

Utilitarian Quotes

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This page seeks to highlight and clarify important utilitarian concepts by providing illuminating quotes that are either about utilitarianism or are written from a utilitarian perspective.

Mozi Quotes

→ [Article on Mozi's life and ideas](#)

- Universal love is really the way of the sage-kings. It is what gives peace to the rulers and sustenance to the people. ¹
- The benevolent person planning on behalf of the world is like this... If the world is poor, he undertakes to enrich it; if the people are few, he undertakes to increase their number; if the multitude is in disorder, he undertakes to put them in order. When he is in these situations, there are indeed cases when his strength is insufficient, his resources exhausted, or his knowledge lacking, and then he gives up. In no case would he dare spare any effort, conceal any scheme, or withhold any benefit without pursuing them on behalf of the world. ²

- The task of the benevolent is surely to diligently seek to promote the benefit of the world and eliminate harm to the world and to take this as a model throughout the world. Does it benefit people? Then do it. Does it not benefit people? Then stop.³
- When we come to think about the several benefits in regard to their cause, how have they arisen? Have they arisen out of hate of others and injuring others? Of course we should say no. We should say they have arisen out of love of others and benefiting others. If we should classify one by one all those who love others and benefit others, should we find them to be partial or universal? Of course we should say they are universal. Now, since universal love is the cause of the major benefits in the world, therefore Mozi proclaims universal love is right. And, as has already been said, the interest of the magnanimous lies in procuring benefits for the world and eliminating its calamities. Now that we have found out the consequences of universal love to be the major benefits of the world and the consequences of partiality to be the major calamities in the world; this is the reason why Mozi said partiality is wrong and universality is right.⁴
- Thus the various lords not caring about each other, they inevitably go to war; heads of clans not caring about each other, they inevitably subvert each other; people not caring about each other, they inevitably injure each other; rulers and subjects not caring about each other, they are not generous and loyal; fathers and sons not caring about each other, they are not paternally kind and filially devoted; elder and younger brothers not caring about each other, they are not peaceful and harmonious. The people of the world all not caring about each other, the strong inevitably oppress the weak, the wealthy inevitably humiliate the poor, the noble are inevitably contemptuous of the lowly, and the cunning inevitably deceive the ignorant.⁵
- The murder of one person is called unrighteous and incurs one death penalty. Following this argument, the murder of ten persons will be ten times as unrighteous and there should be ten death penalties; the murder of a hundred persons will be a hundred times as unrighteous and there should be a hundred death penalties. All the gentlemen of the world know that they should condemn these things, calling them unrighteous. But when it comes to the great unrighteousness of attacking states, they do not know that they should condemn it. On the contrary, they applaud it, calling it righteous.⁶

Susanna Newcome Quotes

→ [Article on Susanna Newcome's life and ideas](#)

- A good being... is, one who wills and promotes the happiness of all mankind, as much as is in his power.⁷
- God wills that man always will happiness, and promote it as far as he is able.⁸

- [A person] may say, he fed, he cloath'd, but when that which should feed and cloath, is to be parted with by himself, in that thing desired to be pardon'd; but God not only wills, but in all actings with sensible beings promotes their happiness: consequently man must, if he would be acceptable to God, promote happiness whenever he has the opportunity.⁹
- [An individual should] remember, when he makes the Creatures labour, to do it with mercy; to lay no grievous burden on them, and what is not proportion'd to their strength; to use them with no unnecessary severity; but to be as compassionate towards them, as is consistent with them being serviceable to him. And further, when he takes away their lives, he is to remember to do it in that manner which is least painful to them.¹⁰

Jeremy Bentham Quotes

→ [Article on Jeremy Bentham's life and ideas](#)

- The principle of utility... approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency it appears to have to increase or lessen—i.e. to promote or oppose—the happiness of the person or group whose interest is in question.¹¹
- [T]he dictates of utility are just the dictates of the most extensive and enlightened—i.e. well-advised—benevolence.¹²
- The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.¹³
- To what shall the character of utility be ascribed, if not to that which is a source of pleasure?¹⁴
- By 'utility' is meant the property of something whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness... or... to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered. If that party is the community in general, then the happiness of the community; if it's a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.¹⁵
- [P]leasure is in itself a good; indeed it's the *only* good if we set aside immunity from pain; and pain is in itself an evil, and without exception the *only* evil; or else 'good' and 'evil' have no meaning! And this is equally true of every sort of pain, and of every sort of pleasure.¹⁶
- Create all the happiness you are able to create: remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow you to add something to the pleasure of others, or to diminish something of their pains.¹⁷
- *Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—*
Such marks in *pleasures* and in *pains* endure.
Such pleasures seek if *private* be thy end:

If it be *public*, wide let them *extend*.

Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:

If *pains* must come, let them *extend* to few.¹⁸

- The day may come when the non-human part of the animal creation will acquire the rights that never could have been withheld from them except by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the whims of a tormentor. Perhaps it will some day be recognised that the number of legs, the hairiness of the skin, or the possession of a tail, are equally insufficient reasons for abandoning to the same fate a creature that can feel? What else could be used to draw the line? Is it the faculty of reason or the possession of language? But a full-grown horse or dog is incomparably more rational and conversable than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month old. Even if that were not so, what difference would that make? The question is not Can they *reason*? Or Can they *talk*? but Can they *suffer*?¹⁹
- Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes.²⁰
- Judges of elegance and taste consider themselves as benefactors to the human race, whilst they are really only the interrupters of their pleasure... There is no taste which deserves the epithet *good*, unless it be the taste for such employments which, to the pleasure actually produced by them, conjoin some contingent or future utility: there is no taste which deserves to be characterized as *bad*, unless it be a taste for some occupation which has mischievous tendency.²¹
- [W]hen a whole community, that is a multitude of individuals, is considered as being concerned in it, the value of it is to be multiplied by the number of such individuals. The total value of the stock of pleasure belonging to the whole community is to be obtained by multiplying the number expressing the value of it as respecting any one person, by the number expressing the multitude of such individuals.²²
- The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is, what is it?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.²³

William Thompson Quotes

→ [Article on William Thompson's life and ideas](#)

- I conceive, then, that in order to make the noble discoveries of political economy... useful to social science... it is necessary always to keep in view the complicated nature of man... Without constant reference to it, the regulating principle of utility is sacrificed and... the indefinite

increase of accumulations of wealth... become worthless objects consigning to the wretchedness of unrequited toil three-fourths or nine-tenths of the human race, that the remaining smaller portion may pine in indolence midst enjoyed profusion.²⁴

- The direct operation of wealth is chiefly to afford the means of more extensive pleasures of the senses: it is only indirectly that it operates to increase our moral and intellectual pleasures; and when unequally distributed, and in very large masses, it tends, as will be proved, to eradicate almost entirely these higher moral and intellectual pleasures.²⁵
- The only and the simple remedy for the evils arising from these almost universal institutions of the domestic slavery of one half the human race, is utterly to eradicate them. Give men and women equal civil and political rights.²⁶

John Stuart Mill Quotes

→ [*Article on John Stuart Mill's life and ideas*](#)

- The Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.²⁷
- I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.²⁸
- The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end.²⁹
- That the morality of actions depends on the consequences which they tend to produce, is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that the good or evil of those consequences is measured solely by pleasure or pain, is all of the doctrine of the school of utility, which is peculiar to it.³⁰
- The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.³¹
- It is not human life only, not human life as such, that ought to be sacred to us, but human feelings. The human capacity of suffering is what we should cause to be respected, not the mere capacity of existing.³²
- A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury. The latter case, it is true, requires a much more cautious exercise of compulsion than the former. To make any one answerable for doing evil to

others, is the rule; to make him answerable for not preventing evil is, comparatively speaking, the exception. Yet there are many cases clear enough and grave enough to justify that exception.³³

- [T]he ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable... is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments... This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.³⁴
- The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind.³⁵
- All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men *can* do, but assuredly not an example of what they *should*.³⁶
- We are told that a utilitarian will be apt to make his own particular case an exception to moral rules, and, when under temptation, will see a utility in the breach of a rule, greater than he will see in its observance. But is utility the only creed which is able to furnish us with excuses for evil doing, and means of cheating our own conscience? They are afforded in abundance by all doctrines which recognise as a fact in morals the existence of conflicting considerations; which all doctrines do, that have been believed by sane persons. It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable.³⁷
- The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.³⁸
- What, in unenlightened societies, colour, race, religion, or in the case of a conquered country, nationality, are to some men, sex is to all women; a peremptory exclusion from almost all

honourable occupations, but either such as cannot be fulfilled by others, or such as those others do not think worthy of their acceptance.³⁹

