

'Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few ... or the needs of the one' (Spock and Captain Kirk). Discuss

Logic cannot show that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few without an assumption being made that is entirely illogical. To address this question, it must first be established whether the proposition at hand may be arrived at purely through logic, that is, entirely *a priori*. Once it has been shown that it may not be validly deduced, it becomes necessary to examine the assumptions that any such argument must rest upon, in order that one may reason from empirical observations to the conclusion that the needs of the many indeed outweigh the needs of the few. At this juncture it will become evident that the argument under discussion presupposes that different needs are comparable, that it commits the naturalistic fallacy, and that even when it is assumed that various needs may be balanced against each other and that there is indeed value in addressing a need, it will be shown that it by no means follows that the needs of the many actually outweigh the needs of the few. This process, therefore, indicates that logic in no way dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

For there to be any debate whatsoever about the needs of the many taking precedence over the needs of the few, this statement must be a judgment of value. If 'outweigh' is taken to mean a numerical dominance, then it is self-evident that the needs of the many, who are by definition numerically greater than the few, outweigh, or are greater in number than, the needs of the few. There would thus be no discussion to be had. Rather, for the purposes of this discussion, 'outweigh' must have a different meaning. A. J. Ayer<sup>1</sup> recommends that when words used in propositions have various meanings or connotations, then a 'definition in use' of the word under question must be provided, namely, how the word is actually used. Otherwise, confusions arise, such as the use of 'is' to indicate existence and 'is' to indicate the possession of an attribute. How is 'weight' used in the English language, then? It has two primary senses – either 'weight' as in 'mass', or 'weight' as in 'carrying value', such as 'moral weight'. It is apparent that the first meaning is irrelevant to our discussion, for it would be nonsensical to suggest that certain needs have a greater mass than others. By process of elimination, then, we are left with 'weight' and hence 'outweigh' as indicative of some value. To say that 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few', thus, is to say that 'the needs of the many have a greater value than the needs of the few'.

The assertion under question is one concerning logic – it states that logic dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. When considering the meaning of the word 'logic' in this assertion, a dichotomy of meanings arises: that 'logic' dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few may either mean that it is possible to reach such a conclusion purely through reason, or that, having noted something about the empirical world, the application of logic to such observations provides our conclusion. Essentially, these two approaches represent two different paths to knowledge –

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<sup>1</sup> Ayer, Alfred Jules. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1971.

the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. To begin with the former, it is evident that no question of value, such as the assertion at hand, may be reached simply only through logic. For pure logic consists of the process of deduction, that is, revealing hidden propositions within other propositions. Deduction simply reveals predicates that are entailed within a subject but are not necessarily explicit – Kant gives the example of a triangle having interior angles of a sum of 180 degrees. This is true by the very definition of a triangle, but is a truth not obvious in considering one: it is the process of deduction that allows us to know that the interior angles do indeed have a sum of 180 degrees. It does not matter whether this is termed the synthetic *a priori*, as Kant does, or strictly analytic, as in the view of Ayer: the point is that only propositions that are true by definition may be deduced purely through logic, without any recourse to the empirical world. Can a statement of value, then, ever be true by definition? The method to examine if any statement is true by definition is to see if its contrary is self-contradictory. For example, that two and two make four is true by definition, for it would be self-contradictory to claim that two and two do not make four. This is the method that Ayer adopts in rejecting subjectivism – to say that an action is right if it is generally approved of is not true by definition, for it would not be self-contradictory to say that ‘some actions which are generally approved of are not right’<sup>2</sup>. To apply this to the assertion at hand, it is not true by definition that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, for it would not be self-contradictory to claim that the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many. It can hence be seen that it may not be known, only through logic, that the needs of the many do outweigh the needs of the few.

It has thus been established that it may not be deduced that ‘the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few’, for no matter of value may be deduced *a priori*. Therefore, the reasoning that leads to the assertion under debate must begin in the empirical world. However, it is clear that this assertion is reliant upon numerous assumptions, which may not be taken for granted. To begin with, as Bernard Williams suggests in his critique of utilitarianism in ‘*Morality*’<sup>3</sup>, to be able to say that one set of needs outweighs another requires the ability to compare different needs in some sort of common currency, for otherwise it would be like attempting to compare apples to pears. How does one compare the need for food and drink and the need for emotional security, for example? At this point, it becomes necessary to define ‘need’ in some way. It can be suggested, along the lines of Bentham, that ‘need’ represents that ‘which the fulfillment of provides a balance of pleasure over pain’<sup>4</sup>. This would therefore allow a common currency between different needs, namely the amount of pleasure provided by the fulfillment of a need. Yet it may be argued that there are different types of ‘pleasure’, from the sensations derived from food to sexual pleasure. Yet these may also be reduced further, for example simply into amounts of dopamine released by the brain when experiencing certain pleasures. It is of no concern to the debate which particular definition of ‘need’ is used, for all definitions may ultimately be reduced to activity in the brain, which could be ascertained by a MRI scan. This allows a comparison to be made between the needs of different

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<sup>2</sup> Ayer, Alfred Jules. *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Bernard. *Morality*

<sup>4</sup> *vide* Bentham, Jeremy. *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

groups. Furthermore, this is not limited to the value of 'needs' – any type of value, be it moral, aesthetic or otherwise, can be reduced in such a way to a currency of exchange, allowing the value of one thing to be balanced against another.

