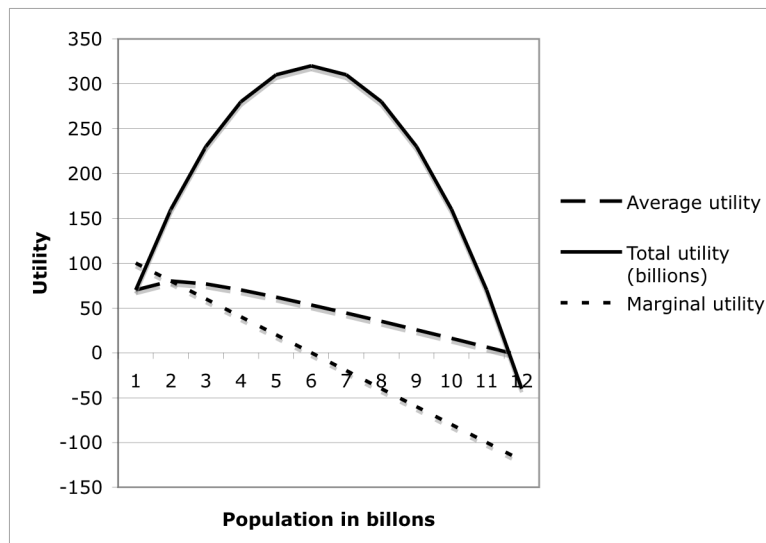


Phil 2, February 8, 2011

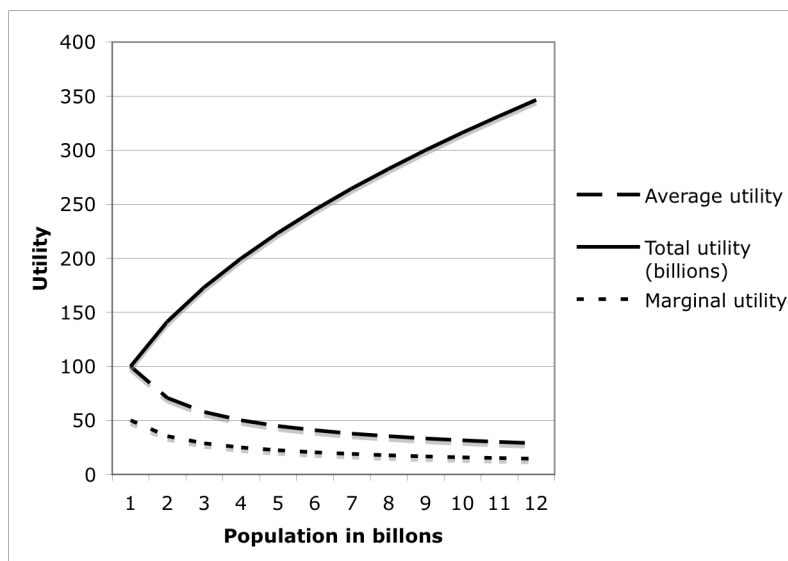
Challenges to Aggregation: Population growth

Plausible: Population is at its ideal size when average, or per capita, utility (=what's good for people, e.g., pleasure) is greatest (or when average utility = marginal utility*). According to Aggregation, however, population is at its ideal size when *total* utility is greatest (i.e., when marginal utility = 0).



Why should we do this? The population is not itself some being who will experience the increase in total utility. There are only individuals, and each individual's utility will be lower.

Indeed, Aggregation might require us to increase population indefinitely:



* Marginal utility is roughly the answer to the question: If we add one more person, how much will total utility increase?

A utilitarian might replace Aggregation with:

Average: An outcome is better if the *average* of what is good for each person (who exists at the time of the outcome) less what is bad for each person (who exists at the time of the outcome) is greater.

Call a utilitarian who accepts Average an “average utilitarian,” whereas a utilitarian who accepts the original Aggregation a “total utilitarian.”

Challenges to Aggregation: Equal division

According to Aggregation,

No person’s good counts for more than another person’s good in calculating the sum total.

But does this capture the whole of our sense of equal concern? Plausible:

Equal Division: When we have a fixed stock of goods, and a group of people none of whom deserves those goods more than anyone else, we ought to give each member of the group an equal share.

Can Aggregation explain this? The basic worry, which we discussed in a different context last time, is that Aggregation takes account of only the *sum* of utility, not how it is *distributed* among people. Why should we care how many people derive (e.g.) pleasure from those goods, so long as the same (e.g.) pleasure is derived?

A utilitarian reply:

Diminishing marginal utility: The same amount of a good produces more pleasure when given to someone who has *less* of it than when given to someone who has *more* of it.

