

Lecture: The Standard of Utility

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There is an old fairy tale that goes roughly like this:

A man and his wife have one possession, an old milking cow. Times are hard, and they decide that they have no choice but to sell the cow so they can have some money for food. As the man is leading the cow toward the market to sell, he passes by a peasant carrying a pair of chickens. "Say, that's a fine cow you have there," says the peasant, "I don't suppose you would like to trade your one cow for two whole chickens." The man thinks to himself, "two is more than one, as everyone knows. This is a deal that can't be passed up!" He quickly agrees and leaves cow with the peasant, taking the two chickens instead. By and by he meets a woman selling loaves of bread, who offers him three loaves of bread in exchange for the two chickens. Again the man reasons, "three is more than two, as everyone knows. This woman must not be very clever to be willing to take only two chickens in exchange for three loaves of bread!" So he makes the exchange and continues on. A while later, he comes across an old beggar with four beans spread on a blanket. "What say you exchange those three loaves of bread for these four beans?" suggests the beggar. The man thinks to himself, "it's no wonder that he's a beggar if he doesn't even realize that four is more than three! I have never had such luck!" Just before he arrives home with his beans, he passes by a young boy playing with some rocks. The young boy spots his beans, and offers him 5 pebbles in exchange for those four beans. Quickly agreeing, the man runs home and excitedly proclaims to his wife, "I set off with just a single cow, and instead of selling it in the market, I traded that for *two* chickens, which then fetched me *three* loaves of bread, for which I then got *four* beans, and now I have *five* pebbles! You have, indeed, the cleverest husband in the world."

What is wrong with this man's reasoning? Clearly he failed to realize that quantity isn't everything: just because a decision will result in a larger quantity of things, that doesn't make that decision a good one. How should he have compared, say, four beans with three loaves of bread? Some common standard would have to be considered, a standard that would have allowed him to compare the value of four beans and three loaves of bread. Without that common standard, the decision comes down to a matter of sheer numbers, which in this case proved to be ridiculously foolish, no matter how clever he took himself to be.

Utilitarianism is the moral theory that regards right choices as those that produce the most value relative to the alternatives, usually expressed in terms of the amount of "good utility" minus the amount of "bad utility" that results from the actions. Thus, if action 1 produces a certain amount of overall utility, and action 2 produces more overall utility, then action 2 is the morally right action.

But what is utility? Is it something that we can clearly discern and measure in any given state of affairs? Utilitarians themselves have often disagreed about what, exactly, utility is, and what it is that we are supposed to be measuring when making these calculations about the overall results of different actions. Some have talked about utility in terms of pleasure and an absence of pain, others in terms of fulfilling desires or preferences, and still others speak of utility in terms of certain independent standards of living, just to name a few. And each of these in turn elicits further disagreement and debate.

As this story illustrates, though, without a clear standard by which to measure the value produced by alternative courses of action, a decision that may seem to one person to be “better” because it produces “more” value, may seem to another person to be obviously worse if they don’t share that same *standard* of value. For instance, we often hear people disagreeing about some proposed legislation or economic policy, one person claiming that her proposed policy will make us all better off, with her opponent claiming that *his* policy will make us better off instead. It often sounds like they are disagreeing about how the numbers add up, but often the disagreement is deeper, as they are invoking different standards of what make people “well off” in the first place.

Are there clear standards of value by which we can measure the relative value of different policies, courses of action, and so forth? If there are not, what implications might this have for a utilitarian approach to these kinds of decisions?