Negative Utilitarianism and Buddhist Intuition

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Abstract

Various authors suggested that Buddhism may be a kind of negative utilitarianism. A closer examination of the corresponding intuitions leads to the following result:

– Negative utilitarianism, understood as an umbrella term, models the *asymmetry between suffering and happiness* and therefore accords with the Buddhist intuition of *universal compassion*.
– The Noble Truths of Buddhism accord with the negative utilitarian intuition that (global) *suffering cannot be compensated by happiness*.
– Some forms of Buddhism and negative utilitarianism share the intuition that *non-existence is a perfect state*.

1. Introduction

Starting point
– Serge-Christoph Kolm suggests that "Buddhism advocating minimizing *dukkha* (pain, dissatisfaction), rather than maximizing *sukkha* (from which "sugar" comes) may be a kind of negative welfarism" [Kolm, 8].
– Christoph Fehige, after proposing that "*Maximizers of preference satisfaction* should instead call themselves *minimizers of preference frustration*", concludes that Buddha is on his side [Fehige 518, 522].

Type of Problem
What are the common intuitions of negative utilitarianism and Buddhism?

2. The Positive Utilitarian Intuition

A negative valuation of the world is hard to defend, if it is confronted with empirical data. Surveys on subjective life satisfaction consistently report that the majority is satisfied with their lives [Frey]. Since in these surveys welfare is interpersonally comparable and cardinally measurable, the situation can be depicted in a two parameter diagram with the size of the population represented by column width and welfare represented by column height (Fig.1). If not mentioned otherwise in this paper, the terms *happiness*, *positive welfare,* and *life satisfaction* will be treated as synonyms.

–   According to utilitarian theory there is a level of welfare, at which the value of a life is *neutral* [Broome 2004, 142]. Above this level a life is *worth living*, below it is *not worth living*. A neutral life has the value zero on the hedonic scale [Broome 2004, 257].
–   The intuition that having children is morally neutral (because unborn children do not suffer from missed chances) contradicts theory. There is a *single* level of welfare, the neutral level for existence, at which having children is morally neutral [Broome 2004, 143]. Above the neutral level parents can make the world *better* by having a child, below the neutral level they can make it *worse*. The neutral level is vague [Broome 2004, 264], but for the purpose of this paper we can set it equal to the value of a neutral life.

The *World Values Survey* asks: "Taking all things together, would you say you are very happy, quite happy, not very happy, not at all happy?" [World Values Survey Organisation]
–   In *metric 1* (Fig.1 left hand side) the "not at all happy" people are called "suffering" people and their suffering is expressed by negative numbers [Inglehart, 269]. The minority's suffering is overruled by the majority's happiness so that the overall result is positive.
–   In *metric 2* "suffering" is expressed as "state of low quality" (Fig.1 right hand side). The quality-adjusted life years (qualys) used in hospitals address unpleasant states with positive numbers [Broome 2004, 2-12]. The meaning of a given *qualy* may be "constant pain", but the number used to measure such a state is positive [Broome 2004, 261]. The metric therefore suggests that every life is worth living. The tolerance of suffering, which is implicit in this modified notion of a life worth living, is a measure for the will to live.

Fig.1
Metrics for measuring life satisfaction
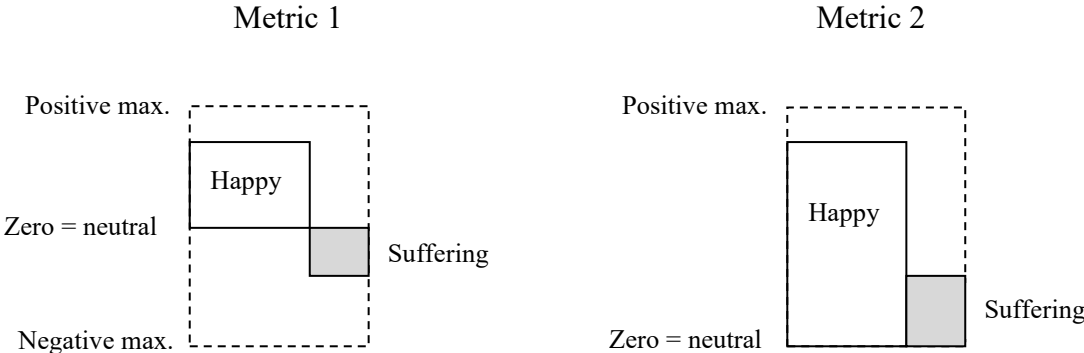
Metric 1

Metric 2

- Since *metric 1* allows negative values, a terribly suffering patient can improve his/her situation by falling in a coma (which is a neutral state) or putting an end to his/her life. Consequently, in this model, having children is only right, if the child does not become one of these terribly suffering patients. It would for example be morally wrong to have a child with a severe case of *spina bifida*, if it can be prevented.
- In *metric 2* a neutral life is at the lowest level of the point scale. As soon as a patient wakes up from the coma, his/her life is worth living. Consequently, there are no moral conditions for having children. New lives will be worth living, regardless of any degree of ensuing suffering.