If diminishing marginal utility is true, and if we have a fixed stock of resources, then we always increase total pleasure by taking from someone who has more and giving it to someone who has less. We maximize total pleasure, therefore, when everyone has an equal amount.

Is DMU an adequate answer?

First, DMU may be *false*. Even if everyone’s marginal utility diminishes, it may diminish at different rates.

Second, *even if* DMU is true, it is still be a problem that utilitarianism makes the wrong choice in hypothetical cases in which DMU is false.

Digression:

Like many objections to utilitarianism, this objection has the following form:

1. Utilitarianism implies that if we were in a certain situation, S, then we would be morally required to X.
2. But it is false that, if we were in S, we would be morally required to X.

Many observe that:

3. S is unrealistic. We will probably never be in S.

To what extent does 3 protect utilitarianism from objection? It’s not clear.

On the one hand, 3 does not change the fact that, if 1 and 2 are true, then:

4. Utilitarianism is *false*.

On the other hand, if 3 is true, then 1 and 2 do *not* show that:

5. If we use utilitarianism to decide what to do, then we will probably make incorrect decisions.

End of digression.

Challenges to Aggregation: Sacrificing the few

Many decisions do not involve distributing a fixed stock of goods.

- Example 1: Enslaving an especially productive person.
- Example 2: Persecuting a minority whose practices we, the majority, find displeasing.

Each victim suffers more than each beneficiary benefits. But there are more beneficiaries than victims. So the sum total increases.

The basic problem is this:

Utilitarianism implies that we are morally required to impose great suffering on a few people in order to produce a greater sum of smaller benefits for many other people.

Rawls's diagnosis: Overlooking the distinction between persons

- “adopt[ing] for society as a whole the principle of rational choice for one man” (27).
- This principle permits us to “impose a sacrifice on ourselves now for the sake of a greater advantage later” (23). Consider my decision to visit the dentist:

	<i>Today for me:</i>	<i>Everyday for me after age 40:</i>	<i>Total:</i>
Go to dentist	Severe pain	[Avoid mild discomfort]	Severe pain today
Don't go to dentist	[Avoid severe pain]	Mild discomfort	Years of mild discomfort in the future

- It can be rational for me to go to the dentist, because *I* will be compensated for my displeasure *today* by less displeasure in the *future*.
- Now suppose that this principle of rational choice applies to *society* as a whole. Then it may be rational to cause a *few* people displeasure, because *society* will be compensated for their displeasure by less displeasure for *many other* people.

	<i>Minority:</i>	<i>Majority:</i>	<i>Total:</i>
Oppress minority	Severe pain	[Avoid mild discomfort]	Severe pain for the few
Don't oppress minority	[Avoid severe pain]	Mild discomfort	Mild discomfort for the many

- But there is no person, “Mr. Society,” who is compensated for the displeasure of the few.
- The only people who *could be* compensated for the displeasure of the few are the few themselves.
- And in this case they are *not* compensated.
- They are simply sacrificed for the benefit of *other* people.
- “Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.”

Is there an alternative to Aggregation?

- How can we “take seriously the distinction between persons”?
- Almost every choice makes *some* person better off and *some other* person worse off than would another choice.
- Can’t the people who are made worse off *always* claim that they are sacrificed for the benefit of others?
- If this complaint—“You’re sacrificing me for others!”—is *always* decisive, then there is a decisive complaint against almost *every* choice.
- We need some way to prioritize complaints.
- Plausible: The person with *less* has a stronger complaint when he is sacrificed for the benefit of others than has the person with more.
- If we take this to its logical conclusion, we get:

(*Rawls’s*) *Difference Principle* (sort of): An outcome is better if the person who is worst off in that outcome is better off.

A generalization of the Difference Principle:

Leximin: An outcome is better if the person who is worst off in that outcome is better off, and if he is equally well off, then if the person who is second-worst off in that outcome is better off, and if she is equally well off, then if the person who is third-worst off...

Review Questions:

1. Does replacing Aggregation with Average help at all to explain Equal Division? Why or why not?
2. Is assuming Diminishing Marginal Utility enough to overcome the objection to Aggregation that comes from cases of “Sacrificing the Few”? Why or why not?
3. How do Aggregation, Average, the Difference Principle, and Leximin rank the following outcomes from best to worst?

	Outcome A	Outcome B	Outcome C	Outcome D	Outcome E
Person 1	2	1	3	4	2
Person 2	4	1	3	3	4
Person 3	4	1	3	4	6
Person 4	6	20	3	5	6