

Objections to Utilitarianism

- I. *Disutility of Utilitarianism*: Some objections to utilitarianism seek to *undermine* utilitarianism “on its own grounds”. That is, they seek to show that utilitarianism refutes itself.
 - A. *Disutility of Calculating*: It is sometimes charged that utilitarianism has bad consequences because if we were to take time to calculate before acting, we would frequently not be acting in a timely manner. (The image is that of a person calculating utility while an innocent child drowns.)
 1. *Reply*: Utilitarianism recommends that course of action that produces the best consequences. If calculating produces worse consequences than some alternative, the utilitarian theory tells us not to calculate.
- II. *Applicability*: Even if we wanted to put utilitarianism into effect, we could not, for there is no practical measure of utility (whether that is understood as pleasure, happiness or the object of a desire).
 - A. *Incommensurability*: Pluralistic utilitarians have the additional problem of potential incommensurability of utility. If, for example, both liberty and security are intrinsically valuable and there is no common standard on which both can be measured, then there is no possibility of reconciling conflicts between these two values.
 1. *Example*: The Case of the Fairly Virtuous Husband
 - B. *Interpersonal Comparison of Utility*: Many theories, most notably the desire satisfaction theory, have serious problems with interpersonal comparisons of utility. Desire satisfaction theories have this problem because strength of desire is usually measured by noting what an agent does when in a trade-off situation. If she prefers apple pie to cherry pie when she knows that she can have either, she has a stronger desire for apple pie. But this gives us no mechanism for determining strength of desires in *different* persons.
- III. *Counter-Intuitive Consequences*
 - A. *Problems with Population Size*: This problem arises because the utilitarian requirement to maximize total individual utility seems to lead to a duty to procreate where we think there is none. If, to avoid this consequence, the utilitarian requires that we maximize *average* utility, a duty to exterminate those with low levels of utility seems to arise. Restricting utilitarian theories to situations where the population size doesn't change seems to solve these problems, but at the price of making the theory incomplete.
 1. *Duty to Procreate*: If our duty is to maximize total utility, it appears that we might have a duty to procreate that is quite different from any plausible duty of this sort. We might have a duty to produce a child who is less happy than anyone now alive and whose birth will make everyone else less happy, just because the addition of his small happiness will just more than compensate for the reduction in their happiness.
 - a) *Reply #1*: Maximize *average* utility rather than total utility.
 - (1) *Response—Duty to Exterminate*: The case of Xavier, the Happy Hermit.

- b) *Reply #2: Apply utilitarian reasoning only to fixed populations*
 - (1) *Response: Utilitarianism is not a fully adequate theory of morality because many of our moral problems concern issues that intrinsically involve population changes. (Should we adopt policies that encourage or discourage population growth?)*

- B. *Special Obligations: It is often argued that the utilitarian takes the only intrinsically significant moral relation to be the benefactor/beneficiary relation. But this leads to insufficient concern for the special relation in which we stand to others. It leads to giving no intrinsic weight to promises and contracts, nor to special obligations one might have as a result of an office one holds, etc.*

- C. *Justice*
 - 1. *Retributive Justice:*
 - a) *Example: Preventing a Riot by Punishing an Innocent Person*
 - 2. *Distributive Justice:*
 - a) *Distribution of Wealth (Commodities, Body Parts, etc.): Since the utilitarian is concerned to maximize total (or average) utility, there is no guarantee that money, commodities or any other objects of value will be distributed equitably.*
 - (1) *Utilitarian Reply: There are good utilitarian reasons for favoring more equal distributions of wealth over less equal ones other things being equal. The primary reason is that wealth is subject to diminishing marginal utility. Thus, a thousand dollars in my pocket will probably create more happiness, pleasure, and produce more desire satisfaction than it will in Donald Trump's pocket. While there are other utilitarian arguments favoring some inequalities in the distribution of wealth, it is reasonable to think that utilitarianism will not be indifferent to the demands of equality of wealth.*
 - b) *Distribution of Utility: The utilitarian can, though, give no reason for favoring a more equitable distribution of utility over a less equitable one. For the maximization of utility is all that matters to the utilitarian. Thus, if one alternative maximizes utility (pleasure, happiness, or what-have-you), but gives it all to one person, that is better than any alternative that fails to maximize utility but distributes what it does produce more equitably.*

- D. *Excessive Demands: Any consequentialist theory, utilitarianism included, seems to demand too much of us. Practically everything we do will be immoral. For it is almost always true that we could be doing something else that would produce more utility. Is it permissible to give only 1/3 of your income to the needy? Not if it would produce more total utility to give 1/2 or 2/3 of it. Many argue that morality does not demand that on each and every occasion we be doing all we can to produce total utility. Morality leaves us some leeway—some “moral slack”.*