Since positive utilitarianism strives to maximize welfare, both metrics favour a potentially unlimited expansion. The source of *unconditional* expansionism (*metric 2*) could be the biological utility function (the proliferation of genes), which is a maximizing function as well [Dawkins]. This leads us to the wider context of evolution:

Consider the following hypothesis:
- The value of the world can be measured by the welfare of sentient beings [Wessels, 11]. If there are no such beings, then there is no value.
- The evolution of sentient beings represents a qualitative and quantitative *expansion of welfare*.

We will call this the *positive welfare* hypothesis. It does not exclude that evolution could have taken a different (non-sentient) path.

Fig.2 depicts the *average* welfare and the *average* lifetime of different populations. Since we concentrate on averages, the population size is out of consideration. Each sentient species has a specific universe of emotions and a frame of reference (indicated by positive and negative max.) for measuring them. The *positive welfare* hypothesis says that humans not only experience a higher intensity of emotions (indicated by the darker shading), but also a higher level of average welfare (percentage) within their frame of reference. Most invertebrates probably do not have emotions, but we assume that there are exceptions (like the cephalopods).

Fig.2
Positive welfare hypothesis
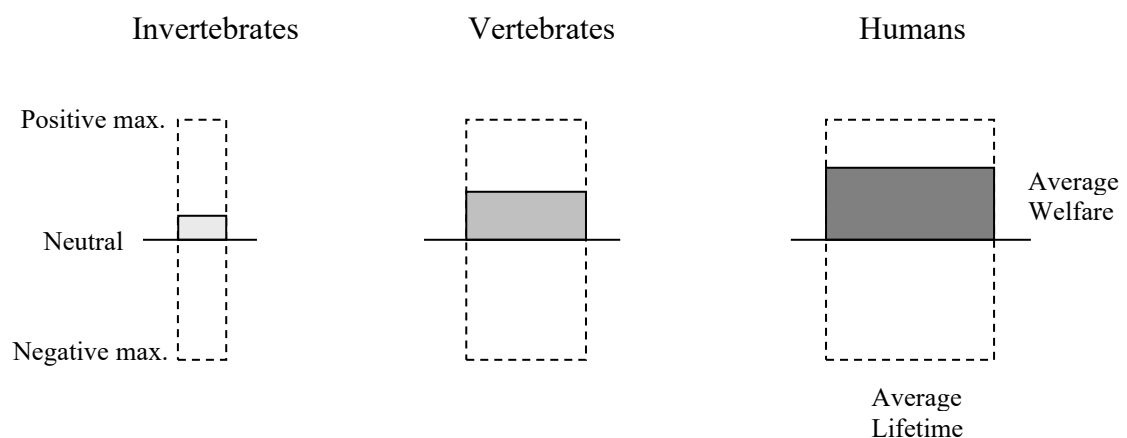
The *positive welfare* hypothesis is the basis of an optimistic secular world view.
The compensation of the minority's suffering by the majority's happiness, however, is a controversial issue.

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3. The Negative Utilitarian Intuition

The idea to formulate an ethical goal negatively originates in Buddhism and is more than 2500 years old. In the 20th century, however, the idea is attributed to Karl Popper. In his socio-critical analysis "The Open Society and its Enemies" (1945) he wrote:

"I believe that there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness (…). In my opinion human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, the appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway.

A further criticism of the utilitarian formula "maximize pleasure" is that it assumes, in principle, a continuous pleasure-pain scale which allows us to treat degrees of pain as negative degrees of pleasure. But, from the moral point of view, pain cannot be outweighed by pleasure and especially not one man's pain by another man's pleasure. Instead of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, one should demand, more modestly, the least amount of avoidable suffering for all [Popper, 284].

