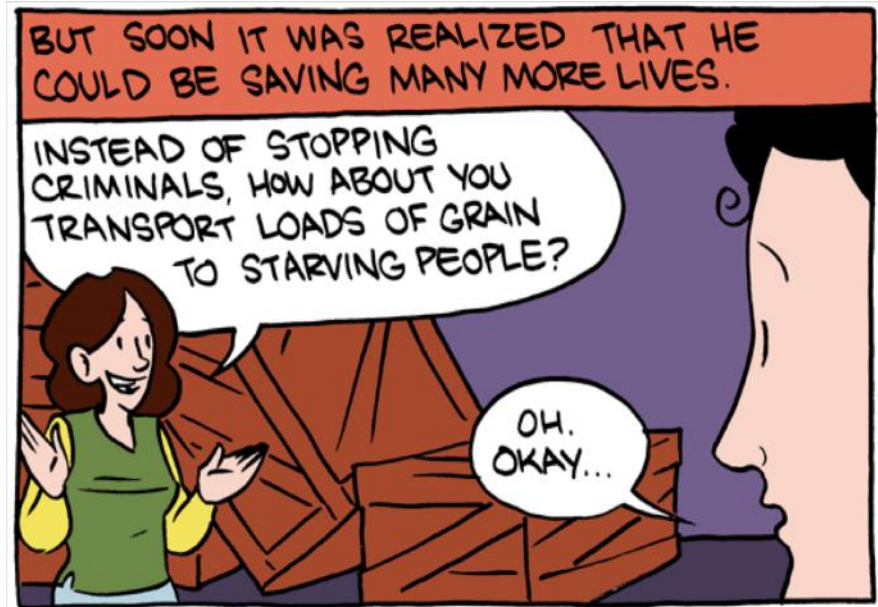


AUTONOMY
THE DESIRE TO BE
SELF DIRECTED



- » This points to the moral value of **autonomy**: the power each individual has to determine the course of their own life through rational choices.
 - Autonomy is a key idea in a competing normative ethical theory called deontology.

Superman, “trapped in a spiral of consequentialist logic” (Rini):



FINALLY, WE FOUND MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY.

WE NEED YOU TO CRANK THIS MAGNET AS FAST AS POSSIBLE. THE ENERGY IT GENERATES WILL BE SO CHEAP THAT EVERYONE CAN ENJOY A WESTERN STANDARD OF LIVING.

SEEMS... A BIT MONOTONOUS...

OH, THAT REMINDS ME. KEEP YOUR SPEED CONSTANT AT ALL TIMES.



THIS BEGAN TO WEAR ON THE HERO.

I KINDA MISS FIGHTING CRIME.

YOU KNOW WHAT I MISS? FOOD. THAT'S WHAT THEY'LL SAY IN BANGLADESH IF YOU STOP.



BUT SOCIETY ADVANCED RAPIDLY ON CHEAP, CLEAN ENERGY.



SCIENTISTS DISCOVERED A PROBLEM.

BY OUR CALCULATIONS, WE WILL HIT PEAK SUPERMAN HERE.

WHEN'S THAT?

WHEN SUPERMAN DIES OF EXHAUSTION.



WE COLLECTIVELY TRANSITIONED TO CLEAN ENERGY, MAKING SUPERMAN AN OBSOLETE POWER SOURCE.

YOU'VE BEEN REPLACED.

BY WHAT?

MUONS.
DON'T YOU READ THE NEWS?

BY THEN, SOCIETY WAS SO IMPROVED THAT CRIME WAS NONEXISTENT, MAKING SUPERMAN AN OBSOLETE PERSON.

STOP CROOK!

OH, NO, HE'S GIVING ME A FREE PURSE AND SKI MASK.

I'M KEEPIN' IT WARM WITH MY FACE!

HE TRIED TO GET A JOB, BUT HIS RESUMÉ WAS A BIT THIN.

SUPERMAN

1939-1947
• REPORTER, DAILY PLANET
1947-PRESENT
• MOVING ARMS UP AND DOWN CONSTANTLY.

HE SPENT HIS LAST FEW YEARS AS A GREETER FOR THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM OF SUPERHEROES.

WELCOME! MY SUPER-HEARING TELLS ME YOU NEED DIRECTIONS TO THE RESTROOM!

THE EXHIBIT OF HIS BODY WAS MUCH MORE POPULAR.

SUPERMAN:
A TRANSITIONAL
POWER SOURCE

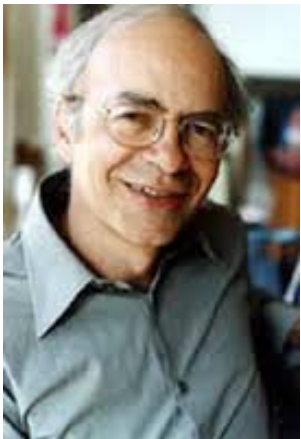
Regina Rini questions utilitarianism's requirement that we should be completely impartial in considering how *our own* happiness will be affected by our actions.



- She argues that the fictional saga of Superman functions as ***a reductio ad absurdum*** **against utilitarianism:**
 - **strict utilitarianism requires us to give up our freedom & ignore our own preferences** if we are in a position to contribute substantially to the greater good.
 - “...the better you are at producing good in the world, the less permissible it is for you to spend your time doing things other than producing good in the world”
 - **So, the people who are most capable of doing good are in a sense punished for their ability,**
 - » **and are *used* by society as a *tool* to generate good.**
 - In other words, consequentialism allows that we can *instrumentalize* people – more on this next week!

Rini brings up **an objection to consequentialism that paints its supporters as hypocrites:**

- “...if you’re so dedicated to doing whatever makes the world best,
 - how about you quit doing moral philosophy, go start a hedge fund, and give the profits to reputable charities?
- Surely...the good done by the money you’d earn [in a high-paying career & give to charity] far outweighs whatever good you might be doing propounding consequentialist moral theory.”
 - (In light of this objection, **some consequentialists have sought to channel their beliefs into real action:**



- » E.g., the “**effective altruism**” movement, based on utilitarian arguments by Peter Singer, defends the value of “*earning to give*” --
 - working to maximize your salary so that you can give away most of your income to life-saving causes & charities.)

Rini remarks that

- the objection that working in a hedge fund would produce more utility than doing philosophy makes a **“questionable empirical assumption”**:
 - **that someone who is as good at philosophy** has the traits & skill set necessary to succeed in a field like finance, and thereby **is guaranteed bring more good to the world working in finance than they would as a philosopher.**



» “A consequentialist moral philosopher might quite reasonably say: ‘I’ve no reason to expect I’d actually produce much good in finance, but I have a reasonable expectation of producing at least some good in my present work, so the best choice is to continue.’”

- ...however, **if there was a way for a consequentialist to gain these traits, she would be *morally obligated* to do it** because of the contributions she could then make to the greater good.
 - **So: a (non-hypocritical) consequentialist has no choice but to do whatever generates maximal utility** – even if it means abandoning what she is truly passionate about.