In Support of Absolute Negative Utilitarianism

Absolute negative utilitarianism is the philosophy that values the diminution of pain above the creation of joy (which holds no value for the absolute negative utilitarian). I intend to argue in favor of it. Let’s view pain of any sort as a negative and joy as a positive for the sake of the argument. We do this to replicate the most popular opinions and feelings surrounding joy and suffering. Logically, the negative should be removed before a positive is created, as it is the issue currently existing. Of course, ignorance of joy may seem bleak, but the absence of the positive (joy) does not detract from anyone, while the existence of the negative (suffering) does. While the creation of joy may seem significant, it is simply ignorance of the issue (suffering). This is because the creation of joy is not inherently something that diminishes suffering. One may experience joy without diminishing the suffering of oneself or others. I emphasize that joy is not an inherent reduction of suffering. Therefore, any action that causes a combination of suffering and joy is immoral. This idea may seem absurd, as most everyday experiences could be categorized in such a way. However, our first priority should be eliminating an issue rather than yielding a separate positive experience. Thus, most joyful activities are inconsequential, as anything that does not diminish suffering is meaningless. Of course, joy *may* accompany something that reduces suffering, but it will not always. Some joyous experiences can help reduce suffering. But it is far from guaranteed.

Many actions commonly committed in life are mixtures of joy and suffering and are thus immoral. Reproduction is perhaps the best example of these immoral actions, as having a child will certainly produce suffering and joy. I would like to first specify that this view is not a promotion of violence. Ending a life and refraining from starting a life are crucially different actions. Ending a life inflicts immense suffering on the victim and their loved ones. suffering that is much greater than the suffering caused had the victim lived their life, (provided that the victim had no plans of causing a great deal more suffering in their life). While ending a life causes much suffering, refraining from starting a life typically does not. For those with extreme maternal and paternal instincts, the idea of not reproducing can cause a degree of suffering. However, I would argue that this suffering is generally incomparable to the lifetime of suffering that their potential offspring would endure.

A compelling argument against absolute negative utilitarianism is the Pinprick argument. It asks the absolute negative utilitarian if they would allow the pain of a pinprick so that all the joy in the world could occur. The absolute negative utilitarian would reject this because the absence of joy hurts no one. Why would the negative utilitarian prick someone arbitrarily? The absence of joy is not hurting anyone at all, so any suffering is not worth inflicting on someone in this scenario.

Another interesting question that could be asked of the absolute negative utilitarian is the following: If one could kill everyone painlessly with the push of a button, should one do so? I would argue that if it were a viable option, ending all life painlessly and instantaneously is preferable to the suffering that currently exists in our world and the inevitable suffering that will affect later generations of sentient beings. However, there is no such button. And if there were, there may still be reason not to press it. Deciding for billions of people’s lives is dangerous. Even though it may make sense to the absolute negative utilitarian to push the button, there is always a possibility that she is mistaken in her logic. If absolute negative utilitarianism is incorrect, simple negative utilitarian actions like not reproducing, philanthropy, and volunteer work all have very little consequence. However, pushing this button could be catastrophic if the negative utilitarian is incorrect or the button is faulty. Although it coheres that the negative utilitarian theoretically should push the button, this decision may not be practical as it is very risky to end so many beings in the name of eliminating suffering.

I would like to conclude this essay with some practical advice for negative utilitarians or anyone willing to heed my advice. Do not have children; try your best not to suffer; try your best to reduce others’ suffering; and try not to be ashamed of acting against negative utilitarianism. It is a very difficult philosophy to practice, but any small attempt to incorporate this philosophy into your life is commendable. Ultimately, this is a philosophy of peace. Even people who cause the most suffering shouldn’t be tortured or murdered in the name of revenge. We must recognize that these people were forced to exist. The best course of action for the perpetrator of suffering would be to disallow the person from causing further suffering to themself or others. There is no reason to be hostile in this world. We were all wronged by evolution by being forced into sentience. This is simply a way of reducing the suffering in our faulty lives.