Popper uses the terms *happiness* and *pleasure* as synonyms. In the above text these terms are also applied to compensation *within the same person* and therefore have a more general meaning than the terms *life satisfaction* and *welfare.* In the following we restrict the investigation to compensation across different persons.

Negative utilitarianism is an *umbrella term* for versions of utilitarianism which model the *asymmetry between suffering and happiness* [Fricke, 14]. It variously includes concepts that
1. assign a *relative* priority to the avoidance of suffering
2. assign an *absolute* priority to the avoidance of suffering
3. consider non-existence to be the best state of affairs

According to this definition the general intuition that *suffering cannot be compensated by happiness* can be subdivided into more specific intuitions:
1. A *relative* priority (of the avoidance) of suffering represents a consensus on compassion and risk-aversion. At a certain level of compassion and risk-aversion suffering cannot be compensated by happiness anymore (left hand side of Fig.3). A negative total expresses the *denial of the world out of compassion.*
2. The *absolute* priority of negative welfare is known under the term *negative total utilitarianism* [Arrhenius, 100]. Absolute priority is a border case of relative priority, where the moral weight of happiness converges towards zero (right hand side of Fig.3). Happiness only regains moral value, if there are no more lives with negative welfare (i.e. if the shaded square disappears).
3. There are two versions of negative utilitarianism which claim that non-existence is the best state of affairs (not only the lesser evil):
   a. *Classical negative utilitarianism* completely denies the moral value of happiness.
   b. *Negative preference utilitarianism* completely denies the moral value of preference-satisfaction [Fricke, 20].

The moral weight assigned to the different levels of welfare constitutes the negative utilitarian metric. There is no metric for a person's welfare that is independent of the priority we assign it [Broome 1991, 222].

Fig.3
The moral weight of suffering

Metric 3
Relative priority

Metric 4
Absolute priority
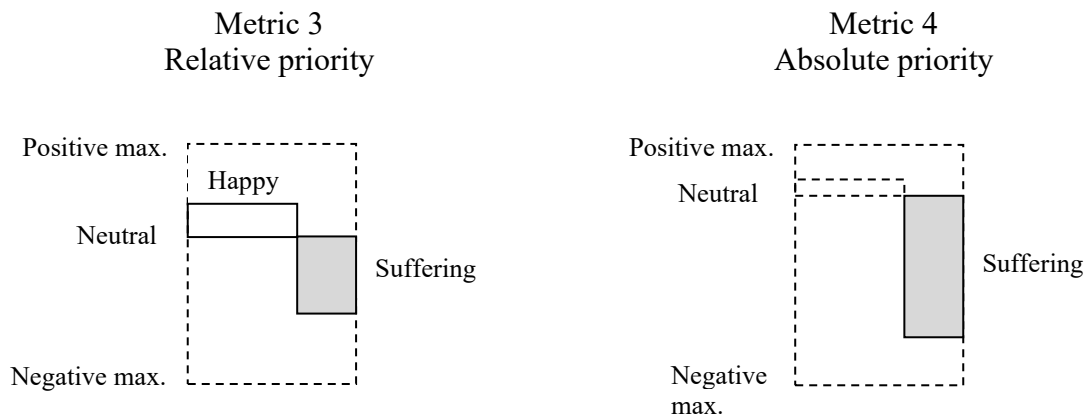
The positive utilitarian intuition turns quickly into the negative, if family members or close friends are struck by a horrible accident, illness, or crime. Changing intuitions are driven by changing interests [Contestabile, 109-111]. But how should we weigh individual interests? Is there something like an "objective" view, which deviates from the majority view?

The most prominent answer to this question is given in decision theory and game theory [Binmore]. In order to apply decision theory, we have to interpret Fig.1 and Fig.3 as probability distributions for life's risks and chances and ask which distribution is more realistic from an *impartial* view. The concept of impartiality goes back to Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant and was taken up in the 20th century by John Harsanyi [Harsanyi] and John Rawls [Rawls].

The quality of an evaluation improves with the quality of information. An observer who has to evaluate life's risks and chances should therefore exercise a perfect empathy and know the different levels of happiness and suffering by experience. A perfectly empathic observer could make an impartial decision between the positive and negative utilitarian intuition. Perfect empathy provides a correct metric for measuring the asymmetry between suffering and happiness, whereas current surveys suggest symmetric (linear) scales. However, since there is no consensus on the impact of perfect empathy, the normative force of such an approach is limited. The metric shifts towards Fig.3, but we do not know to what extent. There is no claim in this paper that *metric 3* is the correct metric. We will instead focus on the finding that the metric for comparing happiness with suffering is uncertain.

