Dalen A. Casey

2/10/24

In Support of Absolute Negative Utilitarianism

Absolute Negative Utilitarianism is a philosophy that values the reduction of pain above the creation of joy (which holds no value for the absolute negative utilitarian). I intend to argue in favor of it. I will now refer to pain of any sort as a negative and joy as a positive. I will do this to replicate the most common connotations of joy and suffering. I believe it to be uncontroversial that joy is commonly viewed as a positive and suffering, a negative. Logically, the negative should be removed before a positive is created, as it is the issue currently existing. Focusing solely on removing suffering though, implies ignorance of the creation of joy; and 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 from the perspective of us beings who generally seek joy, it is simply neglect of the issue (suffering). I argue this because the creation of joy is not inherently something that reduces 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, as the suffering created is not inherently addressed by the joy that was created. It simply exists with nothing to offset it. I am aware that this idea sounds very strange, as most everyday experiences contain such combinations of joy and suffering. However, our first priority should be eliminating the existing issue rather than yielding a separate positive experience. Thus, most joyful activities are inconsequential, as anything that does not diminish suffering does nothing to address the existing issue. 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 combinations of joy and suffering and are thus, immoral. Reproduction is a controversial and intriguing example of these immoral actions, as having a child will certainly produce great amounts of suffering and joy. Before explaining the immorality of reproduction, I would like to first specify that my disapproval of reproduction 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 those who are close with them. Suffering that is most commonly 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). Ending a life also destroys a person’s opportunity to decrease more suffering than they would have caused in their life if they were never killed. In other words, taking away their ability to help themselves and other people avoid suffering. While ending a life causes great suffering, refraining from starting a life typically does not. For those with extreme maternal and paternal instincts, the idea of not reproducing may 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 be forced to endure. There are also various hypothetical circumstances in which reproduction would result in less suffering, such as a scenario in which a group of people needs aid, and having a child may provide them with such aid and thus, reduce a great amount of suffering for the people in need. However, situations like this are rare and require careful consideration before sacrificing the pain of a whole life in order to reduce a greater amount of suffering.

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 simply reject this because the absence of joy hurts no one. The negative utilitarian has no reason to 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 every sentient being completely painlessly with the simple 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 likely 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 is likely still reason not to press it. Deciding for billions of people’s and other beings’ lives is terribly risky. Though it may seem logical 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 negative 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.

Some other ideas that correlate with Absolute Negative Utilitarianism are nonviolence and anti-vengeance ideology. I believe in this correlation because causing as little suffering as possible (Negative Utilitarianism) means mercy and pity for nearly everyone so that they will not suffer. Even people who cause the most suffering shouldn’t be tortured or murdered solely in the name of revenge. We must recognize that these people were forced to exist and that causing them suffering merely for the sake of revenge will likely only result in more pain. The best course of action for the perpetrator of suffering would be to prevent that person from causing further suffering to themself or others. There are situations where the pain of one may reduce more pain of others. People like Adolf Hitler’s painful deaths were likely better for the world because so many people suffered from the mere knowledge of his being alive, and his death and pain likely alleviated more suffering that would’ve been caused without the sacrifice of Hitler’s suffering and life. However, again, these situations are very rare and require thought and care to be resolved morally.

I would like to conclude this essay with some practical advice for negative utilitarians or anyone willing to heed my advice. Absolutely do not have children; do your best not to suffer; do your best to reduce others’ suffering; and do not be too ashamed of acting against Negative Utilitarianism. It is a difficult philosophy to practice, but any small attempt to incorporate this philosophy into one’s life is commendable. Ultimately, I believe that this philosophy is a promotion of peace. There is no reason to be unnecessarily hostile in life. We were all wronged by evolution by being forced into sentience. This philosophy is simply a way of reducing the suffering in our faulty lives.