Chapter 5
Decisions for others

In ch. 4, I argued that the Other perspective was the simplest because it did not involve the emotions and goals associated with deciding. The Other perspective lets us separate the decision process from its consequences. The present chapter concerns the jump from Other decisions to Other-other decisions.

First, a possible problem: Some objections to utilitarianism concern the presumptuousness of making decisions on behalf of other people. What gives us the right to reduce the utility of one person in order to increase the utility of someone else by what we think is a greater amount, as we do when we levy taxes, promulgate government regulations, or punish criminals? We could, after all, be wrong. Perhaps we should let people make their own decisions.

Note that this kind of argument depends on a questionable distinction between acts and omissions. If legislators have an opportunity to pass a law regulating air polluters for the greater good of all other air-breathers, their failure to pass the law could be seen as harmful to most air-breathers. If citizens have an opportunity to elect legislators who will enact such regulation, then their failure to do so is an option with consequences, compared to the alternative option of electing the legislators. I shall discuss the act-omission issue in ch. 7.

The difficulty of knowing the utilities of others is not peculiar to the case in which interpersonal comparison must be made. It is present even when we must make decisions for a single other person. Partly because of this difficulty, we have developed various rules for cases in which people make decisions for others. Trustees who make investments for others, for example, must make conservative investments, regardless of their opinion about their clients’ desires.

Yet, in the case of Other decisions, our uncertainty about the utilities of the Other need not inhibit us from action, just as uncertainty in general need not inhibit us. If action has the highest expected utility, we should act. To “not decide” is simply to decide in favor of the default. We must do the best we can in the face of uncertainty. The same argument can be made in the case of Other-other decisions, once the special problems of this kind of decision are overcome. The problem of presumptuousness is not an excuse to avoid thinking about decisions made for others.

All this is not to deny that, in certain situations, the prescriptively best option is always not to act on behalf of others. But such rules must be justified in terms of our inability to recognize situations in which acts are
beneficial, with sufficient reliability to act on our judgment.

5.1 Interpersonal comparison

An essential and controversial feature of utilitarianism is the making of tradeoffs among people, reducing the utility of some to provide greater utility to others. The crucial concept in justification is contained in the term "greater," which implies interpersonal comparison.

The comparison involved is of utility differences. For example, in considering a tax on the rich to help the poor, we should ask whether the decrease in utility for the rich is smaller than the increase for the poor. For making the relevant comparison, we need not consider absolute levels of utility. We are concerned only with the consequences of a particular decision, and we want to know whether the good that results from some option – compared to an alternative option – is greater than the harm.

Comparisons of utility differences are difficult, but we do make them, on the basis of the same sort of information we use to think about tradeoffs within individuals in other decisions. It is clear, for example, that the utility that my friend Bill gains from having a $30 bottle of wine with his dinner out, instead of a $15 bottle, is less than the utility gain to someone else from having her malaria cured. (The comparison is even easier if the disease is fatal without the cure.) If I could purchase a cure for $15 by making Bill forgo the more expensive wine, other things being equal, I ought to do it. Other comparisons are more difficult, but the difficulty of making them is only a matter of degree.

The degree of difficulty may well have prescriptive implications, but objections to utilitarianism (or any view) at the level of practical application have no force at the normative level.\footnote{Moreover, such objections are often based on a limited set of imagined examples. Hardin (1988), for example, doubts that calculations of utility can be made, but he seems to ignore examples in which such calculation are made, as in medical decision analysis.} We are asking how decisions should ultimately be justified. An answer to this question may well appeal to a standard that is difficult to apply. People can argue about the application of the standard without questioning the standard itself.

5.1.1 How we make interpersonal comparisons

The assertion that we make interpersonal comparisons is a glib reply to critics who say that interpersonal comparison is meaningless. Such critics assert that comparing utilities across people is like comparing the saltiness of two colors. Of course we could do it, and we might even agree about it,