Not only is the metric uncertain, but also the outcomes and probabilities derived from surveys:
– People who are directly involved in accidents, wars, crimes, severe diseases, strokes, natural catastrophes etc., as well as dying people, do not participate in surveys on subjective life satisfaction.
– The environment is dynamic. Whereas natural risks only change in large time periods, *technological* risks steadily increase [Birnbacher, 25] [Rees, 26].
Given the uncertainty of the metric, the outcomes, and the probabilities we have to apply the theory of decisions under uncertainty.

Two levels of uncertainty have been investigated:

1. For an impartial observer who does not know outcomes and probabilities [Rawls, 118-123] the *avoidance of the worst outcome* is a rational strategy [Hurley, 376-377]. With the exception of *metric 2* in Fig.1, non-existence is preferable to the worst outcome.

2. If the impartial observer has to decide between two *ranges* of outcomes and probabilities and the information is insufficient to maximize the expected welfare, then the *avoidance of the worst outcome* is a rational secondary criterion [Angner, 14 ff.]. Since we cannot exclude that the range of outcomes and probabilities yields negative totals, we also cannot exclude that non-existence is the better option.

Ethics which assumes that life's risks surpass the chances can therefore not easily be dismissed as being irrational.

4. Non-Existence as the Lesser Evil

According to utilitarian theory *non-existence* is fully comparable in value with existence and has the value of a neutral life [Broome 2004, 143]. The claim that *non-existence is the lesser evil* therefore follows naturally from the assumption, that life's risks surpass the chances. In the following we investigate this intuition in the wider context of evolution.

Fig.4 compares the positive and negative utilitarian metric.
−   The *solid lines* represent the positive utilitarian metric, the *dashed lines* the negative utilitarian metric,
−   The column height shows *absolute* values of happiness and suffering (not percentages). The intensity of emotions increases in the course of evolution.
−   The relative population size is represented by column width. Since we concentrate on the *relation* between the happy majority and the suffering minority the *absolute* size of the populations does not matter.

Fig.4
Evolution of happiness and suffering

Happy Majority

Neutral life

Suffering Minority

Invertebrates

Vertebrates

Humans
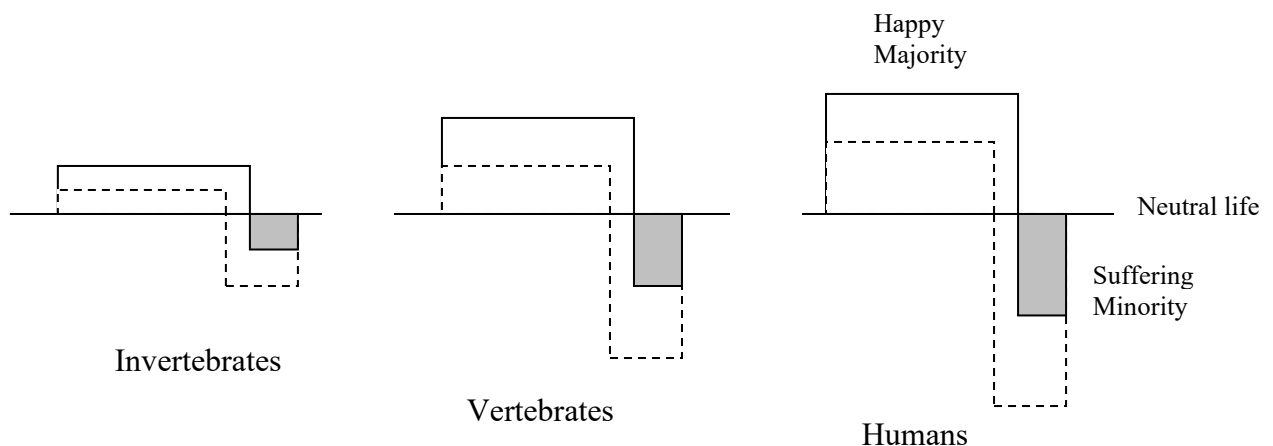
Let us consider the following hypothesis:

– There is no world with positive total welfare. The positive utilitarian intuition is a distorted perception of the risk-benefit ratio, caused by the interest to survive. With an undistorted perception suffering gets much more weight than in surveys.
– Suffering increases in the course of evolution. Happiness increases as well, but less than suffering, so that the totals turn *increasingly* negative.

