

# Utilitarianism, Consent and the Self-Other Asymmetry

## Abstract

Consider the following case:

**Maternal Sacrifice:** A child's birthday is coming up. The mother has the option of working overtime in order to buy the child a gift. Doing so would significantly decrease the utility of the mother, a decrease greater than the utility the child would receive from the gift. No one else's utility would be affected.

According to *standard (act) Utilitarianism*, an act is morally permissible *iff* it maximizes total utility. Thus, according to standard Utilitarianism, this maternal sacrifice is impermissible. This strikes many as the wrong verdict.

Call the thought that it's that it's permissible to ignore one's own utility when making decisions, but not the utility of others, the *self-other asymmetry*. In order to accommodate the self-other asymmetry, Sider (1993) and Portmore (2008) have suggested replacing the simple act assessment algorithm of standard Utilitarianism with a more complicated algorithm, yielding a theory they call *Self-Other Utilitarianism*. But although Self-Other Utilitarianism yields the desired result in the Maternal Sacrifice case, it yields odd results in other cases. One oddity arises in cases where agents can choose how much to sacrifice, such as:

**Two Maternal Sacrifices:** A child's birthday is coming up. The mother has the option of working overtime for a week in order to buy the child a gift, or for two weeks in order to buy the child an even better gift. Both options would significantly decrease the utility of the mother — in both cases, the decrease would be greater than the utility the child would receive from the gift. No one else's utility would be affected.

In this case it seems permissible for the mother to make either of these sacrifices. But according to Self-Other Utilitarianism it's impermissible for the mother to work only one week of overtime: she must either work no overtime, or work overtime for the full two weeks.

Another oddity arises in cases in which the sacrifice would be shared by other willing agents, such as the following:

**Parental Sacrifice:** A child's birthday is coming up. The mother has the option of working overtime in order to buy the child a gift. Doing so would significantly decrease the utility of both the mother and the father — the decrease for each of them would be greater than the utility the child would receive from the gift. But the father is willing to make the sacrifice, and no one else's utility would be affected.

Again, it seems permissible for the mother to work overtime. But according to Self-Other Utilitarianism, doing so turns out to be impermissible.

I argue that these problems arise for two reasons. First, I argue that Self-Other Utilitarianism act assessment algorithm doesn't do a good job of capturing the self-other asymmetry. If we want to modify Utilitarianism in order to capture the self-other asymmetry, we should adopt a different kind of algorithm. Second, I'll argue that we should reject the self-other asymmetry. The morally important distinction is not whether the sacrifice is made by oneself or by others, it's whether the sacrifice is made by subjects who *consent* to it.

In this paper, I'll propose an alternative way of modifying the act assessment algorithm of standard Utilitarianism in order to accommodate these kinds of cases. I'll begin by introducing a way of formally modeling consent, using tools from denotic logic. Then I'll use this model to construct an act assessment algorithm that takes consent into account. The resulting proposal, *Consent-Sensitive Utilitarianism*, yields the desired results in all three of the three cases described above. And it yields a number of other benefits as well: it avoids Self-Other Utilitarianism's awkward conflict between what you're permitted to do and what others are permitted to let you do, and it mitigates standard Utilitarianism's counterintuitive prescriptions in cases of unwilling utility increases.

## References

- Portmore, D. W. (2008). Dual-ranking act-consequentialism. *Philosophical Studies*, 138(3), 409–427.
- Sider, T. (1993). Asymmetry and self-sacrifice. *Philosophical Studies*, 70(2), 117–132.