Can Negative Utilitarianism be Salvaged?

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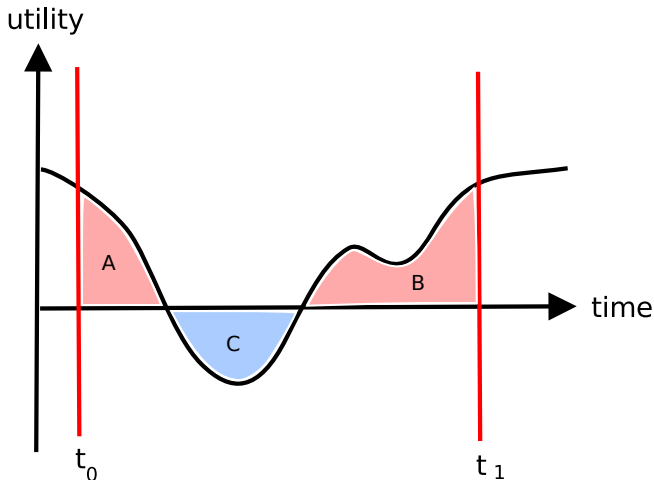
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1. Classical Negative Utilitarianism and Smart's Response

2. Lexical Threshold NU

3. Discussion of Counter-Arguments (with many credits to Toby Ord)

Classical Negative Utilitarianism

1. Minimize suffering!
2. No amount of pleasure can outweigh intense suffering.

- Several variants of this position can be made precise.
- The plausible ones will have some threshold, as the adjective 'intense' indicates.

Ordinary Sum Utilitarianism: $A + B - C$ counts
Negative Utilitarianism: only C counts (at least if it is below some threshold)

Popper's Remark:

"I believe that there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure. Both the greatest happiness principle of the Utilitarians and Kant's principle 'Promote other peoples happiness . . . ' seem to me (at least in their formulations) wrong on this point which, however, is not completely decidable by rational argument." Popper (1945: 235, Fn. 2)

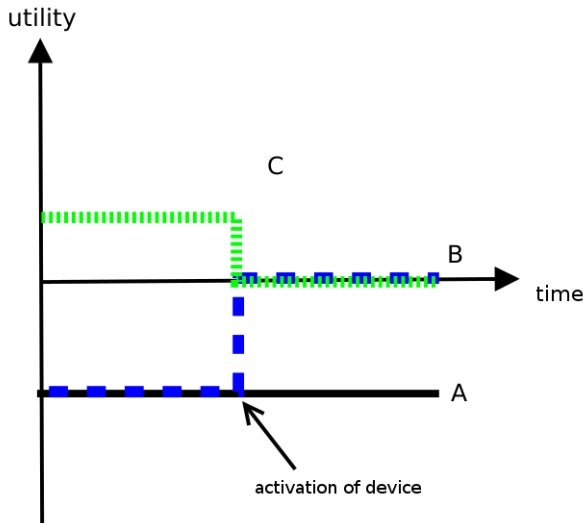# Popper in 'The Open Society and Its Enemies'

Popper's Remark (continued):

"[H]uman 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; and further, that unavoidable suffering—such as hunger in times of an unavoidable shortage of food—should be distributed as equally as possible.)" Popper (1945: 235, Fn. 2)

The Doomsday Device (Smart 1958)

"Suppose that a ruler controls a weapon capable of instantly and painlessly destroying the human race. Now it is empirically certain that there would be some suffering before all those alive on any proposed destruction day were to die in the natural course of events. Consequently the use of the weapon is bound to diminish suffering, and would be the ruler's duty on NU grounds.
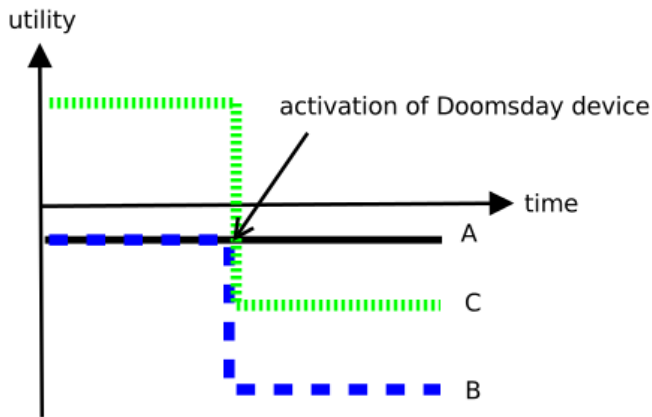
On the other hand, we should assuredly regard such an action as wicked. On utilitarian grounds we might defend this judgment by pointing to the positive enjoyments and happiness likely to be found in a great number of the lives destroyed." Smart (1958: 542)
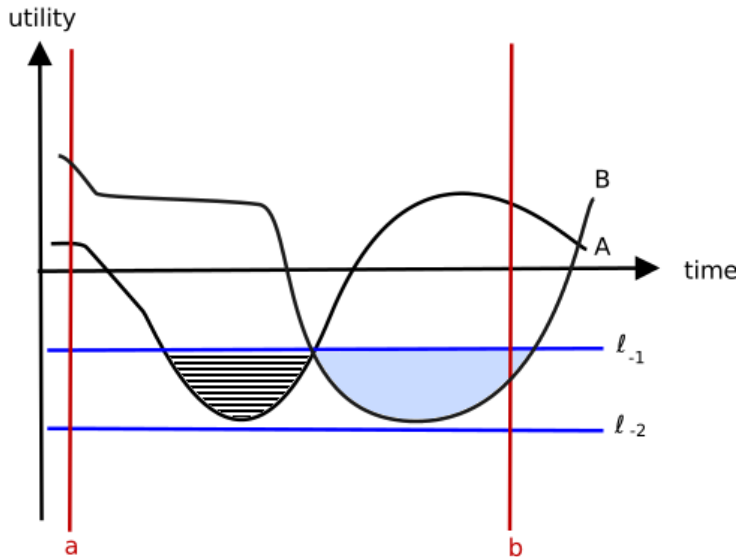
In this picture, involuntary deaths have no disvalue besides the grief they cause.