We will call this the *negative welfare* hypothesis. It is reminiscent of the *Noble Truths* of Buddhism, which claim that an expansion of desires is tied to an expansion of suffering.

Arguments in favor of the *negative welfare* hypothesis are amongst others:

– The higher intensity of emotions goes with a stronger attachment to life and with a corresponding higher suffering from transience.
– The complexity of desires increases with the complexity of the environment and makes it more difficult to have them satisfied.
– The technological improvement of welfare has to be "paid for" by increasing risk [Rees].
– Populations with a happy majority might be a temporary phenomenon.

The last of these arguments, claiming that suffering majorities represent "normality", is inspired by the unbalanced growth of populations and resources:

"The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. It must be so. If there is ever a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored." [Dawkins, 131-132].

Missing in Dawkins' description is the *qualitative* increase of suffering in the course of evolution.

Fig.5 below is a different view on the dashed lines in Fig.4, emphasizing the evolution of *qualitative experience*. If a new level of happiness emerges in a species (shaded rectangles, above neutral), then it is correlated to a new level of suffering (shaded squares, below neutral) which are also more intense than the ones experienced before. The *negative welfare* hypothesis says that – seen from an impartial view – the new levels of happiness (H1, H2, H3) cannot compensate the correlated new levels of suffering (S1, S2, S3).

Fig.5
Emergence of qualities
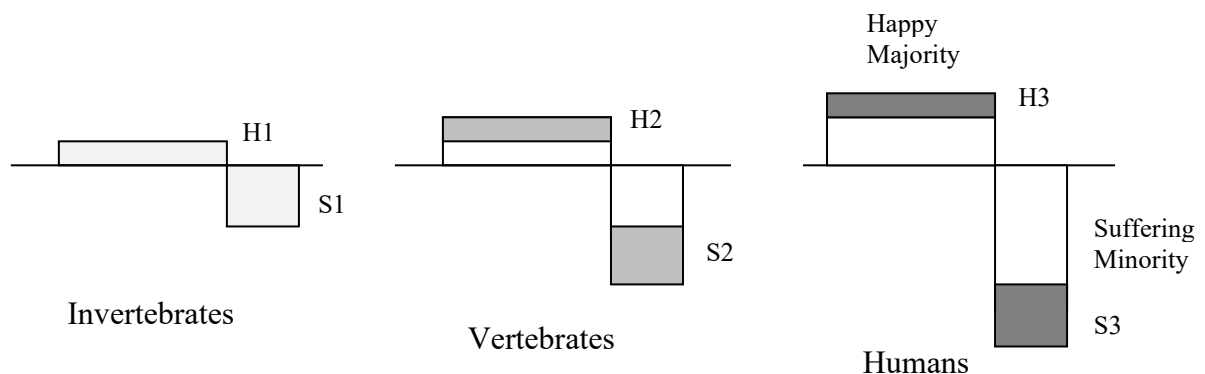
If the hypothesis proves to be true, then happiness as *an overall phenomenon* cannot compensate the correlated suffering. The statistical and long-term "price" for happiness is too high. Take heroin as an example. For beginners a new dimension of ecstasy emerges, and there are also individuals who manage to handle the drug, but *statistically and in the long run* the balance is negative. Possibly heroin use is paradigmatic for all kinds of happiness.

The higher intensity of pleasure and pain is not an accidental by-product of evolution; it is the consequence of the adaptive function of emotions. The increasing capability to "feel" has to do with the increasing importance of learning mechanisms. The importance of learning mechanisms in turn increases with the lifetime of the creatures and with the complexity of the environment.

- Invertebrates are short-lived and their behaviour is largely genetically determined. There is little pressure for the evolution of emotions.
- Vertebrates are relatively long-lived creatures and learning shapes their behaviour. A wide range of emotions (including high intensity of suffering) enhances the capability to respond to the environment and is therefore *superior* with regard to biological fitness.
- Humans combine a long lifetime with a previously unknown (cultural) complexity of the environment. There is a high evolutionary pressure to improve learning mechanisms and to increase sensitivity.

The evolution of sentient beings is much more complex than a process of accumulation and the size of the populations varies vastly, but the details of the process do not matter in our context. The *negative welfare* hypothesis only says that the negative total – seen from an impartial view – increases in the course of evolution.

Fig.6 depicts the *average* welfare and the *average* lifetime of different populations *from an impartial view*. Note that – in contrast to Fig.4 and Fig.5 – welfare is measured as a percentage. Since we concentrate on averages, the population size is out of consideration.