- The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatised injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race, and sex.⁴⁰
- The reasons for legal intervention in favour of children, apply not less strongly to the case of those unfortunate slaves and victims of the most brutal part of mankind, the lower animals.⁴¹
- Everybody knows that the same sum of money is of much greater value to a poor man than to a rich one. Give £10 a year to the man who has but £10 a year, you double his income, and you nearly double his enjoyments... To the possessor of £1,000 a year the addition of £10 would be scarcely perceptible; to the possessor of £10,000 it would not be worth slooping for... The richer a man is the less he is benefited by any further addition to his income. The man of £4,000 a year has four times the income of the man who has but £1,000; but does anybody suppose that he has four times the happiness?⁴²
- [S]ociety between human beings... is manifestly impossible on any other footing than that the interests of all are to be consulted. Society between equals can only exist on the understanding that the interests of all are to be regarded equally.⁴³
- No longer enslaved or made dependent by force of law, the great majority are so by force of poverty; they are still chained to a place, to an occupation, and to conformity with the will of an employer, and debarred, by the accident of birth both from the enjoyments, and from the mental and moral advantages, which others inherit without exertion and independently of desert. That this is an evil equal to almost any of those against which mankind have hitherto struggled, the poor are not wrong in believing.⁴⁴
- Justice remains the appropriate name for certain social utilities which are vastly more important, and therefore more absolute and imperative, than any others are as a class... and which, therefore, ought to be, as well as naturally are, guarded by a sentiment not only different in degree, but also in kind; distinguished from the milder feeling which attaches to the mere idea of promoting human pleasure or convenience, at once by the more definite nature of its commands, and by the sterner character of its sanctions.⁴⁵
- The “principle of utility” understood as Bentham understood it, and applied in the manner in which he applied it... fell exactly into its place as the keystone which held together the detached and fragmentary component parts of my knowledge and beliefs. It gave unity to my conceptions of things. I now had opinions; a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy... the inculcation

and diffusion of which could be made the principal outward purpose of a life. And I had a grand conception laid before me of changes to be effected in the condition of mankind through that doctrine.⁴⁶

- Yet in the first pages of Bentham it burst upon me with all the force of novelty. What thus impressed me was the chapter in which Bentham passed judgment on the common modes of reasoning in morals and legislation... and characterized them as dogmatism in disguise, imposing its sentiments upon others under cover of sounding expressions which convey no reason for the sentiment, but set up the sentiment as its own reason. It had not struck me before, that Bentham's principle [of utility] put an end to all this. The feeling rushed upon me, that all previous moralists were superseded, and that here indeed was the commencement of a new era in thought.⁴⁷
- Again, defenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this — that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness. This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which anything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments. The answer to the objection is, that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions.⁴⁸

Harriet Taylor Mill Quotes

→ [*Article on Harriet Taylor Mill's life and ideas*](#)

- We deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion what is and what is not their 'proper sphere'. The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to.⁴⁹
- There is no inherent reason or necessity that all women should voluntarily choose to devote their lives to one animal function and its consequences. Numbers of women are wives and mothers only because there is no other career open to them, no other occupation for their feelings or activities. Every improvement in their education, and enlargement of their faculties, everything which renders them more qualified for any other mode of life, increases the number of those to whom it is an injury and an oppression to be denied the choice. To say that women must be excluded from active life because maternity disqualifies them for it, is in fact to say that every other career should be forbidden them, in order that maternity may be their only resource.⁵⁰
- [I]f we look to the great majority of cases, the effect of women's legal inferiority, on the character both of women and of men, must be painted in far darker colours. We do not speak

here of the grosser brutalities, nor of the man's power to seize on the woman's earnings, or compel her to live with him against her will. We do not address ourselves to any one who requires to have it proved that these things should be remedied. We suppose average cases, in which there is neither complete union nor complete disunion of feelings and character; and we affirm, that, in such cases, the influence of the dependence on the woman's side is demoralising to the character of both.⁵¹

Henry Sidgwick Quotes

→ [*Article on Henry Sidgwick's life and ideas*](#)

- [T]he good of any one person is no more important from the point of view... of the universe than the good of any other; unless there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to occur in the one case than in the other.⁵²
- Each one is morally obliged to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him.⁵³
- [W]hatever action any of us judges to be right for himself, he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances... if a kind of conduct that is right (or wrong) for me is not right (or wrong) for someone else, it must be on the ground of some difference between the two cases, other than the fact that I and he are different persons.⁵⁴
- How far we are to consider the interests of posterity when they seem to conflict with those of now-existing human beings? The answer to this, though, seems clear: the time at which a man exists can't affect the value of his happiness from a universal point of view; so the interests of posterity must concern a utilitarian as much as those of his contemporaries—except in that the effect of his actions on the lives and even the existence of posterity must be more uncertain.⁵⁵
- Who are the 'all' whose happiness is to be taken into account? Should our concern extend to all the beings capable of pleasure and pain whose feelings we can affect? Or should we confine our view to human happiness? Bentham and Mill adopt the former view, as do (I believe) utilitarians generally; and it is obviously more in accordance with the universality of their principle. A utilitarian thinks it is his duty to aim at the good universal... interpreted and defined as 'happiness' or 'pleasure'; and it seems arbitrary to exclude from this project any pleasure of any sentient being.⁵⁶
- it seems scarcely extravagant to say that, amid all the profuse waste of the means of happiness which men commit, there is no imprudence more flagrant than that of Selfishness in the ordinary sense of the term,—that excessive concentration of attention on the individual's own

happiness which renders it impossible for him to feel any strong interest in the pleasures and pains of others.⁵⁷

