Value Debate Occasional #2
The Two Faces of Utilitarianism
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This text is one of a series of essays on various philosophical topics relating to academic debate at the high school level — primarily Lincoln-Douglas debate, but also the values argumentation that has become part of policy debate. Students are encouraged to use these essays as a starting point for your own deeper analysis.

Imagine this: It is a dark winter's night. You are in a sleigh with a number of other people, fleeing at high speed along a dangerous and icy path toward shelter. Your horses are nearly exhausted, but they are straining to carry you home, because you are being pursued by a pack of wolves.

The horses will never make it. Soon the ravenous wolves will overtake the sleigh and kill the horses. Then the pack will descend on you and your companions. You certainly can't flee them on foot.

There is one chance to escape. You can throw one of your party over the side. The pack of wolves will converge on the helpless victim, but that will buy enough time to allow everyone else to escape.

Should you do it?

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Utilitarianism has a long and complicated history. One can probably see its roots in the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who believed that the avoidance of suffering was the highest good. The modern version originates with the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, whose *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) begins with the claim that pleasure and pain dominate all of human life. Bentham's principle of **utility**, or the "greatest happiness principle," claimed that the best course was the one which maximized human happiness.

It was Bentham's student (and godson), John Stuart Mill, who expanded on this work and coined the term **utilitarianism**, which is commonly summarized as "the greatest good for the greatest number." People are enjoined to act in a way that will bring the greatest possible amount of good into the world. Acts are to be judged as moral — or not — according to their results, rather than by their intentions. Thus, utilitarianism falls squarely within that branch of ethics known as **consequentialism**.

This makes utilitarianism a common source for argument in value debate. It is common, for instance, in Lincoln-Douglas rounds to have both sides support values on that basis that pursuing those specific values will maximize human well-being in the long run.

So far, that sounds simple enough, right? I mean, aside from the challenge of determining what "good" is, and how it can be measured, so we can be sure to maximize it. The whole idea of utilitarianism was a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution, and it seemed like a good idea to put morality on a scientific, calculated basis.

Well, as it turns out, utilitarianism fractured into a variety of competing theories. In this essay, we're going to highlight two, usually called **act utilitarianism** and **rule utilitarianism**.

Act utilitarianism says that we need to assess the consequences of each specific possible action each time it is performed, and calculate the potential good.

Rule utilitarianism says, instead, to look at the consequences that would result from everyone following a particular rule; if, overall, more good comes from following the rule than not, then everyone should follow the rule, even if in specific instances bad stuff happens.

So look back on our example of the wolf pack pursuing the sleigh through the snow. Rule utilitarians could well decide that the act of sacrificing an innocent person is a horrible thing to do, regardless of the circumstances, and thus condemn any decision to throw someone out of the sleigh. Act utilitarians would probably argue, however, that if nobody is sacrificed, then everyone will be killed by the wolves; it is better that one person die, if everyone else could thereby be saved.

Even today, disputes rage between the two camps. Rule utilitarians would say that, by allowing each act to be evaluated separately, we risk having important individual rights thrown away for the sake of expediency. Also, they argue, in many cases there is not sufficient time to calculate the likely results of all particular courses that could be undertaken. Therefore the better method is to adopt rules to guide behavior ahead of time, and to stick to those rules even when the outcomes look bleak. They say that act utilitarians are too willing to go for an expedient course that ultimately puts everyone at risk of being, well, thrown to the wolves.

In response, act utilitarians say that clinging to rules even when it appears those rules lead to disaster gives too much weight to the rules themselves: making rules, not safeguarding human happiness, becomes the focus of our morality. If rules get in the way of the greater good, then the rules must give way. Act utilitarians suggest that rule utilitarians are too willing to surrender the greater good that should be the centerpiece of utilitarianism.

What does this all mean for debate? Well, in a lot of Lincoln-Douglas rounds, one side or the other ends up supporting utilitarianism as a standard for measuring the resolution. But in most cases, the debater does not make a distinction as to the sort of utilitarianism he is advocating. It's a useful tool for the opponent, then, to be able to show that — for example — the Affirmative is really supporting act utilitarianism, and then argue that act utilitarianism is flawed (by applying the criticisms raised by rule utilitarians).

In policy debate, utilitarianism is a hidden assumption of most rounds. Indeed, the problem-solution-disadvantage analysis that pervades policy debate is premised on a form of utilitarian calculation. Affirmatives tend to believe that, as long as their plan can provide a net

improvement in human life, then it must be enacted; Negatives often fall into the rule utilitarian role, saying that the plan or resolution will thereby trample critical principles. In other rounds, those stances are reversed, with Affirmatives saying that the status quo is violating rights in its current approach to achieving some social, economic, or political good, and the Negative saying that the greater good should dominate in all circumstances.

Of course, explicitly recognizing the utilitarian underpinnings of your opponents' arguments opens up the option of a kritik against whatever variety of utilitarianism the other side favors. But even if you shy away from arguing kritiks, recognizing the underlying philosophy of the opposition can guide your strategy. If your Affirmative opponents are taking the more common act utilitarianism stance, then you can develop disadvantage arguments that highlight how the plan will lead to specific acts that seem unjust or immoral.