

Satisficing

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Classical utilitarianism is a consequentialist moral theory. Consequentialist moral theories identify some set of intrinsic goods, and then define a right act exclusively in terms of how well an act promotes those goods. Classical utilitarianism identifies *pleasure* (or happiness) as the sole intrinsic good, and identifies a right act with an act that maximizes pleasure. In virtue of this, classical utilitarianism is a form of *maximizing* consequentialism. Maximizing theories say that only the best is good enough (or, in the case of ties, one of the best): an act that promotes anything less than the best outcome is morally wrong.

But what if promoting the best outcome requires you to sacrifice something of great significance to you? For example, what if it requires giving nearly all of your resources to charity, leaving you penurious? Maximizers say that it would be wrong for you *not* to give the resources away. But many people think this is obviously wrong, because it is *too demanding*. Morality would not demand that much of you. This is known as the “demandingness objection”

to maximizing consequentialism (Scheffler 1982, Mulgan 2001).

Some consequentialists respond that morality really is that demanding (Shelly 1984). But many have looked for other ways out. One way is to adopt an agent-relative theory of goodness, or to weight bad consequences for the agent more heavily, so that morality never ends up requiring you to sacrifice so much. Another way is to relinquish maximizing consequentialism for satisficing consequentialism (Slote 1985).

Satisficing consequentialism identifies a right act with one that promotes a good enough outcome, where *good enough* need not be *optimal*. This opens up the possibility – though it does not entail – that it is acceptable for you to not give away all, most, or even many of your resources. Donating \$100 might be good enough.

One main challenge facing satisficers is to explain just when an outcome is good enough (Bradley 2006). Is there some absolute minimum of goodness that any act must promote in order to be good enough, or is the threshold always determined relative to the quality of options available to you at the time? Different accounts of *good enough* might seem more or less plausible, depending on which theory of goodness we adopt (Hurka 1990).

The appeal of satisficing does not derive solely from its role in avoiding objections to maximizing consequentialism. Common-sense seems to recognize a category of actions that moral philosophers call “supererogatory.” To perform a supererogatory act is to go “beyond the call of duty.” For example, it is not wrong for you to donate five, rather than fifty, percent of your net income to famine

relief. But it is still permissible for you to donate fifty percent. And donating fifty percent seems obviously better than donating five percent. But since, according to commonsense, donating fifty percent is *better* but nevertheless *not required* of you, it seems that commonsense morality is committed to satisficing.

The main significance of satisficing to utilitarians, then, lies in the fact that it opens up further theoretical possibilities for developing a consequentialist morality that can avoid certain compelling counterexamples to maximizing consequentialism, and better accommodate commonsense moral categories and judgments.

Bibliography

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Further Reading

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