- A universal refusal to propagate the human species would be the greatest of conceivable crimes from a Utilitarian point of view⁵⁸
- If the Utilitarian has to answer the question, ‘Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?’ it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist, ‘Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future? Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?’⁵⁹
- I may begin by laying down as a principle that ‘all pain of human or rational beings is to be avoided’; and then afterwards may be led to enunciate the wider rule that ‘all pain is to be avoided’; it being made evident to me that the difference of rationality between two species of sentient beings is no ground for establishing a fundamental ethical distinction between their respective pains.⁶⁰
- [I]t is reasonable for a Utilitarian to praise any conduct more felicitous in its tendency than what an average man would do under the given circumstances—being aware of course that the limit down to which praiseworthiness extends must be relative to the particular state of moral progress reached by mankind generally in his age and country; and that it is desirable to make continual efforts to elevate this standard.⁶¹
- [I]s it Total or Average Happiness that we seek to make a maximum?... Assuming, then, that the average happiness of human beings is a positive quantity, it seems clear that utilitarianism directs us to make the number of happy people as large as we can without lowering the average level of happiness. We foresee as possible that an increase in numbers will be accompanied by a decrease in average happiness... [I]f we take Utilitarianism to prescribe, as the ultimate end of action, happiness on the whole... it would follow that, if the additional population enjoy on the whole positive happiness, we ought to weigh the amount of happiness gained by the extra number against the amount lost by the remainder. So that, strictly conceived, the point up to which, on Utilitarian principles, population ought to be encouraged to increase, is not that at which average happiness is the greatest possible... but that at which the product formed by multiplying the number of persons living into the amount of average happiness reaches its maximum.⁶²
- [T]he main utilitarian reason why it is not right for every rich man to distribute his superfluous wealth among the poor, is that the happiness of all is on the whole most promoted by maintaining in adults generally... the expectation that each will be thrown on his own resources for the supply of his own wants. But if I am made aware that, owing to a sudden calamity that could not have been foreseen, another’s resources are manifestly inadequate to

protect him from pain or serious discomfort, the case is altered; my theoretical obligation to consider his happiness as much as my own becomes at once practical; and I am bound to make as much effort to relieve him as will not entail a greater loss of happiness to myself or others. If, however, the calamity is one which might have been foreseen and averted by proper care, my duty becomes more doubtful: for then by relieving him I seem to be in danger of encouraging improvidence in others. In such a case a Utilitarian has to weigh this indirect evil against the direct good of removing pain and distress⁶³

- We think of a philosopher as trying to do more than merely define and formulate the common moral opinions of mankind. His function is to tell men not what they do think but what they ought to think; he is expected to go beyond common sense in his premises, and is allowed some divergence from it in his conclusions... his task is to state in full strength and clarity the primary intuitions of reason which can, handled scientifically, systematise and correct the common moral thought of mankind.⁶⁴
- It is in their purely physical aspect, as complex processes of corporeal change, that [physical processes] are means to the maintenance of life: but so long as we confine our attention to their corporeal aspect,—regarding them merely as complex movements of certain particles of organised matter—it seems impossible to attribute to these movements, considered in themselves, either goodness or badness. I cannot conceive it to be an ultimate end of rational action to secure that these complex movements should be of one kind rather than another, or that they should be continued for a longer rather than a shorter period. In short, if a certain quality of human Life is that which is ultimately desirable, it must belong to human Life regarded on its psychical side, or, briefly, Consciousness.⁶⁵

Richard M. Hare Quotes

→ [*Article on Richard M. Hare's life and ideas*](#)

- The rules of moral reasoning are, basically, two, corresponding to the two features of moral judgment... When we are trying, in a concrete case, to decide what we ought to do, what we are looking for... is an action to which we can commit ourselves (prescriptively) but which we are at the same time prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action to be prescribed for others in like circumstances (universalizability)... [I]f we cannot universalize the principle, it cannot become an 'ought'.⁶⁶
- [W]hat the principle of utility requires of me is to do for each man affected by my actions what I wish were done for me in the hypothetical circumstances that I were in precisely his situation; and, if my actions affect more than one man... to do what I wish, all in all, to be done for me in the hypothetical circumstances that I occupied all their situations⁶⁷

