

Utilitarianism: Simply Explained

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Introduction

Utilitarianism is a moral theory that combines two key claims:

(1) Everyone matters equally

and

(2) It's better to do more good than less.

Seems obvious, right? But these simple ideas turn out to have radical implications for how we should live our lives. The purpose of this website is to

(i) introduce and defend these key ideas, and (ii) explore their practical implications.

Most people say they'd like to help people and make a difference in the world. Utilitarians are interested in doing *the most good they can*.

1. Everyone Matters Equally

The greatest moral atrocities in history—from slavery to the Holocaust—stem from *denying moral equality*. Their perpetrators claim that certain groups of people *don't matter* and can rightly be oppressed, their interests and well-being disregarded by those with greater power.

Utilitarianism rejects this claim at its root. It opposes not just racism, sexism, and homophobia, but also nationalism, speciesism, and any other bias or “ism” that would lead us to disregard the suffering of any sentient being.

Utilitarians believe that if someone can suffer, then they matter morally. Moreover, we ought to care just as much about preventing *their* suffering (and promoting their well-being) as we would anyone else's. Just as we recognize it was wrong for people to disregard others' interests in the past, so we should expect that neglecting moral equality could lead us into moral error today.

2. It's Better to do More Good than Less

Given a choice between helping a lot or helping a little, it's better to help a lot! This sounds obvious, but is often neglected. For example, when donating to charity, very few people put effort into finding the best cause possible. But some organizations can do hundreds or even *thousands* of times more good than others, so the choice of *where* to give can be even more important than *how much* you give. \$100 to a highly effective charity will be much more worthwhile than even \$100,000 to an ineffective (or possibly even counterproductive) charity. For this reason, utilitarianism encourages people to find and put into practice the very best ways of doing good.

If we don't think about it, we're more likely to donate to a random charity we're asked to support, or to select a charity based on our personal connection to the cause. This is understandable, but it means passing up an opportunity to potentially do more good for others at no greater cost to ourselves. It also risks biasing our decisions in unfair ways: because cancer affects people like me (and those in my local community), whereas malaria does not, I'm more likely to feel an emotional connection to cancer charities. If I let my emotions decide who I will help, I will unfairly neglect those in other countries who, through no fault of their own, suffer from problems that I personally never have to worry about.

Feelings are important, of course, as they help to motivate us to do good in the first place. But feelings need to be guided by careful thought and evidence. [Effective Altruism](#) involves combining the head and the heart so that we can do the *most* good.

Click [here](#) for a more advanced introduction to utilitarianism and its definition.

Two Arguments for Utilitarianism

The idea of giving *rational arguments* for moral views can seem strange. Those with strong views rarely change their mind when presented with rational arguments. Yet the implications of our values are not always obvious, so it can be helpful to carefully think them through—especially if we're not yet certain where our moral compass points.

The Veil of Ignorance

Humans are masters of self-deception and motivated reasoning. If something benefits us personally, it's all too easy to convince ourselves that it must be okay. To correct for such self-serving biases, philosophers invented a concept called *the veil of ignorance*. Imagine looking down on the world from a kind of "God's eye view". You can see everyone, and understand the possible futures

—what will happen to each and every person depending on what particular choices are made—*but you don't know which of these people is you!*

When you compare different options from behind the veil of ignorance, you are forced to be impartial. If you don't know who you will end up being, the most rational way to promote your self-interest is to choose whatever would *best promote everyone's interests overall*. Slave-owners might rethink their position if evaluating the institution of slavery from behind the veil of ignorance—if they believed they were equally likely to end up as *anyone*, then the risk that they themselves might end up suffering in the position of a slave would clearly outweigh the “benefit” of a chance of being a slave-owner.

Choosing rationally from behind the veil of ignorance would lead to supporting both key claims of utilitarianism: (i) everyone matters equally, and (ii) it's better to do more good than less. The veil of ignorance indicates what we *would* choose if free from self-serving biases, which is plausibly what we should choose, morally.

Generalizing the Golden Rule

Many ethical traditions endorse some form of the *Golden Rule*: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Of course, it needs to be interpreted sensibly: we wouldn't want a masochist to go around whipping people who aren't as into that as he is. Rather, it suggests that other people's interests matter just as ours do, and so we should take others' interests fully into account just as we would want others to do with our interests. Utilitarians call this the *equal consideration of interests* principle.

One vivid way to implement this principle is to imagine yourself in the position of *each* affected person, one after the other, living each of their lives (with *their* tastes and preferences) in sequence. If you were, in effect, *everybody*, what would it be rational for you to choose? Clearly, this would support (i) treating everyone's interests equally, and (ii) always preferring more good rather than less—that is, the key ideas of utilitarianism.