Fig.6
Negative welfare hypothesis
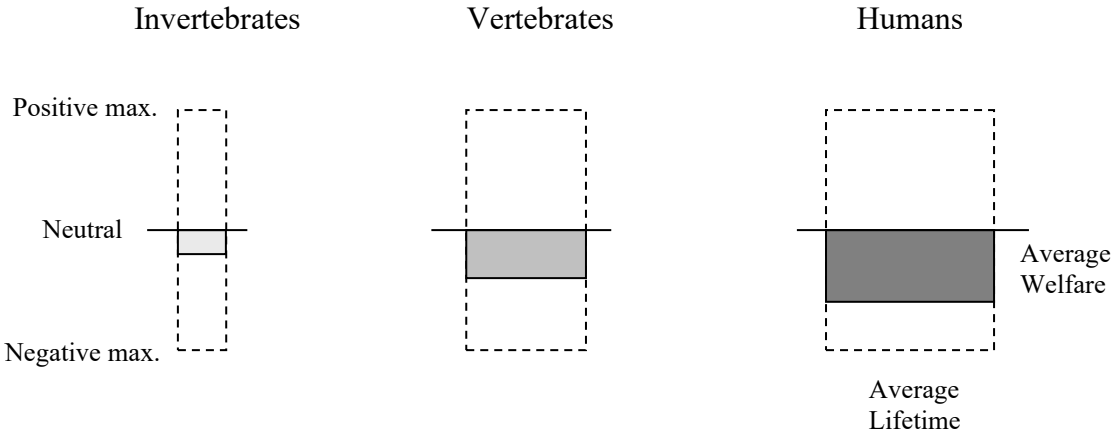
The *negative welfare* hypothesis says that the average human not only experiences a higher intensity of emotions (indicated by the darker shading), but also a lower level of life satisfaction (indicated by column depth, below neutral) than the average animal. But – whereas animals are caught in their (assumed) world of negative welfare – humans have the *potential* to liberate themselves from their biological destination and question the value of existence.

5. Non-Existence as a Perfect State

At the origin of the claim that *non-existence is a perfect state* may have been the observation that a *high* level of life satisfaction often goes with a *low* intensity of desires. In the words of Epicurus: *"If thou wilt make a man happy, do not add to his riches but take away from his desires"*. Obviously, the intensity of desires is not decisive; the only thing that counts is the *degree of satisfaction*. A child does not miss the sexual pleasure of adults and the average citizen does not miss the ecstasy of heroin. Life satisfaction relates to a limited universe of desires.

The elimination of desires – if it is attained by insight and not by coercion – eliminates the risk of frustration. As a consequence, a simple and contemplative life can be more satisfying than a complex and passionate one. Meditation, the ultimate step within this logic, reveals that the *complete* elimination of desires – and the corresponding dissolution of the ego – can be experienced as an immense liberation. Buddhists call this experience Nirwana.
In a Buddhist meditation, the seemingly absurd claim that the *non-existence of the ego is a perfect state* turns into a tangible truth. But does the perfection of the Nirwana say something about the perfection of non-existence (of the ego) in general? According to the *Brahman* concept – which originates in Hinduism and was later adopted by some forms of Buddhism [Fowler, 34] – it does. The advocates of this concept postulate that there is a perfect, impersonal, and spiritual form of existence, which represents the ultimate essence of material phenomena. Sentient beings come out of the *Brahman* and return to it after death [Raju, 228].

Consider the following hypothesis:
o   The universe was in a perfect state until sentient life started to emerge.
o   The average life satisfaction – seen from an impartial view – *decreased* in the course of evolution.
o   At some point (global) suffering could not be compensated by happiness anymore.
We will call this the *expulsion (from paradise)* hypothesis.

In Fig.7 populations are ordered from left to right according to an increasing average intensity of emotions. Welfare is measured as a percentage (depicted by column height). Intensity is expressed by the shading – the *darker* the rectangle, the *higher* the intensity. Insofar as the *Brahman* is described as bliss [Raju, 54, 228] it is justified to depict it on the hedonic scale.