- [In the bilateral case]... if I have full knowledge of the other person's preferences, I shall myself have acquired preferences equal to his regarding what should be done to me were I in his situation; and these are the preferences which are now conflicting with my original prescription. So we have in effect not an interpersonal conflict of preferences or prescriptions, but an intrapersonal one; both of the conflicting preferences are mine... Multilateral cases now present less difficulty than at first appeared. For in them too the interpersonal conflicts... will reduce themselves, given full knowledge of the preferences of others, to intrapersonal ones.⁶⁸
- It is said that the prescription to keep all black people in subjection is formally universal, and internally consistent, and so is not ruled out by the Categorical Imperative. But the point is: can somebody who has fully represented to himself the situation of black people who are kept in subjection go on willing that they should be so treated? For if he has fully represented this to himself, he will have formed a preference that he should not be so treated if he is a black person; and this is inconsistent with the universal form of the proposed maxim. There is of course the problem of the fanatical black-hater who is prepared to prescribe that the maxim should be followed even if he himself were a black person. I have discussed the case of this fanatic at length in my books... and I think I have shown that my theory can deal with him. At any rate the Kantian move can be used in arguments with ordinary non-fanatical people.⁶⁹

J. J. C. Smart Quotes

- The sentiment to which [the utilitarian] appeals is generalized benevolence, that is, the disposition to seek happiness, or...good consequences, for all mankind, or perhaps for all sentient beings.⁷⁰
- [I]f it is rational for me to choose the pain of a visit to the dentist in order to prevent the pain of a toothache, why is it not rational of me to choose a pain of Jones, similar to that of my visit to the dentist, if that is the only way in which I can prevent a pain, equal to that of my toothache, for Robinson? Such situations continually occur in war, in mining, and in the fight against disease, when we may often find ourselves in the position of having in the general interest to inflict suffering on good and happy men.⁷¹
- Another type of ultimate disagreement between utilitarians, whether hedonistic or ideal, can arise over whether we should try to maximize the *average* happiness of human beings... or whether we should try to maximize the *total* happiness or goodness... Would you be quite indifferent between (a) a universe containing only one million happy sentient beings, all equally happy, and (b) a universe containing two million happy beings, each neither more nor less happy than any in the first universe? Or would you, as a humane and sympathetic person, give a preference to the second universe? I myself cannot help feeling a preference for the second universe.⁷²

- Normally the utilitarian is able to assume that the remote effects of his actions tend rapidly to zero... It seems plausible that the long-term probable benefits and costs of his alternative actions are likely to be negligible or cancel one another out.
An obviously important case in which, if he were a utilitarian, a person would have to consider effects into the far future, perhaps millions of years, would be that of a statesman who was contemplating engaging in nuclear warfare, if there were some probability, even a small one, that this war might end in the destruction of the entire human race... Similar long term catastrophic consequences must be envisaged in planning flight to other planets, if there is any probability, even quite a small one, that these planets possess viruses or bacteria, to which terrestrial organisms would have no immunity.⁷³
- Nor is this utilitarian doctrine incompatible... with a recognition of the importance of warm and spontaneous expressions of emotion. Consider a case in which a man sees that his wife is tired, and simply from a spontaneous feeling of affection for her he offers to wash the dishes. Does utilitarianism imply that he should have stopped to calculate the various consequences of his different possible courses of action? Certainly not. This would make married life a misery and the utilitarian knows very well as a rule of thumb that on occasions of this sort it is best to act spontaneously and without calculation.⁷⁴

Peter Singer Quotes

→ [Article on Peter Singer's life and ideas](#)

- To be a utilitarian means that you judge actions as right or wrong in accordance with whether they have good consequences. So you try to do what will have the best consequences for all of those affected.⁷⁵
- If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.⁷⁶
- Living a minimally acceptable ethical life involves using a substantial part of our spare resources to make the world a better place. Living a fully ethical life involves doing the most good we can.⁷⁷
- The only justifiable stopping place for the expansion of altruism is the point at which all whose welfare can be affected by our actions are included within the circle of altruism. This means that all beings with the capacity to feel pleasure or pain should be included; we can improve their welfare by increasing their pleasures and diminishing their pains.⁷⁸
- *If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration.* No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that the suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – in so far as rough comparisons can

be made – of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience... is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.⁷⁹

- Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.⁸⁰
- [T]he fact that no one has come up with a really convincing reason for giving greater moral weight to members of our own species, simply because they are members of our species, strongly suggests that there is no such reason. Like racism and sexism, speciesism is wrong.⁸¹
- Animals no doubt have different interests from humans, and may experience different pleasures and pains, but the principle of equal consideration for similar interests still holds, and pleasures and pains of similar intensity and duration should be given equal weight, whether they are experienced by humans or by animals.⁸²
- [W]hen we make ethical judgments, we must go beyond a personal or sectional point of view and take into account the interests of all those affected, unless we have sound ethical grounds for doing otherwise... The essence of the principle of equal consideration of interests is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions... What the principle really amounts to is: an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be.⁸³
- [U]tilitarianism is often thought to be insufficiently egalitarian, or insufficiently concerned about those who are worse off, because it gives no intrinsic weight to human equality, and no intrinsic priority to improving the position of those who are worse off. It is true that utilitarians do not give any independent weight to equality, beyond the kind of equality that is... built into the idea of utility itself... But we think it is a mistake to see this as an objection to the utilitarian view. Utilitarianism supports those forms of equality (or of priority for the worse off) that should be supported, and does not support those that should not be supported.⁸⁴
- The kind of equality utilitarianism supports is given by Bentham's formula...: 'everybody to count for one, and nobody for more than one'... Utilitarianism seeks to maximize happiness, and in deciding how to calculate whether happiness is being maximized, no one's pleasures or pains should count for less because they are peasants rather than aristocrats, slaves rather than slave-owners, Africans rather than Europeans, poor rather than rich, illiterates rather

than doctors of philosophy, children rather than adults, females rather than males, or even, as we have seen, non-human animals rather than human beings.⁸⁵

- Even if we think the prior existence view is more plausible than the total view, we should recognize that we could be mistaken about this and therefore give some value to the life of a possible future—let’s say, for example, 10 per cent of the value we give to the similar life of a presently existing being. The number of human beings who will come into existence only if we can avoid extinction is so huge that even with that relatively low value, reducing the risk of human extinction will often be a highly cost-effective strategy for maximizing utility, as long as we have some understanding of what will reduce that risk.⁸⁶
- When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look “well-dressed” we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving. It follows from what I have said earlier that we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called “supererogatory”—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.⁸⁷
- The replacement of our species by some other form of conscious intelligent life is not in itself, impartially considered, catastrophic. Even if the intelligent machines kill all existing humans, that would be, as we have seen, a very small part of the loss of value that Parfit and Bostrom believe would be brought about by the extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life. The risk posed by the development of AI, therefore, is not so much whether it is friendly to us, but whether it is friendly to the idea of promoting wellbeing in general, for all sentient beings it encounters, itself included.⁸⁸

Joshua Greene Quotes

- Utilitarianism is a great idea with an awful name. It is, in my opinion, the most underrated and misunderstood idea in all of moral and political philosophy.⁸⁹
- [W]e can summarize utilitarianism thus: Happiness is what matters, and everyone’s happiness counts the same. This doesn’t mean that everyone gets to be equally happy, but it does mean that no one’s happiness is inherently more valuable than anyone else’s.⁹⁰
- Bentham and Mill introduced a perfectly general standard for measuring moral value and for making hard moral decisions: All actions are to be measured by the sum of their effects on happiness. Utilitarianism is a splendid idea... [b]ut it’s also a highly controversial idea, the object of two centuries’ worth of philosophical debate⁹¹

