



Philosophical Enquiry for Philosophy Clubs

The More the Merrier

A session on maximisation and moral values

Happiness

1. **Would you prefer a life in which you were mildly happy some of the time, or very happy most of the time?**
2. **If happiness is generally a good thing, is more happiness generally better?**

Maximisation and Utilitarianism

Many people agree that happiness is a good thing. If something is good, it is tempting to think that the more you have of it, the better things are for you.

The moral theory Utilitarianism, proposed by Jeremy Bentham in 1789 and subsequently developed by other philosophers, political theorists and economists, is the view that the best state of affairs is one in which utility (often understood as “happiness”) is maximised. If we want to do good, we should act in ways that create the most happiness for the most people.

3. **If you want to do good, should you try to maximise happiness?**
4. **Could such a strategy ever lead to wrong-doing?**

Maximisation and the Friedman Doctrine

Some moral and political philosophers, such as Martha Nussbaum, are suspicious of the view that there is only one measure of goodness, such as happiness and that morality is a matter of maximising that good. She thinks moral life is more complicated than that.

However, we might think that there are some social systems that are less complex than morality, systems such as economics. Perhaps the ideas of maximisation (i.e. the more of something the better) makes more sense here?

In 1970, the economist Milton Friedman advanced a now-famous argument that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”, to maximise the amount of money returned to shareholders (the individuals who have invested in a company).

5. **Is maximising profit the aim of business?**
6. **Is the maxim ‘the more the merrier’ true for companies?**

Maximising final and instrumental goods

Many people would distinguish the values of money and happiness. For some the latter is a final good, whereas the latter is an instrumental good, good but only insofar as it helps achieve something with final value. For example, we often hear people claiming that money is valuable because it makes people happy, yet we rarely hear an argument that happiness is valuable because it leads to more money or some other good. We tend to think that happiness is good in itself.

7. Does it make more sense to maximise final goods than instrumental goods? Or to maximise instrumental goods rather than final goods?

Maximising important and trivial things

8. Is there anything in life that we really *should* try to maximise?
9. Is there anything wrong with maximising trivial things?

Maximising Machines

Share stimulus: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/06/23/frankensteins-paperclips>

Imagine an Artificial Intelligence that was programmed to make paperclips. The Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom proposed such a thought experiment called 'The Paperclip Maximiser' in 2003.

"Imagine an artificial intelligence", he says, "which decides to amass as many paperclips as possible". It devotes all its energy to acquiring paperclips, and to improving itself so that it can get paperclips in new ways, while resisting any attempt to divert it from this goal. Eventually it "starts transforming first all of Earth and then increasing portions of space into paperclip manufacturing facilities". Such an AI—recognising that human beings are made of atoms that can be recycled into other things—would ultimately destroy us all, since as far as it can tell, the more paperclips the merrier.

This is a thought experiment designed to illustrate the existential risk that an artificial intelligence may pose to human beings when programmed to pursue even seemingly harmless goals. It has been used to argue for the necessity of incorporating machine ethics into artificial intelligence design.

10. If we were to programme machines with human values, what should we programme them to know?
11. If ethics is ultimately about the human values of happiness, care or justice etc. could anything go wrong if an AI attempted to maximise these things to the extreme?

Maximisation or Moderation?

Aristotle and the Doctrine of the Mean

The 4th Century BC philosopher Aristotle advocated for moderation in ethics. For him, the right action was the midway between two excesses. So, courage is the virtue (the quality in people that we value) and it is to be found midway between cowardice and foolhardiness. (Cowardice being a lack of 'deficiency' and foolhardiness being too much or an 'excess').

PTO

12. Should we seek out a moderate amount of the goods we value such as happiness, care, or justice?

13. Could you have too much moderation?

This session was produced for Jason Buckley's weekly online philosophy classes. Sign up to take part in them here:
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