Fig.7 Expulsion hypothesis
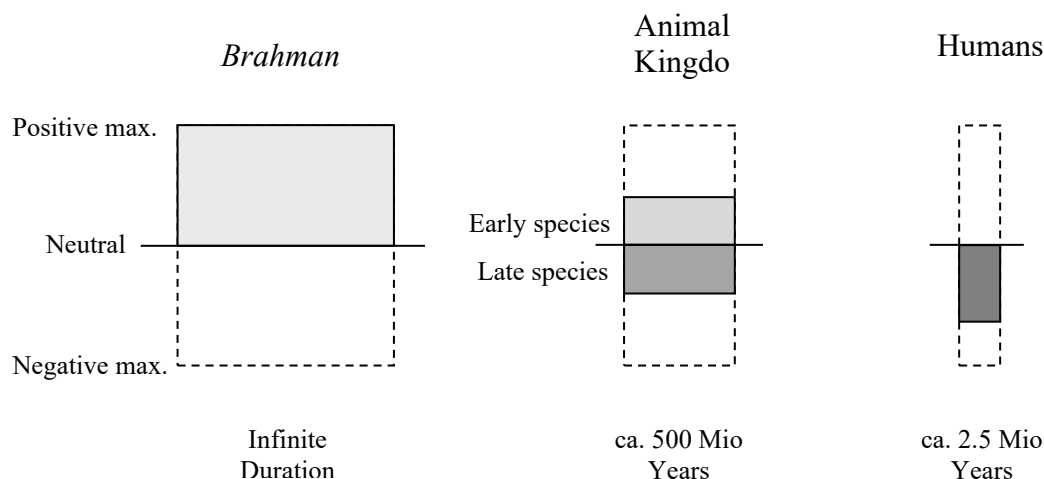
The *expulsion* hypothesis is a weaker form of the *negative welfare* hypothesis, because it does not exclude that the early species had and – as far as they survived – still have a positive total welfare (middle of Fig.7). But sooner or later in the course of evolution the intensity of pain reached a level which made it impossible (from an *impartial* view) to compensate suffering by happiness.

The *Brahman* concept is in competition with an ethical theory called *negative preference utilitarianism* [Fricke, 20]. In this context the term *preference* corresponds to the Buddhist term *desire* (interest, attachment) as used in the *Noble Truths*. Negative preference utilitarianism can be characterized by the following quote:

What matters about preferences is not that they have a satisfied existence, but that they don't have a frustrated existence [Fehige, 518].

Both concepts claim that the non-existence of preferences has the *same moral value* as perfect preference satisfaction:
–   Negative preference utilitarianism devaluates preference-satisfaction,
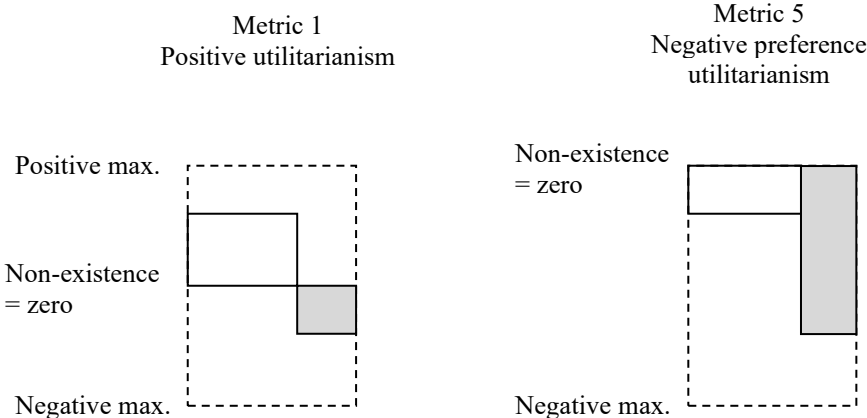–   The *Brahman* hypothesis upgrades non-existence.

In Fig.8 negative preference utilitarianism is compared with positive utilitarianism. The happy majority is depicted by white rectangles, the suffering minority by shaded rectangles.
If preference-satisfaction does not count and non-existence is given the value zero (*metric 5* in Fig.8), then the welfare of *each* sentient being is necessarily negative [Stanford, chapter 2.4] [Arrhenius, 63]. Even an almost perfect life is not worth living, a conclusion which is known as *Reverse Repugnant Conclusion.*

Note that *metric 5* in Fig.8 is the mirror image of *metric 2* in Fig.1. Both metrics change the notion of a *life worth living*, though in the opposite sense:
–   *Metric 2* allows creating a Darwinian hell, because the will to survive completely overrules hedonistic concerns. The association of death with deprivation and eternal night, which stands in diametric opposition to the *Brahman* hypothesis, favours this view.
–   With *metric 5*, conversely, hedonistic concerns completely overrule the will to survive. The least kinds of risk are reason enough to deny the world.

