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Giving Priority to the Worse Off? Generalized Utilitarianism for Interval-Scale Measurable Well-Being

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Abstract

Generalized Utilitarianism is one of the central approaches to social evaluation. It allows to give priority to worse off individuals. The purpose of the paper is to identify and solve open issues regarding Generalized Utilitarianism. First, it clarifies informational requirements. Contrary to discussions in the literature, Generalized Utilitarian Orderings are well-defined if well-being is interval-scale measurable. There are promising approaches to construct such a scale. Second, the paper unifies the prevalent topological approach to Generalized Utilitarianism with an intuitive algebraic approach. While the former is based on continuity, the latter employs existing and new compensation conditions. They lead to three characterizations of Generalized Utilitarian Orderings. Third, the paper examines old and new justifications of Utilitarianism. Maskin's influential characterization implicitly employs a problematic substantive invariance requirement on social evaluation. A more convincing characterization of Utilitarianism is based on a new stability condition. Except for Strong Pareto, the result does not need any substantive normative conditions.