
Utilitarianism As An Ethical Theory

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory founded by Jeremy Bentham. It is a theory that aims to maximize utility, or well being of all sentient life forms. To calculate a situations utility, one is supposed to add up the pleasure/happiness that stems from the action taken, and subtract the pain/suffering involved as well. Utilitarianism acknowledges and takes into account the interests of all sentient life forms equal to one another. Consequentialism is an umbrella over utilitarianism, and the basic premise is that the actions taken do not matter as much or at all compared to the consequences of those actions. The consequences determine if the actions taken were right, or wrong.

Utilitarianism: Application

While the decision surrounding how to best pilot the laughing coyote is morally difficult, when viewed within a utilitarian lense Rosy Young is the clear choice as to who should be thrown overboard. Utilitarianism observes people equally, looking to minimize suffering of all involved. Because Rosy Young has only her grandmother that will miss her, Rosy becomes the optimal victim.

Other passengers have greater connections with society than Rosy, meaning their deaths would bring about greater suffering. If Faris Pilton were to die, her father and her fans would be incredibly upset. While the number of fans is unclear in the scenario, it is clear that her death would bring many people sorrow, as they lose an idol. Because she is worshipped in this manner, a utilitarian approach would spare her life to spare the sequel suffering of her fans. Jonathan Strongback has planned to spend the rest of his life easing the suffering of others. If he was selected as a victim, that potential decline in worldwide suffering would be lost. As a member of the Peace Corps, he could change the lives of hundreds, even thousands of people. Because he is only 35, he has an average of around 40 more years of life he could spend helping society. Choosing the send him overboard would be neglecting this societal assistance, and not utilitarian. As a doctor, Eric Healthbetter is also not an optimal victim. With his practice, he can ease the suffering of doctors. As a plastic surgeon, he provides his patients with attaining looks they like, easing their suffering. With his general practitioner knowledge, in case of a crisis, Healthbetter's skills would also be incredibly useful. Regarding his specific skill set, keeping him onboard is really in the best interests of all involved. Gretchen Cainrattler, as an active member of her community, would be deeply missed. Her passing would cause suffering within her large family. Her community would be slighted of the work she does for them.

Rosy Young is a child who lost her parents, and is now being sent to live with her grandmother. Her parents already passed away, so they are not around to miss her. Because she is already being sent to a new place, it doesn't seem that anyone besides her grandmother would be particularly affected by her death. While her grandma's suffering would be great, especially considering the recent death of Rosy's parents, a utilitarian perspective understand the suffering of one person is better than the suffering of many, making Rosy Young the ultimate optional victim.