

Question: **The problem for preference utilitarianism is how to count and compare preferences. Explain and assess how successful preference utilitarianism is as a moral theory.**

1. **Definition:**

- a) **Good = what we all prefer** irrespective of what that is and whether it promotes pleasure
  - in this form of utilitarianism ‘good’ = that which is subjectively desired, the satisfaction of such desires being the goal of all moral actions
- b) only way to know which outcome is better overall is to **count how many desires are satisfied** = the ultimate standard.

2. **Problems:**

- a) **tyranny of the majority:**
  - (i) need some method of determining how many people have a preference for something
    - if we go with the majority we maximize preference satisfaction by ignoring the preferences of the minority
  - (ii) This may not be quite so bad, if we could ensure that we make some people better off and nobody worse off
    - but this is not usually the case – more often we make some people better off, while others are worse off
- b) problem of **justice** and **special responsibilities:**
  - (i) action may maximize the amount of good, but be unjust in the way it distributes it
    - = distributive justice: how we are to lay off the disadvantage to some against the advantage to others?
  - (ii) Other special responsibilities:
    - e.g. to friends/family – re. Hare’s example of the survivors of an air crash

### 3. **Hare's solution:**

#### a) **Strength of preference:**

– not just counting how many people want X, but measuring the strength of their competing preferences

#### b) **Interpersonal problem** into an **intrapersonal problem:**

(i) Put ourselves imaginatively in someone else's position and experiencing for ourselves how much we would or would not want for the same thing to happen to us

(ii) In this way transform an interpersonal problem (a problem between different people) into an intrapersonal one (a problem within oneself)

(iii) Then settle it in the same way we settle all our problems involving our conflicting preferences  
i.e. by satisfying the strongest

### 4. **Problems:**

a) still allows **the majority's weak, trivial preferences to outweigh the strong preferences, the needs, of the few**

#### b) **immoral preferences:**

(i) If the strength of preferences = the sole criterion, then we might find the strong immoral preferences of, say, the paedophile, outweigh those of his victim

(ii) To avoid this we would need a supplementary criterion of value in addition to preferences to exclude immoral preferences  
– but then we get behind utilitarianism as the standard of value

#### c) **what preferences to include:**

(i) only the preferences of those directly affected?

(ii) those indirectly affected?

(iii) 'external preferences' for things other than experiences of the preferrer?

- d) **needs** – whether they should count for more than mere preferences
- (i) utilitarianism has no special place for needs and the priority of meeting them first before ordinary preferences
  - (ii) We can have strong preferences for things that are not fundamental to survival or to alleviate suffering, but which outweigh our preferences for things that are
- e) Some intense desires for things = **effect of being in the state that this thing puts us in** e.g. the heroin addict
- f) **Different distinctions involved:**

not just 1. what we *want* – preferences;

but 2. what we *think* we want;

3. what we would want if we knew all the *facts*;

4. what is in our best *interests*;

and 5. what we *need*.

-- to take these distinctions into account = involves a radical departure from narrowly conceived preference utilitarianism

= **preference management**

-- 'Government House Utilitarianism' (Williams)

5. Preference utilitarianism leaves untouched much of what we normally regard as morality i.e. **supererogatory actions**

a) **Distinction:**

(i) ordinary or obligatory level

e.g. should not steal or kill others

(ii) supererogatory – not morally required, but makes things better

e.g. risk your life to save another

b) **Supererogatory:**

- (i) If supererogatory actions = merely the maximization of the preferences of all, then preference utilitarian **cannot make a distinction between what is morally required of us and what is a supererogatory action**

Ultimately = the same

i.e. both merely aim to maximize preference satisfaction

- (ii) Therefore whenever we see the possibility of maximizing preference satisfaction we are **obligated** to so act and this may involve what we would normally regard as supererogatory actions

- (iii) **marginal utility:**

e.g. Peter Singer

-- morality is driven by marginal utility: only when the marginal utility of the donator is equal to the marginal utility of the recipient do we maximize utility or preference satisfaction

- (iv) Therefore, preference utilitarianism **appears to be demanding too much**

i.e. it has made supererogatory actions into our everyday moral obligations

- (v) Singer – **only seems impossible**, when in fact it is just *difficult*