

# *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism Can Be Worse for All Affected*

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**ABSTRACT.** According to *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism*, prospect  $X$  is at least as good as prospect  $Y$  if and only if the expected average well-being is at least as great in  $X$  as in  $Y$ . Relative to the *ex-ante* approach of taking the average of peoples' expectations, this *ex-post* approach has the advantage of not needing well-defined expectations of well-being for contingent people — people who exist in some but not all states of nature. Nevertheless, we show that *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism* can oppose the interests of all affected people. Moreover, we show this without relying on any comparisons of expectations of well-being for contingent people.

Average utilitarianism is the view that the value of a final outcome is equal to the average well-being in that outcome.<sup>1</sup> This view about how to evaluate final outcomes can be extended in several ways to also evaluate prospects — that is, probability distributions over possible final outcomes. The most straightforward way to do so is to let the value of a prospect be equal to its expected value. This view can be called *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism*:<sup>2</sup>

*Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism* Prospect  $X$  is at least as good as prospect  $Y$  if and only if the expected average well-being is at least as great in  $X$  as in  $Y$ .

A rival view can be called *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism*:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sidgwick (1907, p. 415) distinguished average and total utilitarianism, although he (1907, pp. 415–416) favoured the latter. The name 'average utilitarianism' comes from Rawls 1971, p. 599.

<sup>2</sup> Harsanyi 1985, p. 44; 1986, p. 57. Nevertheless, in his correspondence with Ng (1983, p. 168), Harsanyi seems to defend *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism*. This conflicts with Harsanyi's (1955, p. 313) commitment to the expectation taking for the social ranking.

<sup>3</sup> Ng 1983, p. 168.

*Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism* Let a possible person's *conditional-on-existence expectation* be their expected well-being conditional on them existing. A prospect  $x$  is at least as good as prospect  $y$  if and only if the average conditional-on-existence expectation for possible people in  $x$  is at least as great as the average conditional-on-existence expectation for possible people in  $y$ .

An advantage of *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism* over *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism* is that the former maximizes an expectation, which means it satisfies expected utility theory for general betterness.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we show that *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism* can oppose the interests of all affected people. Moreover, we can show this without assuming any well-defined expectations of well-being for contingent people.

Two standard objections to *Ex-Post Average Utilitarianism* concern the addition of lives of negative well-being. Like every form of average utilitarianism, the *ex-post* variant is vulnerable to the Sadistic Conclusion:<sup>5</sup>

*The Sadistic Conclusion* When adding people without affecting the original peoples' well-being, it sometimes can be better to add

<sup>4</sup> *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism* violates expected utility theory. For instance, *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism* even violates statewise dominance in non-sequential choices. Consider the following case where there are two possible states of nature  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  with an equal probability.

	Prospect A		Prospect B	
	$S_1$	$S_2$	$S_1$	$S_2$
	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2
Ann	5	$\Omega$	6	2
Bob	5	1	$\Omega$	2

In  $S_1$ , the average well-being is 5 in  $A$  and 6 in  $B$ , and, in  $S_2$ , the average well-being is 1 in  $A$  and 2 in  $B$ . So  $B$  is better than  $A$  in every state of nature according to average utilitarianism. But, according to *Ex-Ante Average Utilitarianism* the value of  $A$  is 4 and the value of  $B$  is 3; so  $A$  is better than  $B$ . (This counter-example also works against other *ex ante* approaches that would aggregate peoples' conditional-on-existence expectations while ignoring probabilities of their existence — such as an approach that values each prospect according to the minimum conditional-on-existence expectation among possible people.)

<sup>5</sup> Arrhenius and Bykvist 1995, p. 85 and Arrhenius 2000, p. 251. Parfit (1984, p. 406) also puts forward an objection based on the addition of lives with negative well-being in his two-hells case.

a number of people with negative well-being, rather than a number of people with positive well-being.

A potential response to these objections is that the average utilitarian can reject the meaningfulness of the concept of negative well-being. Negative well-being levels are plausibly those levels that are less good than the neutral well-being level.<sup>6</sup> But how are we to understand the neutral well-being level? One compelling idea is that the neutral well-being level is the level that is equal to the well-being level of non-existence. Yet it is dubious whether non-existing people would have any well-being at all.<sup>7</sup> And, crucially, *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarians are not committed to any comparisons of well-being between existence and non-existence.<sup>8</sup> So they may consistently deny the underlying assumption of the existence of negative well-being in these objections.

Another standard objection to average utilitarianism is the Egyptology objection.<sup>9</sup> It is the objection that, given average utilitarianism, the evaluation of acts today may depend on how well off people were in ancient Egypt. If the ancient Egyptians were very well off, then the addition of a person with a certain level of well-being could be worse than not adding them (because they would lower the average) even though, if the ancient Egyptians were, instead, less well off, the addition of the person would be better (because they would raise the average). A potential response to this objection is that the average utilitarian could maintain that whether the well-being of the ancient Egyptians were high or low is morally relevant, so sensitivity to such facts is not a drawback.

A final standard objection to average utilitarianism, is the utility monster.<sup>10</sup> The objection is that, even supposing that everyone in history would live very good lives, it would be better according to average utilitarianism if there had only been a single person that is just slightly happier. A weakness of this objection, in a dialectic between total and average utilitarianism, is that much the same objection also applies to total utilitarianism (if the single person is sufficiently happy to have more total well-being).

<sup>6</sup> Chisholm and Sosa 1966, pp. 247–248.

<sup>7</sup> Williams 1973, p. 87, Parfit 1984, p. 487, and Broome 1993, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> See Harsanyi in Ng 1983, pp. 168–169.