Fig.8
The value of non-existence

Metric 1
Positive utilitarianism

Positive max.

Non-existence
= zero

Negative max.

Metric 5
Negative preference
utilitarianism

Non-existence
= zero

Negative max.

In contrast to negative preference utilitarianism the *Brahman* concept avoids the *Reverse Repugnant Conclusion* [Contestabile, 108]:

– If non-existence is associated with the value zero (as in utilitarianism), then it is counter-intuitive to claim that an almost perfect life is not worth living.
– If non-existence is associated with perfection (as in the *Brahman* concept), then this claim makes sense, and the goal can only be to avoid the creation of new lives. Consequently, if a world without sentient beings is perfect, then the creation of the early species (Fig.7) did not improve the state of affairs, even if these species had (or still have) an almost perfect life.

The two concepts converge, if the description of non-existence is detached from the hedonic scale. With terms such as "perfection beyond emotions" or "indescribable Absolute" [Fowler, 7], however, negative preference utilitarianism enters the world of metaphysics.

Early Buddhism avoided metaphysical speculation in general and the idea of the *Brahman* in particular [Keown, 70] [Fowler, 81] [Webster, 96]. Obviously, Buddhist ethics can be constructed without resorting to the *Brahman* concept. The knowledge how to reach Nirwana has an immense therapeutic potential, independent of the controversial metaphysical dimension. The positive experience of non-existence (of the ego) is the key for coping with transience and death.

6. Intuition and Interest

The axiologies investigated in this paper document the conflict between the biological interest to survive and the cultural interest to reduce suffering. Each axiology revolves around an intuition, which is driven by one of these two interests or a compromise between them. In the following the intuitions are ordered by decreasing survival value:

Intuition	Axiology	Graphics
Life is always worth living, even under the worst circumstances.	Positive utilitarianism, with a metric excluding negative numbers	Fig.1 metric 2
Happiness surpasses suffering.	Positive utilitarianism, with a metric allowing negative numbers	Fig.1 metric 1
Suffering surpasses happiness.	Relative priority of (the avoidance of) suffering	Fig.3 metric 3
The horrible suffering of a single person is reason enough to deny the world.	Negative total utilitarianism	Fig.3 metric 4
Non-existence is a perfect state, better than an almost perfect life.	Negative preference utilitarianism	Fig.8 metric 5

Imagine that Buddhist monks found a source of knowledge which confirms the *negative welfare* hypothesis. In this situation we put our axiologies into the laboratory of cultural evolution and observe what happens:

– The birth rate of people who strive to survive under all circumstances is not affected by a negative forecast.
– The birth rate of already pessimistic people is not affected as well.
– Optimists are confronted with a new argument for childlessness. This has a short-term impact on birth rates, but the long-term picture hardly changes for the simple reason that *only those survive who discard the truth.* If the level of suffering increases, then those survive who are better able to suppress risk, better able to forget painful experiences and less bothered by compassion. It is even sufficient if the perception is distorted during the individual's fecund period. The realistic perception becomes a threat (risk) with regard to the biological fitness, whereas a distorted perception allows having plenty of children. Unrealistic optimism is a successful strategy of life in order to maximize the replication of genes [Dawkins].

The above thought experiment cannot be taken as an argument to confirm the *negative welfare* hypothesis, but it suggests that the truth does not necessarily prevail in ethics.

7. Conclusion

Negative utilitarianism and Buddhism share the following intuitions:
– Negative utilitarianism – understood as an umbrella term – models the *asymmetry between suffering and happiness* and therefore accords with the Buddhist intuition of *universal compassion*.
– The *Noble Truths* of Buddhism accord with the negative utilitarian intuition that (global) *suffering cannot be compensated by happiness.*
– Some forms of Buddhism and negative utilitarianism share the intuition that *non-existence is a perfect state.*

New Findings

In 2022 a group of researchers published an empirical study on population ethical intuitions, which confirms a thesis discussed in this paper. In valuing entire populations, the majority's intuitions are *asymmetric* about happiness and suffering. If this asymmetry is applied to the life evaluations of the World Happiness Report, then the aggregated total turns *negative*; see *Is There a Predominance of Suffering?*, available from www.philarchive.org.

Acknowledgment

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Further information on negative utilitarianism and Buddhism can be found at
www.socrethics.com