

Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice

- I. *Utilitarianism and the Distribution of Wealth:* It is often claimed that utilitarianism is insensitive to the distribution of wealth—two distributions which produced the same total wealth of society would be judged morally equal by the utilitarian even if one distributed the wealth very unequally and the other very equally. Worse, perhaps, a distribution that produced even slightly more total (or average) wealth would be judged morally *better* than one that produced slightly less but distributed it more equally.

	A	B
1	\$100,000	\$15,000
2	2,000	15,000
3	2,000	15,000
4	0	15,000
5	-20,000	20,000
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TOTAL	\$84,000	\$80,000

- A. *Reply:* The utilitarian is not concerned to maximize total *wealth*. And there are well-known and plausible arguments that show that utilitarians *will* be sensitive to the distribution of wealth.
1. *Diminishing Marginal Utility:* The assumption that an increase in wealth of a wealthy person produces less utility than an equal increase in the wealth of a poor person, argues for more equal distributions of wealth.
 2. *Feelings of Resentment:* Radically unequal distributions of wealth also cause feelings of resentment and envy. The utilitarian counts these as bad.
 3. *Efficiencies of Inequality:* Still, the utilitarian need not be a strict egalitarian about wealth. It may promote overall utility to reward people unequally for unequal efforts or talents so as to encourage people to perform particularly difficult or onerous tasks that are necessary to society. There may be, that is, *efficiencies of inequality*.
- II. *Utilitarianism and the Distribution of Utility:* The utilitarian is, though, committed to the view that there is no moral reason for preferring one distribution of *utility* over another if equal amounts of utility are distributed. The theory holds that we are to maximize total (or average) utility, and doing so is *insensitive* to distributive considerations.

	A	B
1	1,000h	100h
2	-100h	100h
3	-100h	100h
4	-100h	100h
5	-100h	100h
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TOTAL	600h	500h