<sup>9</sup> McMahan 1981, p. 115 and Parfit 1984, p. 420.

<sup>10</sup> Nozick 1974, p. 41.

In this paper, we present a new objection to *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarianism, which avoids the drawbacks of the earlier objections.<sup>11</sup> Consider the following prospects, where columns are risky states of nature, rows are people (including contingent people), and cells are outcomes which could include ordered well-being levels, represented by numbers, or non-existence, represented by  $\Omega$ :

	Prospect A		Prospect B	
	$S_1$	$S_2$	$S_1$	$S_2$
	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$
Ann	1	$\Omega$	1	$\Omega$
Bob	1	7	9	1

There are two possible states of nature  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  with an equal probability. In both prospects, Ann exists with a well-being of 1 in  $S_1$  but she does not exist at all in  $S_2$ . Bob, on the other hand, exists in all states of nature in both prospects. In A, Bob has a well-being of 1 in  $S_1$  and a well-being of 7 in  $S_2$ . In B, Bob has a well-being of 9 in  $S_1$  and a well-being of 1 in  $S_2$ .

Part of the motivation for average utilitarianism is that it does not rely on comparisons of well-being between existence and non-existence. Indeed it is unclear whether a prospect could be better-for a person who would exist only in some possible outcomes and would not exist in others. We will say that a person is *affected* in a comparison between two prospects  $X$  and  $Y$  if and only if there is a state of nature in which that person's outcome (which could be either existence with a well-being level or non-existence) is different in  $X$  than in  $Y$ ; otherwise, the person is *unaffected* in that comparison. Given this distinction, we can rely on a weakened form of *ex-ante*-Pareto dominance that only applies to people who are affected in a comparison and who are necessary in a comparison (that is, people who exist in all possible states):<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Or, for a reader persuaded by these prior objections to Average Utilitarianism, our new example adds to their strength.

<sup>12</sup> It may be helpful to compare our approach to that of Thomas 2022, pp. 280–282. Thomas shows that Anteriority, combined with some further assumptions, rules out average utilitarianism. Here, Anteriority is the following principle (McCarthy, 2017, p. 226):

*Anteriority* If every potential person faces the same prospect in  $X$  as in  $Y$ , then  $X$  and  $Y$  are equally good.

(We have added 'potential' to highlight that the involved people need not exist.) An advantage of relying on Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto rather than

*Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto* If (i) all contingent people are unaffected in a comparison between prospects  $X$  and  $Y$  and (ii), for each affected person,  $X$  stochastically dominates  $Y$ , then  $X$  is better than  $Y$ .

Notice that Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto does not invoke expectation-taking even for necessary people: It merely uses stochastic dominance.

Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto follows naturally from a view that ethics should primarily be concerned with how we can affect people:<sup>13</sup>

*The Person-Affecting Restriction* The part of morality concerned with individual well-being should be explained entirely in terms of what would be good or bad for those people whom our acts affect.

The Person-Affecting Restriction tells us to ignore all unaffected persons when we evaluate prospects. And then, considering everyone who is affected in a choice between two prospects  $X$  and  $Y$ , if  $X$  stochastically dominates  $Y$  for them, then from Pareto and stochastic dominance for well-being, it follows that  $X$  is better than  $Y$ . Hence we have derived Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto.

Returning to our example, Ann is unaffected by a choice between  $A$  and  $B$ . But, for Bob,  $B$  stochastically dominates  $A$ . Hence, for the only affected person (in either existence or well-being),  $B$  is clearly better than  $A$ . So, according to Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto,  $B$  would be better than  $A$ . And yet, *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarianism entails that  $A$  is better than  $B$ , because the expected average well-being is 4 in  $A$  but just 3 in  $B$ .<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in the comparison of  $A$  and  $B$ , *Ex-Post*

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Anteriority is that the former (unlike the latter) does not assume that we are indifferent between prospects which are the same except that some contingent person (who exists with the same well-being and probability) exists in different states of nature. As Blackorby et al. (1998, p. 10) point out, contingent people do not have well-defined expectations, because they do not have a well-being level in all potential final outcomes. So Anteriority cannot be supported by the claim that each person has the same expectation in the prospects. Given a variant of our example that replaces the 9 with a 7, Anteriority rules out *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarianism without further assumptions.

<sup>13</sup> Parfit 1984, p. 394.

<sup>14</sup> Note, moreover, that *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarianism would still favour  $A$  even if Ann's well-being in  $S_1$  of  $B$  were 2.

Average Utilitarianism opposes the interests of all affected people.<sup>15</sup>

This counter-example to *Ex-Post* Average Utilitarianism avoids the drawbacks of the earlier objections. It does not rely on negative well-being. Unlike the unaffected ancient Egyptians in the Egyptology objection who could be relevantly better or worse off, this counter-example does not rely on any morally relevant change to the unaffected Ann — as her prospect is exactly the same in both prospects. Finally, this counter-example does not work against total utilitarianism or its additively-separable generalizations.

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<sup>15</sup> By the same reasoning as in our example, Necessity-Restricted All-Affected Stochastic Pareto is also incompatible with *ex-post* extensions to social risk of other non-separable population axiologies defined elsewhere in the literature, such as variable-value utilitarianism (Hurka 1983, Ng 1989, pp. 244–250, formalized as ‘number-dampened utilitarianism’ by Blackorby et al. 2005, pp. 144–147); rank-discounted utilitarianism (Asheim and Zuber, 2014, pp. 632); variable-population extensions of equally-distributed-equivalent egalitarianism (Fleurbaey 2010, pp. 657–658 for fixed-population cases; Spears and Zuber forthcoming); and variable-population expected maximin, which would value a prospect according to the expectation across states of the minimum well-being among people alive in that state.

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