

Utilitarians versus Aristotelians: a false dichotomy

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Most people think that the disagreement is about the **nature** of happiness – that utilitarians think of happiness as the **enjoyable** life and Aristotelians think of happiness as the **virtuous** life. But that is not the real difference. The true difference is whether you focus on the **consumption** of happiness (the utilitarian perspective) or the **production** of happiness (the Aristotelian perspective).

So let's start with how each school defines a **good society** or a good situation. Utilitarians say the best situation is where people **experience** the most happiness. By contrast Aristotelians say a good situation is where people **behave best**. So, the best situation for Aristotelians can perfectly well be defined as where people **produce** the most happiness.

Thus there **need** be no disagreement. If we look at any situation it can be looked at in either of two ways. In the first, we look at the distribution of happiness **experienced** – and there is a given total of that. In the second approach, we look at the distribution of happiness **created** – which also equals the total of happiness consumed.

So the best society can **equally well** be defined as one where the consumption of happiness is highest **or** where the production of happiness is highest.

Which approach is best?

Obviously we need both approaches. First, we have to have **reasons** for the outcome we desire. It is **much** more plausible to argue that the outcome that matters is what people experience rather than what they do. That is the contribution of the utilitarian approach. Second, we **then** have to make that outcome happen. That is the contribution of the Aristotelian approach. Unless someone is **creating** happiness, no one will experience it. But we can only identify which actions are **virtuous** by looking at what results come from each action.

This brings me to another phrase: the **good life**. Here there can be no question. The good life must refer to the creation of happiness and not its consumption. No utilitarian should say that a happy selfish person, importing happiness from others, leads a good life. A good life is one which creates happiness for others as well as yourself.

So there need be **no disagreement**. Let the Aristotelians agree that what matters is that people should enjoy their lives. And let the utilitarians agree that the **good life** is the one which produces that outcome.

Let me end on an important **empirical** issue. Clearly some people create more happiness than they consume and vice versa. Some are net exporters of happiness and some are net importers. But just how **different** is it to create happiness and to experience it. Are those who create more happiness than the average also on average happier? Does creating happiness for others make you happier?

There is a substantial amount of **evidence** on this, most of which can be found in the writings of John Helliwell and in Mathieu Ricard's wonderful book on Altruism. What has always impressed me most is the paper by Rilling and others where people play the Prisoner's Dilemma game while their brains are being scanned. And when they cooperate, there is more activity in their brain's reward centre than when they defect. So to some extent virtue is its own reward. There is a mass of other **experimental** evidence by Elizabeth Dunn and others that also shows this. There is also the simple cross-sectional fact that more pro-social people are on average happier and vice versa – but that is only a correlation and not a statement about causality. And, critically, not everyone who is happy is good (consider Hitler – so full of purpose). And not everyone who is good is happy.

So people who rightly focus on the good life (and how to encourage it) should drop their aversion to the utilitarian approach. Both sides are looking at the same thing – just from a different angle.