

# Limits to Utilitarianism in Medical Care

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*This note discusses how the moral theory of Utilitarianism seems to falter when it is applied to questions of social or individual justice.*

Utilitarianism is a school of philosophical thought frequently identified with the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In more recent years it has undergone a number of refinements, such as “Preference Utilitarianism”, advocated by Professor Peter Singer. Classical Utilitarianism advocates the principle of providing “the greatest happiness to the greatest number” as the basis for assessing the morality of various actions, while “Preference Utilitarianism” advocates the principle of meeting the preferences of the greatest number of people. Thus, good variously consists in providing maximal happiness (or satisfying people's preferences, in the case of Preference Utilitarianism) and the rightness of an action depends directly or indirectly on its yielding such outcomes.

However, while Utilitarianism has had a strong influence of the intellectual landscape of recent philosophical discourse and, in particular, in ethical theory, Utilitarianism is often seen to falter when it is applied to questions of social or individual justice. In particular, Utilitarianism sometimes violates common-sense notions of justice. Because Utilitarianism seeks to maximize the total amount of a particular “utility” (like happiness or preferences) over an entire society or social group, it seeks whichever arrangement achieves maximum utility. But such an arrangement might be achieved by distributing benefits and burdens in a way that violates common notions of justice.

Perhaps the best known example of how Utilitarianism sometimes violates common-sense notions of justice is the often-cited scenario where killing one individual would save the lives of many. Under the Classical Utilitarian ethical model such action would be appropriate. (Such a situation arose in the 1968 movie “The Magus”, where the mayor of a small Greek village under WW II German occupation is ordered by the Nazi Commandant to personally kill three Greek freedom fighters responsible for the death of German soldiers. If the mayor refused, the Germans would kill both the freedom fighters and all the villagers.)

Another example: The use of slaves might greatly help maximize the net happiness in a society, but common-sense notions of justice almost always take slavery to be wrong (with apologies to both Aristotle and Thomas Jefferson, two great intellectuals who were unapologetic slave owners).

Another serious criticism of Utilitarianism is that under the goal of maximizing happiness or some other utility, the wishes and desires of sadists and perverts are lumped in with the wishes and desires of everyone else when an overall determination of utility is made. By espousing a system in which the satisfaction of all desires are to be maximized, Utilitarianism can end up violating our intuitive precepts of natural justice.

Such paradoxes lead the philosopher John Rawls and others to take the position that we must reject Utilitarianism and instead develop a genuine understanding of what is right and wrong as a basis for making ethical decisions. What is needed, Rawls argues, is moral theory with justice at its core.

That being said, other philosophers have proposed extensions to the Classical Utilitarian model to deal with some of the limitations identified above. One example is “Negative Utilitarianism”, a moral philosophy aimed at producing the least amount of suffering throughout the world.