

Utilitarianism versus the privileging of speech

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Abstract. Apparently the Western philosophical tradition has (wrongly) preferred speech over writing – so claims Jacques Derrida. In this paper, I consider whether utilitarianism involves such a preference. There are at least two arguments against the claim.

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The greatest happiness for the greatest number

Shall wake you from this Derridean slumber

It is usually difficult to read the texts of Jacques Derrida, but fortunately he is not short of people who explain his ideas. Here is Sarah Richmond:

According to Derrida, Western thought, from at least Plato onwards, has repeatedly propagated a false hierarchy, placing speech above writing. Philosophers have regarded writing with suspicion, as a dangerous repository of thought, in which the speaker’s intentions are likely to be betrayed. (1996: 39)

In this paper, I shall consider whether Derrida’s generalization applies to utilitarianism, understood in the “classical” manner, as a philosophy which says that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness. Happiness is understood as pleasure minus pain. (If two actions are tied on this score, they are both right. But any action that produces less happiness is wrong.)

There are at least two arguments for why utilitarianism is sometimes

pro-writing. (a) One can sometimes make more people happy by writing some stuff down. Magazines which “convey” gossip and make it available for lots and lots of people probably do this, although you might disapprove of the practice. If the information is passed on by word of mouth, it is less likely to reach all the people interested (and furthermore fewer people involved in passing the information on improves reliability, assuming that matters).

(b) Sometimes writing can reduce stress. For example, if someone writes, “There are two points I wish to make,” and you can clearly see on the page where the first point ends, there is less suspense and that might reduce unnecessary stress for some students, maybe many students, compared with an oral presentation.

So it seems Derrida faces at least one major exception within the Western philosophical tradition: utilitarianism. The application of the philosophy sometimes leads to a preference for written communication over speech.

Reference

Richmond, S. 1996. Derrida and Analytical Philosophy: Speech Acts and their Force. *European Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1): 38-62.