- Consequentialism says that consequences—”results”, as a pragmatist might say—are the only things that ultimately matter. Here the word “ultimately” is very important. It’s not that things other than consequences—things like being honest, for example—don’t matter, but rather that other things matter, when they do, because of *their* consequences. According to consequentialism, our ultimate goal should be to make things go as well as possible.⁹²
- The founding utilitarians, Bentham and Mill, were not just armchair philosophers. They were daring social reformers, intensely engaged with the social and political issues of their day. Indeed, many familiar social issues became social issues because Bentham and Mill made them so. Their views were considered radical at the time, but today we take for granted most of the social reforms for which they fought. They were among the earliest opponents of slavery and advocates of free speech, free markets, widely available education, environmental protection, prison reform, women’s rights, animal rights, gay rights, workers’ rights, the right to divorce, and the separation of church and state.⁹³
- [I]t’s plausible that the goodness and badness of everything ultimately cashes out in terms of the quality of people’s experience. On this view, there are many worthy values: family, education, freedom, bravery, and all the rest of the values listed on the chalkboard. But, says utilitarianism, these things are valuable because, and only because, of their effects on our experience. Subtract from these things their positive effects on experience and their value is lost. In short, if it doesn’t affect someone’s experience, then it doesn’t really matter.⁹⁴
- Happiness is not (just) ice cream and warm summer evenings at the lake house. One’s happiness is the overall quality of one’s experience, and to value happiness is to value everything that improves the quality of experience, for oneself and for others—and especially for others whose lives leave much room for improvement. From a utilitarian perspective, it’s not that happiness *beats out* the other values on the list. Happiness, properly understood, *encompasses* the other values.⁹⁵
- [On utilitarianism,] everyone’s happiness counts the same. This doesn’t mean that, in a utilitarian world, everyone gets to be equally happy... [A] world in which everyone gets the same outcome no matter what they do is an idle world in which people have little incentive to do anything. Thus, the way to maximize happiness is not to decree that everyone gets to be equally happy, but to encourage people to behave in ways that maximize happiness. When we measure our moral success, we count everyone’s happiness equally, but achieving success almost certainly involves inequality of both material wealth and happiness. Such inequality is not ideal, but it’s justified on the grounds that, without it, things would be worse overall.⁹⁶
- Measuring happiness is not an insurmountable problem, and to the extent that it’s a problem, it’s a problem for *everyone*, not just utilitarians. No one thinks that the effects of our choices on our happiness are *irrelevant*. Thus, even if you reject the utilitarian idea that happiness is

all that ultimately matters, as long as you think that happiness matters to some extent, you need to measure it, too!⁹⁷

- The utilitarian ideal is impartial. An ideal utilitarian values the well-being of others no less than she values her own well-being—a perfect embodiment of the Golden Rule.⁹⁸
- Utilitarianism is not, at the most fundamental level, a *decision procedure*. It is, instead, a theory about what matters at the most fundamental level, about what's worth valuing and why. Utilitarianism does not require us to constantly calculate the expected costs and benefits of our actions. On the contrary, it requires us to trust our moral intuitions most of the time, because that's more likely to serve us well than constant moral calculation.⁹⁹
- One imagines a utilitarian standing in the aisle at the store, adding up the costs and benefits of shoplifting. Fortunately, most of us don't engage in this kind of moral calculation, but it might seem that this is what utilitarianism recommends. If you think about it, however, this is a decidedly un-utilitarian way to be. Why? Because constant moral calculation about what will serve the greater good *is clearly not going to serve the greater good*. Were we to allow ourselves to do whatever we wanted, so long as we could convince ourselves that what we were doing was for the "greater good", it would be a disaster. We humans are notoriously biased in our own favor and not especially good at calculating the long-term, global effects of our actions. Thus, in everyday life, we're much better off listening to our moral instincts, rather than trying to work out whether petty theft, for example, might serve the greater good.¹⁰⁰
- This worry about dangerous utilitarian utopianism exemplifies a whole class of confused, though nonetheless tempting, objections to utilitarianism: If the utilitarian world that you're imagining sounds like a generally miserable place, then, by definition, you're imagining the wrong thing. Your objection is a utilitarian one, and what you're objecting to is not really utilitarianism.¹⁰¹
- From a utilitarian perspective, a good decision-making system is one in which the decision makers are more likely than otherwise to make decisions that produce good results. In principle, this could be one in which all decision-making power is vested in a single philosopher king. But everything we know of history and human nature suggests that this is a bad idea. Instead, it seems we're better off with representative democracy, coupled with a free press and widely accessible education, and so on, and so forth.¹⁰²
- Utilitarianism is a very egalitarian philosophy, asking the haves to do a lot for the have-nots. Were you to wake up tomorrow as a born-again utilitarian, the biggest change in your life would be your newfound devotion to helping unfortunate others.¹⁰³
- The utilitarian argument for giving is straightforward: Going skiing instead of camping (or whatever) may increase your happiness, but it's nothing compared with the increase in

happiness that a poor African child gains from clean water, food, and shelter... Thus, says utilitarianism, you should spend that money helping desperately needy people rather than on luxuries for yourself.¹⁰⁴

- According to utilitarians, the distinction between doing and allowing is morally irrelevant, or at least has no independent moral force. *A harm is a harm is a harm*, we say, and there is no fundamental moral distinction between harms that we actively cause and harms that we merely allow to happen.¹⁰⁵
- The worry that utilitarianism is too demanding is a devastating worry only if we expect ourselves to be perfect utilitarians, and trying to be a *perfect* utilitarian is, in fact, a very un-utilitarian thing to do.¹⁰⁶
- If what utilitarianism asks of you seems absurd, then it's not what utilitarianism actually asks of you. Utilitarianism is, once again, an inherently practical philosophy, and there's nothing more impractical than commanding free people to do things that strike them as absurd and that run counter to their most basic motivations. Thus, in the real world, utilitarianism is demanding, but not overly demanding.¹⁰⁷
- Does utilitarianism require us to turn ourselves into happiness pumps?... No. Because this is not a realistic goal for flesh-and-blood humans, whose brains were not designed for moral heroism. Instead, utilitarianism asks only that we push ourselves to be morally better, to care more than we do about people beyond our immediate circles. Utilitarianism doesn't ask us to be morally perfect. It asks us to face up to our moral limitations and do as much as we humanly can to overcome them.¹⁰⁸