Click [here](#) for a more advanced discussion of arguments for utilitarianism.

Two Objections to Utilitarianism

Critics have raised many important objections to utilitarianism. In this section, we'll briefly discuss the two most influential: the rights objection, and the demandingness objection.

The Rights Objection

Utilitarianism seems to endorse the controversial idea that “the end justifies the means”. In theory, it allows that any act—even deliberately killing an innocent person—may be justified if it serves to bring about a better outcome (such as saving more lives overall). Many consider it monstrous for a moral theory to permit *violating an individual's rights* in this way.

A vivid example of this objection is found in the following thought experiment: Imagine that five patients each need a different transplanted organ or they will soon die. A healthy patient, Chuck, comes into the hospital for a routine check-up and the doctor finds that Chuck is a perfect match as a donor for all five patients. Should the doctor kill Chuck and use his organs to save the five others?

Utilitarianism seems to imply that the doctor should kill Chuck, since one death is better than five. But many people find this answer to be unacceptable, and would sooner reject utilitarianism than believe that the doctor really ought to kill Chuck.

In response, utilitarians may argue that it will generally lead to better results if agents are deeply reluctant to kill innocent people. Historically, we know that most times when people violate rights for the so-called “greater good”, they end up doing vastly more harm than good. They do not usually manage to bring about better outcomes at all. In addition to the direct harm done, violating rights also causes indirect harms via reduced social trust and cooperation. (How many more people would die for lack of routine medical

care, if they feared that their doctor might murder them?) In practice, rights are an excellent tool for promoting human well-being, so we ought to be *very wary* of violating rights in this way. The doctor cannot reasonably be confident that killing Chuck would really do more good than harm (once the risk of indirect effects is taken into account). So utilitarianism can accommodate our condemnation of the murder after all.

The Demandingness Objection

Utilitarianism claims that we should do whatever would bring about the overall best result, counting everyone equally. This implies that we are almost always acting wrongly, because there is almost always something *better* that we could be doing. For example, almost anytime you spend money on yourself, you could have done more good by instead donating that money to effective global charities.

If a person constantly told you to do everything that utilitarianism requires, they'd probably drive you crazy. "Give me a #*@!-ing break!" you might snap at them. They would be making unreasonable demands. But surely morality itself should not be in the business of making unreasonable demands, right?

Utilitarians may respond by denying that their theory is best understood as making "demands" in this sense. When utilitarianism says that we ought to donate more to charity, this really just means that it would be the *best* or morally ideal choice. But it's not as though anyone would *blame* you for falling short of the ideal. (Utilitarians might instead reserve blame for those who give *egregiously* little weight to others' interests, and positively praise anyone who is more altruistic than average.)

Click [here](#) for a more advanced discussion of objections to utilitarianism.

History and Track Record

The classical utilitarians of the 18th and 19th centuries had social and political attitudes that were far ahead of their time. As a progressive social reformer,

[Jeremy Bentham](#) defended issues such as the separation of church and state; the abolition of slavery and of capital punishment; legal regulations to protect criminals and non-human animals from cruel treatment; and the decriminalization of homosexuality as early as the late 1700s. Indeed, his manuscripts on homosexuality were so liberal that his editor hid them from the public after Bentham's death. They were only published two centuries later.

[John Stuart Mill](#) defended freedom of speech and the provision of social welfare for the poor. He was the second member of the UK's Parliament to call for women's suffrage, and he advocated for gender equality more generally.

In a similar vein, [Henry Sidgwick](#) advocated for women's education and the freedom of education from religious doctrines. Modern utilitarians like [Peter Singer](#) are outspoken advocates drawing attention to pressing moral problems such as extreme poverty and factory farming.

While the early proponents of utilitarianism were far from perfect, their reasoning led them to avoid many of the moral prejudices of their time and reach more enlightened moral and political positions. Those of us living today are, of course, no less fallible than our forebears. To help overcome our own biases, our moral and political views may similarly benefit from being checked against utilitarian principles.

Note: the rest of this website provides a college-level academic guide to utilitarian moral theory. Readers interested in learning more about utilitarianism are encouraged to explore this more advanced material.

How to Cite This Page

Chappell, R.Y. (2023). Utilitarianism: Simply Explained. In R.Y. Chappell, D. Meissner, and W. MacAskill (eds.), <<https://www.utilitarianism.net/utilitarianism-for-high-school-students>>, accessed 3/19/2024.