

PERSON-AFFECTING UTILITARIANISM AND POPULATION POLICY;
OR, SISSY JUPE'S THEORY OF SOCIAL CHOICE

"You don't know," said Sissy, half crying, "what a stupid girl I am. All through school hours I make mistakes. Mr. and Mrs. M'Choakumchild call me up, over and over again, regularly to make mistakes. I can't help them. They seem to come naturally.... [T]oday, for instance, Mr. M'Choakumchild was explaining to us about Natural Prosperity.... And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and an't you in a thriving state?"

"What did you say?" asked Louisa.

"Miss Louisa, I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all," said Sissy, wiping her eyes.

"That was a great mistake of yours," observed Louisa.

"Yes Miss Louisa, I know it was now. Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said he would try me again. And he said, This schoolroom is an immense town, and there are a million of inhabitants, and only five and twenty are starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your remark on that proportion? And my remark was—for I couldn't think of a better one—that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong too."

"Of course it was."

Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said he would try me once more... And I find (Mr. M'Choakumchild said) that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage? And I said Miss;" here Sissy fairly sobbed as confessing with extreme contrition to her greatest error; "I said it was nothing."

"Nothing, Sissy?"

"Nothing, Miss—to the relations and friends of the people who were killed. I shall never learn!"

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

The great insight of utilitarian ethical theories, the feature that makes them seem “so self-evidently correct” to so many of their supporters ([26], p. 84) is surely their insistence that morality is intimately associated with human welfare. As most non-utilitarian theorists would acknowledge, any plausible ethical theory must at least take into account as morally significant the influence of choices and actions on well-being ([23], p. 30). Sissy Jupe, however, cannot accept the classical utilitarian assumption that the misery of the few can be rendered less unfortunate by the prosperity of the many. This paper develops a utilitarian account of choice that explains why she is right. The theory presented also has important implications for population theory, and concerning the moral status of contingent future persons.

I. BRINGING HAPPINESS VS. RELIEVING SUFFERING

Classical utilitarians tell us that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness.” Some add that “By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” [15]. So far so good: Most utilitarians take this principle to pick out as clear and unambiguous a moral theory as one could want. But as it stands, the utilitarian directive is seriously ambiguous, for it tells us nothing about the relationship between pleasures and pains, or about how we are to reconcile the joint commands to ‘promote happiness’ and also to ‘inhibit the reverse of happiness.’ A Benthamic Calculus is no help in this regard, not simply because of its explicit hedonism (which, in any case, is rejected by many contemporary utilitarians), but because Bentham, like Mill and most contemporary utilitarians, fails to distinguish the positive injunction to “promote happiness” from the correlative negative injunction to “prevent unhappiness,” and fails to examine the ways in which the two may conflict. Contemporary economic theories of utility are worse than useless in this regard, for they render it impossible to distinguish the two injunctions from one another ([30], pp. 274-5).

There are two important, and seldom noticed differences between these twin utilitarian commands. First, the positive utilitarian imperative to “maximize happiness” is insatiable, while the negative utilitarian command to “minimize misery” is satiable: no matter how much happiness we have, the positive principle tells us that more would always be better. But the negative principle ceases to generate any obligations once a determinate but demanding goal has been reached: if misery could be eliminated, no further obligation would be implied by the negative principle, even if it were possible to provide people (or non-human ‘persons’) with additional bliss. Second, the injunction to minimize misery is a *person-affecting* injunction: it implies an obligation to respond to the needs of people who already exist, but imposes no obligation to bring people in the world so that their miseries might be relieved. The injunction to maximize happiness, as commonly explained by utilitarians, does not restrict its scope to improving the lives of people who already exist, but goes further to recommend that we should bring