

The Happiness of Others

by: Sam Vaknin, Ph.D. Is there any necessary connection between our actions and the happiness of others? Disregarding for a moment the murkiness of the definitions of "actions" in philosophical literature - two types of answers were hitherto provided. Sentient Beings (referred to, in this essay, as "Humans" or "persons") seem either to limit each other - or to enhance each other's actions. Mutual limitation is, for instance, evident in game theory. It deals with decision outcomes when all the rational "players" are fully aware of both the outcomes of their actions and of what they prefer these outcomes to be. They are also fully informed about the other players: they know that they are rational, too, for instance. This, of course, is a very farfetched idealization. A state of unbounded information is nowhere and never to be found. Still, in most cases, the players settle down to one of the Nash equilibria solutions. Their actions are constrained by the existence of the others. The "Hidden Hand" of Adam Smith (which, among other things, benignly and optimally regulates the market and the price mechanisms) - is also a "mutually limiting" model. Numerous single participants strive to maximize their (economic and financial) outcomes - and end up merely optimizing them. The reason lies in the existence of others within the "market". Again, they are constrained by other people's motivations, priorities and, above all, actions. All the consequentialist theories of ethics deal with mutual enhancement. This is especially true of the Utilitarian variety. Acts (whether judged individually or in conformity to a set of rules) are moral, if their outcome increases utility (also known as happiness or pleasure). They are morally obligatory if they maximize utility and no alternative course of action can do so. Other versions talk about an "increase" in utility rather than its maximization. Still, the principle is simple: for an act to be judged "moral, ethical, virtuous, or good" - it must influence others in a way which will "enhance" and increase their happiness. The flaws in all the above answers are evident and have been explored at length in the literature. The assumptions are dubious (fully informed participants, rationality in decision making and in prioritizing the outcomes, etc.). All the answers are instrumental and quantitative: they strive to offer a moral measuring rod. An "increase" entails the measurement of two states: before and after the act. Moreover, it demands full knowledge of the world and a type of knowledge so intimate, so private - that it is not even sure that the players themselves have conscious access to it. Who goes around equipped with an exhaustive list of his priorities and another list of all the possible outcomes of all the acts that he may commit? But there is another, basic flaw: these answers are descriptive, observational, phenomenological in the restrictive sense of these words. The motives, the drives, the urges, the whole psychological landscape behind the act are deemed irrelevant. The only thing relevant is the increase in utility/happiness. If the latter is achieved - the former might as well not have existed. A computer, which increases happiness is morally equivalent to a person who achieves a quantitatively similar effect. Even worse: two persons acting out of different motives (one malicious and one benevolent) will be judged to be morally equivalent if their acts were to increase happiness similarly. But, in life, an increase in utility or happiness or pleasure is **CONDITIONED** upon, is the **RESULT** of the motives behind the acts that led to it. Put differently: the utility functions of two acts depend decisively on the motivation, drive, or urge behind them. The process, which leads to the act is an inseparable part of the act and of its outcomes, including the outcomes in terms of the subsequent increase in utility or happiness. We can safely distinguish the "utility contaminated" act from the "utility pure (or ideal)" act. If a person does something which is supposed to increase the overall utility - but does so in order to increase his own utility more than the expected average utility increase - the resulting increase will be lower. The maximum utility increase is achieved overall when the actor forgoes all increase in his personal utility. It seems that there is a constant of utility increase and a conservation law pertaining to it. So that a disproportionate increase in one's personal utility translates into a decrease in the overall average utility. It is not a zero sum game because of the infiniteness of the potential increase - but the rules of distribution of the utility added after the act, seem to dictate an averaging of the increase in order to maximize the result. The same pitfalls await these observations as did the previous ones. The players must be in the possession of full information at least regarding the motivation of the other players. "Why is he doing this?" and "why did he do what he did?" are not questions confined to the criminal courts. We all want to understand the "why's" of actions long before we engage in utilitarian calculations of increased utility. This also seems to be the source of many an emotional reaction concerning human actions. We are envious because we think that the utility increase was unevenly divided (when adjusted for efforts invested and for the prevailing cultural mores). We suspect outcomes that are "too good to be true". Actually, this very sentence proves my point: that even if something produces an increase in overall happiness it will be considered morally dubious if the motivation behind it remains unclear or seems to be irrational or culturally deviant. Two types of information are, therefore, always needed: one (discussed above) concerns the motives of the main protagonists, the act-ors. The second type relates to the world. Full knowledge about the world is also a necessity: the causal chains (actions lead to outcomes), what increases the overall utility or happiness and for whom, etc. To assume that all the participants in an interaction possess this tremendous amount of information is an idealization (used also in modern theories of economy), should be regarded as such and not be confused with reality in which people approximate, estimate, extrapolate and evaluate based on a much more limited knowledge. Two examples come to mind: Aristotle described the "Great Soul". It is a virtuous agent (actor, player) that judges himself to be possessed of a great soul (in a self-referential evaluative disposition). He has the right measure of his worth and he courts the appreciation of his peers (but not of his inferiors) which he believes that he deserves by virtue of being virtuous. He has a dignity of demeanour, which is also very self-conscious. He is, in short, magnanimous (for instance, he forgives his enemies their offences). He seems to be the classical case of a happiness-increasing agent - but he is not. And the reason that he fails in qualifying as such is that his motives are suspect. Does he refrain from assaulting his enemies because of charity and generosity of spirit - or because it is likely to dent his pomposity? It is sufficient that a **POSSIBLE** different motive exist - to ruin the utilitarian outcome. Adam Smith, on the other hand, adopted the spectator theory of his teacher Francis Hutcheson. The morally good is a euphemism. It is really the name provided to the pleasure, which a spectator derives from seeing a virtue in action. Smith added

that the reason for this emotion is the similarity between the virtue observed in the agent and the virtue possessed by the observer. It is of a moral nature because of the object involved: the agent tries to consciously conform to standards of behaviour which will not harm the innocent, while, simultaneously benefiting himself, his family and his friends. This, in turn, will benefit society as a whole. Such a person is likely to be grateful to his benefactors and sustain the chain of virtue by reciprocating. The chain of good will, thus, endlessly multiply. Even here, we see that the question of motive and psychology is of utmost importance. WHY is the agent doing what he is doing? Does he really conform to society's standards INTERNALLY? Is he GRATEFUL to his benefactors? Does he WISH to benefit his friends? These are all questions answerable only in the realm of the mind. Really, they are not answerable at all.

About the Author

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