

# Utilitarianism Explained: Should I pull the lever? | Easy Wisdom

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## What is Utilitarianism?

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Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that determines the rightness or wrongness of actions based on their consequences. The core idea is that the best action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or utility. This theory is closely associated with the philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

## Key Principles of Utilitarianism

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- 1. Consequentialism:** The morality of an action is determined by its outcomes or consequences. Actions are judged solely based on their results.
- 2. Utility:** Often defined in terms of happiness or pleasure versus suffering or pain. The goal is to maximize overall happiness and minimize suffering.
- 3. Greatest Happiness Principle:** The best action is the one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
- 4. Impartiality:** Everyone's happiness counts equally. The well-being of each individual is considered without bias.

## Types of Utilitarianism

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- 1. Act Utilitarianism:** Evaluates each action based on whether it produces the greatest happiness in a particular situation. It focuses on the immediate consequences of individual actions.
- 2. Rule Utilitarianism:** Focuses on following rules that, in general, lead to the greatest good. Instead of evaluating individual actions, it assesses the long-term consequences of following certain rules of conduct.

## Criticisms of Utilitarianism

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- 1. Impracticality:** It can be difficult to accurately predict and measure all the consequences of an action.
- 2. Justice and Rights:** Utilitarianism may justify actions that are intuitively unjust or violate individual rights if those actions maximize overall happiness.

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**3. Demandingness:** The theory can be very demanding, requiring individuals to always act in ways that maximize overall happiness, potentially at significant personal cost.

## Examples of Utilitarian Thought

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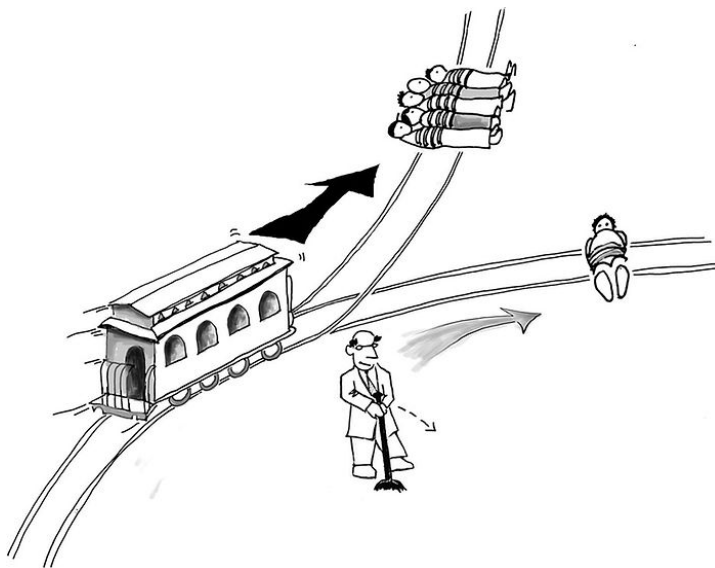
**1. Policy Making:** Utilitarian principles are often used in public policy and economics, where decisions aim to produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

**2. Ethical Dilemmas:** Utilitarianism is frequently applied to ethical dilemmas, such as deciding whether to sacrifice one person to save many others.

In summary, utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that evaluates the morality of actions based on their ability to produce the maximum overall happiness. While it offers a clear and straightforward way to make ethical decisions, it also faces significant criticisms regarding its practical application and potential conflicts with justice and individual rights.

## The trolley problem

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Now, let's look at the trolley problem: Imagine a trolley is heading towards five people tied up on the tracks. You have the option to pull a lever and divert the trolley onto a different track where there is only one person tied up.

In this situation, a utilitarian would argue that the right decision is to pull the lever to save the five people, even though it means sacrificing the one person. This is because in this scenario, saving the greater

number of people brings the most overall happiness or good.

So, in simple terms, utilitarianism in the trolley problem would suggest choosing the option that results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people, even if it involves making a tough decision to sacrifice a smaller number of people.

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## Difference from similar concepts

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<b>Concept</b>	<b>Utilitarianism</b>	<b>Hedonism</b>	<b>Egoism</b>	<b>Consequentialism</b>
<b>Definition</b>	Moral theory that focuses on actions that maximize overall happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people.	Ethical theory that considers pleasure as the highest good and pain as the worst evil, focusing on individual pleasure.	Ethical theory that promotes actions that are in the individual's own best interest.	Broad ethical theory that judges the morality of actions based on their outcomes or consequences.
<b>Focus</b>	Greatest happiness or well-being of the greatest number.	Individual pleasure and avoidance of pain.	Individual self-interest and personal benefits.	Outcomes or consequences of actions.
<b>Scope</b>	Collective well-being, considering the impact on all affected parties.	Individualistic, focusing on personal pleasure and pain.	Individualistic, focusing on personal benefits, often regardless of others.	Can be broad, focusing on outcomes, which may vary depending on the specific type of consequentialism.
<b>Key Principle</b>	The greatest good for the greatest number.	Maximizing personal pleasure.	Maximizing individual self-interest.	Morality is determined by the consequences of actions.
<b>Moral Agent's Consideration</b>	Considers the well-being of all affected parties equally.	Considers primarily the individual's own pleasure and pain.	Considers primarily the individual's own interests.	Considers the consequences, which can be for the individual, a group, or society at large.
<b>Criticism</b>	Can justify actions that harm minorities if it benefits the majority; difficulty in measuring and comparing happiness.	Can lead to selfish or short-term thinking, neglecting broader or long-term consequences.	Can lead to selfishness and disregard for others' rights and well-being.	Can lead to unjust actions if they produce good outcomes; difficult to predict and measure all consequences.

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**Example**

Implementing a policy that benefits the majority even if a minority is disadvantaged.

Pursuing personal hobbies or pleasures at the expense of other responsibilities.

Taking a job for higher pay despite it causing harm to others.

Making decisions based on the predicted positive outcomes, regardless of the means used.