In this picture, involuntary deaths have a disvalue.

The Pinbrick Argument (Ord 2013)

Suppose in some utopian society someone suffers from a small pinbrick by some beautiful rose. "...[l]exical NU says that it is so important to avoid that pinprick that it would be obligatory to destroy all that is good about their world and force the inhabitants down to the muzak and potatoes lives" Ord (2013)

Lit.: Ord, Toby: *Why I am not a Negative Utilitarian*, University of Oxford, publ. online `http://www.amirrorclear.net/academic/ideas/negative-utilitarianism/index.html`, retrieved 20.2.2013.
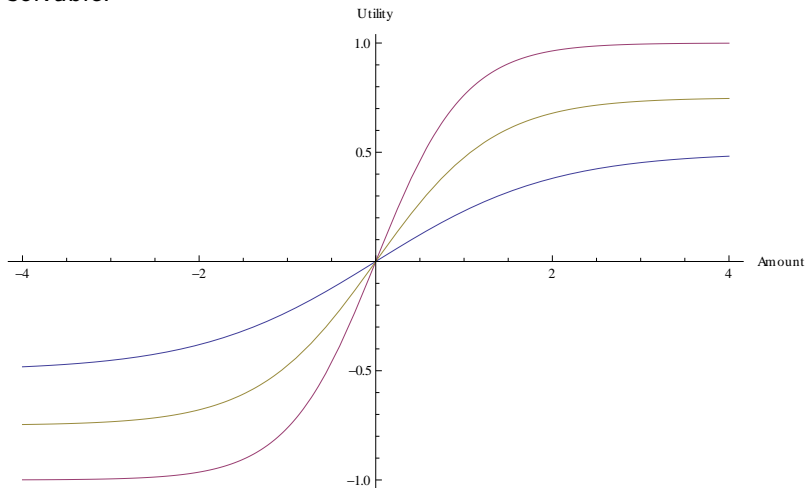
The Continuity Argument (Ord 2013)

❶ To a small amount of suffering (one pinbrick) there must be a small amount of pleasure.

❷ Adding up small disvalues (pinbricks) is intuitively outweighed by corresponding value.

❸ NU predicts a sharp discontinuity: One more pinbrick, and suddenly no corresponding value can outweigh it.

❹ This is extremely implausible / absurd.

- This seems to be one more variant of Sorites' Paradox.

My Reply: There Are Different Types of (Dis-)Value

Once we discard with implausible value monism and allow multiple attributes ($\approx$ different types of values), the problem may be solvable:

The "All Are Worse Off" Argument (Ord 2013)

In some scenarios, NU recommends a state of affairs that makes everyone worse off. That cannot be right.

- A move that makes everyone worse off seems to be bad (and is generally thought so by economists and authors like Broome).
- But: It is known that combining social fairness criteria with 'standard' social welfare accounts may lead to violations of Pareto efficiency. See Fleurbaey & Maniquet (2011: Ch. 1-2)
- 'Battling of intuitions': The purporter of NU will simply accept that sometimes everyone has to be made worse off in order to prevent immense suffering.

- The Continuity Argument seems to be the strongest of the known counter-arguments to NU.
- Lexical Threshold NU seems to be well defensible against counter-arguments, as long as several *types of values* with corresponding thresholds are used.
- For some utilitarians these assumptions might be problematic.
- So why am *I* not a negative utilitarian? – Because I'm not a utilitarian.
  - Numerous problems of interpersonal utility comparability
  - Numerous problems of incorporating deontic rules and social justice into the axiological framework

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- Lyons, David (1965): *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism.* Clarendon. Oxford.

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- Popper, Karl (1945): *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge.

- Smart, R.N. (1958): "Negative Utilitarianism", *Mind* 67, 542-3.