Others

- **Śāntidevak**
 - If a bodhisattva does not make a sincere, unwavering effort in thought, word, and deed to stop all the present and future pain and suffering of all sentient beings, and to bring about all present and future pleasure and happiness, or does not seek the collection of conditions for that, or does not strive to prevent what is opposed to that, or does not bring about small pain and suffering as a way of preventing great pain and suffering, or does not abandon a small benefit in order to accomplish a greater benefit, if he neglects to do these things even for a moment, he undergoes a downfall.¹⁰⁹
- **Charles Darwin**
 - As all men desire their own happiness, praise or blame is bestowed on actions and motives, according as they lead to this end; and as happiness is an essential part of the

general good, the greatest-happiness principle indirectly serves as a nearly safe standard of right and wrong.¹¹⁰

- **James Mackaye**

- Quantities of pain or pleasure may be regarded as magnitudes having the same definiteness as tons of pig iron, barrels of sugar, bushels of wheat, yards of cotton, or pounds of wool; and as political economy seeks to ascertain the conditions under which these commodities may be produced with the greatest efficiency—so the economy of happiness seeks to ascertain the conditions under which happiness, regarded as a commodity, may be produced with the greatest efficiency.¹¹¹

- **Derek Parfit**

- Classical Utilitarians... would claim, as Sidgwick did, that the destruction of mankind would be by far the greatest of all conceivable crimes. The badness of this crime would lie in the vast reduction of the possible sum of happiness.¹¹²

- **Alastair Norcross**

- [M]orality really is very demanding, in precisely the way utilitarianism says it is. But doesn't this fly in the face of common sense? Well, perhaps it does, but so what? Until relatively recently, moral "common sense" viewed women as having an inferior moral status to men, and some races as having an inferior status to others. These judgments were not restricted to the philosophically unsophisticated. Such illustrious philosophers as Aristotle and Hume accepted positions of this nature. Many utilitarians (myself included) believe that the interests of sentient non-human animals should be given equal consideration in moral decisions with the interests of humans. This claim certainly conflicts with the "common sense" of many (probably most) humans, and many (perhaps most) philosophers. It should not, on that account alone, be rejected.¹¹³

- **John Broome**

- Total and average utilitarianism are very different theories, and where they differ most is over extinction. If global warming extinguishes humanity, according to total utilitarianism, that would be an inconceivably bad disaster. The loss would be all the future wellbeing of all the people who would otherwise have lived. On the other hand, according to at least some versions of average utilitarianism, extinction might not be a very bad thing at all; it might not much affect the average wellbeing of the people who do live. So the difference between these theories makes a vast difference to the attitude we should take to global warming. According to total utilitarianism, although the chance of extinction is slight, the harm extinction would do is so enormous that it may well be the

dominant consideration when we think about global warming. According to average utilitarianism, the chance of extinction may well be negligible.¹¹⁴

- **Nick Bostrom**

- For standard utilitarians, priority number one, two, three and four should consequently be to reduce existential risk. The utilitarian imperative “Maximize expected aggregate utility!” can be simplified to the maxim “Minimize existential risk!”¹¹⁵

- **Jonathan Haidt**

- I don’t know what the best normative ethical theory is for individuals in their private lives. But when we talk about making laws and implementing public policies in Western democracies that contain some degree of ethnic and moral diversity, then I think there is no compelling alternative to utilitarianism.¹¹⁶

- **Bart Schulz**

- Happiness, for [the great English-language utilitarian philosophers] was more of a cosmic calling, the path to world progress, and whatever was deemed ‘utilitarian’ had to be useful for that larger and inspiring end, the global minimization of pointless suffering and the global maximization of positive well-being or happiness.¹¹⁷

- **Torbjörn Tännsjö**

- Once we realise that utilitarianism comes with the idea of blameworthy rightdoing (such as when you push a big man onto the tracks in order to save five lives) and blameless wrongdoing (such as when you don’t push a big man onto the tracks in order to save five lives), then utilitarianism all of a sudden appears to give the right answers.¹¹⁸

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