

Criticisms of Utilitarianism

A. Justice and Fairness

1. Can utilitarianism account for justice and fairness?
2. Problem: the rights of an individual are less important than the good for the many, for utilitarianism.

3. **Case 1: *The Fat Man in the Cave*:**

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, the people in the cave should use the dynamite to blow the Fat Man out of the cave opening.

(P2) The people in the cave should not use the dynamite to blow the Fat Man out of the cave.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

A. Justice and Fairness

4. **Case 2: *The Magistrate and the Mob*:**

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then the execution of the homeless man was morally right.

(P2) The execution of the homeless man was not morally right.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

5. **Case 3: *The Organ Harvest*:**

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then the doctor's act of killing the janitor for his organs was morally right.

(P2) The doctor's act of killing the janitor for his organs was not morally right.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

A. Justice and Fairness

6. Similar real life cases:

- Bombing civilian targets in a war
- Torturing innocent civilians in order to catch a mass murder or stop a terrorist threat

7. Other cases involving sacrifice of other rights (property, privacy, free speech)

8. Possible utilitarian responses

a) Other possible consequences must be considered, e.g:

- bad precedents
- weakening the legal system
- longterm effects on victims or their families

b) Can accept that these things *really are* the right things to do in these cases.

- The needs of the many sometimes do matter most.

B. Personal Integrity

1. Another line of criticism from Bernard Williams:



Bernard
Williams
(1929-2003)

2. Utilitarianism does not distinguish ***what we ourselves do*** from that which ***we only allow to happen***

3. Consider the case of Jim and Indians: Jim is a Botanist exploring the wilderness area in South America. He comes across a small town where a local warlord, named Pedro, has captured twenty natives, whom he intends on killing. He gives Jim the opportunity to kill one of the natives himself, in which case he will let the other 19 go. Otherwise, Pedro will kill all 20 himself.

4. What should Jim do?

B. Personal Integrity

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then Jim is morally obligated to kill the one native himself.

(P2) Jim is not morally obligated to kill the one native himself.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

5. Williams: what we ourselves *do* matters more to us than what others come to do because of our actions.

6. A proper moral theory must consider this aspect of moral agency: take into account personal integrity.

7. How could a utilitarian respond to this?

B. Personal Integrity

8. Difference between what we ourselves do and what we only allow to happen is hard to draw in many cases.

9. Suppose I am in a hurry to get to work, but on my way to work I see someone who has been in a motorcycle accident and badly needs help.

It doesn't seem like much of an excuse to simply say, oh well, if the biker dies, it's not my fault. I didn't do it, I'm just allowing it to happen.

C. Utilitarianism Demands too Much

1. Can utilitarianism accommodate our personal projects, desires, values and commitments?

2. **Case 1: George and the Weapons Job:** George is morally opposed to chemical weapons. But he is considering taking a job making chemical weapons, knowing that if he does not, someone else will, and will probably make the weapons worse than he would.

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then George is morally obligated to take the weapons job.

(P2) George is not morally obligated to take the weapons job.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

C. Utilitarianism Demands too Much

3. **Case 2: Bridgett and the Car.** Bridgett is a poor college student who has always wanted her own car. She works after school jobs, saves all her money, rarely goes out, until she has \$7000. On her way to the used car dealership, she reads about an Tsunami in SE Asia that has left thousands dead, wounded and homeless.

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then it would be morally wrong for Bridgett to buy a car rather than give the money to the relief effort.

(P2) It is not morally wrong for Bridgett to buy a car rather than give the money to the relief effort.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

C. Utilitarianism Demands too Much

4. **Case 3: Simon and his Mother.** Simon's mother is feeling really lonely and would like Simon to come and spend the day with her. Simon, an engineer, had planned on using the day to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. By volunteering, since he would be helping a whole family for the rest of their lives, rather than cheering up his mother for simply one day.

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then it would be morally wrong for Simon to visit his mother rather than volunteer.

(P2) It is not morally wrong for Simon to visit his mother rather than volunteer.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

C. Utilitarianism Demands too Much

5. Possible utilitarian responses

a) Being moral simply *does* require a lot from people.

- No one said it was easy.
- If people don't like it, that's just too darn bad.

b) Again, utilitarians can make a distinction between *acting wrongly*, and acting in a way that is *worthy of punishment*.

- accept that a lot of the time people put their own interests, commitments and relationships first
- realize that this is inevitable and not try to punish people for this, or try to force everyone to be moral all the time
- probably enforcing morality or punishing wrongdoers itself would create far more unhappiness than happiness

D. Taking Promises Seriously

1. Yet another common criticism of utilitarianism is that it does not take promises seriously

2. **Case 1: Susan and Her Mother:** On her deathbed, Susan's mother asked Susan to deliver a fresh bouquet of flowers to her gravesite twice a year. After her death, Susan blows off the request, since it simply wastes time and money on flowers that her mother can no longer enjoy.

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then Susan's act of blowing off her promise to her mother is morally right.

(P2) Susan's act of blowing off her promise to her mother is not morally right.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

D. Taking Promises Seriously

3. **Case 2: Angelika's Promiscuity:** David and Angelika are recently married people who have promised to be faithful to each other. David is a member of the Navy who has been sent away on a year long mission in a submarine. Angelika misses their physical intimacy, and as a substitute has secret sexual affairs with willing college students who aren't looking for long term relationships. No one else knows about her dalliances, and David never finds out.

(P1) If utilitarianism is true, then Angelika's acts of cheating on her husband are morally right.

(P2) Angelika's acts of cheating on her husband are not morally right.

(C) Therefore, utilitarianism is not true.

D. Taking Promises Seriously

4. Do utilitarians have a response to worries about promises?

a) Utilitarianism can explain why in most cases we should fulfill promises.

- it upsets people to break promises; destroys important bonds of trust

b) Can accept that when it does more harm to keep a promise than break it, it is morally right to break it.

- Surely there are cases where promises should be broken.