If one is going to assert that different needs must be weighed against each other, then it seems absurd not to take into account the size of the needs. In effect, not to do so creates a tyranny of the majority. This is best illustrated through the use of an example. Let us imagine that 51% of people voted for a particular decision to be made, which would fulfill a minor need of theirs. The 49%, however, voted for another decision, from which they stood to fulfill a very large need. It seems bizarre to favour the many very slightly, at the expense of slightly fewer people gaining very much. This does not just apply at a sociopolitical level, but also at a personal level. To take a more extreme example, let us suppose that a group of ten people wish to murder one person, and the ten, sadistically, would enjoy the murder a small amount. The proposition under question would have it that the value of the need that ten would fulfill from the murder would outweigh the value of the need of the victim that would be fulfilled by not being murdered. The former would outweigh the latter simply because the ten are greater in number than one, although the total need fulfilled, if the size of needs can be quantified, would be larger if the victim is not murdered, for the need to live is much greater than the apparent need to murder even when the latter is multiplied by ten. For the assertion under discussion to be tenable, hence, it must be modified to state that 'the larger total need outweighs the smaller total need'. It must be noted here that 'need' is interchangeable with any word that denotes a concept of value, such as 'goodness', 'pleasure' and 'beauty', for the proposition 'the pleasure of the many outweighs the pleasure of the few' would be of identical logical structure to our initial proposition. In considering the sum total of 'need', we therefore arrive at a sort of utilitarianism, except that rather than being limited to hedonism, it is simply a consequentialist theory applicable to any value: that which produces the most of some value must take precedence. The crude assertion that 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few' must hence be qualified for it to be of any sense – what is important is not the number of individual pieces of value, but the sum total of value on either side of a decision being made.

The qualifications and modifications that are necessary for the proposition at hand to be even potentially tenable have hence been established: firstly, it is possible to reduce questions of value to the changes in brain chemistry that result when we experience the value; and secondly, that to avoid a tyranny of the majority, it is better to give weight to the greater in sum value rather than the greater in the simple number of stakeholders. Consequently, our discussion has arrived at a proposition along the lines of 'the greater total need outweighs the lesser sum need'. However, this proposition is ultimately flawed, in that a logical step is missing, and that this step may only be filled by committing the naturalistic fallacy. It was discussed above that 'outweigh' indicates a judgment of value, showing that one side of a dichotomy is greater in value than another: the greater aggregate need's fulfillment has more value than the lesser aggregate need's fulfillment. But to say that the fulfillment of some needs has more value than the fulfillment of others is to postulate that the

fulfillment of needs has value in itself, for how else could one have more value than the other? Hence our proposition can be restated in a syllogism thus:

- Premise 1:        There exist needs.  
Premise 2:        The fulfillment of needs has value.  
Conclusion:       We should therefore act in such a way that fulfills  
the most possible needs.

While this argument is logically valid, it is by no means sound, for the second premise seems entirely arbitrary – why should the fulfillment of needs have value? It would be rash to say that the fulfillment of needs has intrinsic value, for where would it derive its intrinsic value from? Appeals to God or other deontological theories of ethics open up a veritable Pandora's Box of problems, which are far too great both in number and scope to be discussed suitably here. Can the fulfillment of need have value in a teleological sense, in that it produces desirable consequences? Potential effects of needs being fulfilled may be happiness, or perhaps satisfaction, or comfort – we return to our original idea that if the needs outweigh the needs of the few, this must be known *a posteriori*, perhaps observing that this produces the most happiness. But why are effects such as happiness themselves desirable? To take a consequentialist view of the fulfillment of need merely delays the problem of finding value to the effects of an action, rather than the action itself. It can thus be seen that the proposition 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few' is either based on groundless premises, or must accept another premise, along the lines of 'pleasure has value'. Yet this is evidently the naturalistic fallacy, as outlined by G. E. Moore in '*Principia Ethica*': just because something is natural, such as pleasure, does not mean it is good, or has any other value. It has conclusively been demonstrated, in following, that even if the initial proposition is modified to read 'greater total needs' as opposed to 'needs of the many', the proposition contains a premise that is groundless, and that any attempt to show how this premise may be valid involves a naturalistic fallacy.

Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, then? Taking the above into consideration, it is apparent that such an affirmation cannot be made with authority. There are two approaches to gaining knowledge of such a kind through 'logic', either the *a priori* or the *a posteriori*. The former may not provide assertions that are not already known, for it deals with truths that are true by definition. Applying Ayer's principle of self-contradiction, it can be seen that the statement at hand is patently not true by definition. Our statement may thus only be the conclusion of *a posteriori* observations formulated logically, such as the syllogism outlined above. For our statement's truth to be possible, it is necessary to find a currency of exchange between various needs, or even various values: a reduction of emotions to brain chemistry provides such a currency. Furthermore, our statement is absurd if limited to numerical dominance, that is, in only comparing the number of needs on either side of a choice. Yet even if such qualifications are allowed, our statement assumes that the fulfillment of need has value. This forces the statement into a fork – either it is based upon a groundless premise, 'the fulfillment of need has value', or, it must commit the naturalistic fallacy in asserting that 'the fulfillment of need has value because it creates happiness, or some other desirable emotion'. By this process of reasoning, it may

be concluded that logic in no way dictates that 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few'.

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