

When is Utilitarian Thinking Appropriate?

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There seems to be a reasonable position according to which utilitarian reasoning is applicable, appropriate, and should be relied on in some kinds of cases but not in other kinds of cases. For example, utilitarian reasoning may well be the best way to think about various state policy issues, it may tell us what the best general economic system is in the absence of any real inherent property rights (and perhaps within some fairness constraints), and it may tell us the best way to handle various outbreaks of contagious diseases. But, it may well be inappropriate for other kinds of issues such as how to treat family members, how to think about agreements, or whether the unwilling humiliation of a few can be justified merely by the enjoyment of others.

Are there any formulas for applying utilitarianism? I want to suggest an account of when utilitarian reasoning should be used. I think our application procedures can be informed by the modern conception of morality, according to which morality concerns, centrally, things that we owe to each other, as Scanlon has advocated.¹ However, I believe there is an important difference between what we owe to the moral community at large and what we owe to specific parties or persons. What we owe to the community at large is, in my view, more fundamental, but it is owing to individuals that is relevant for the demarcation I want to draw here.

¹ T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998)

Mark Nelson brings up the applicability of “wronging” some person as an objection to utilitarianism.² This is related to my approach, but I do not treat utilitarianism as a comprehensive moral theory, but as offering a line of reasoning for handling moral problems that may or may not make the most sense for some case. Since wronging someone, as I understand it, is conceptually related to what we owe to each other as individuals, this translates to a kind of limiting condition on the applicability of utilitarian reasoning.

So, my proposal is that utilitarian reasoning is rightly applied in ways that are separate from what we owe to each other as individuals. This means that it is (other things equal) best in cases where what we owe to each is not yet settled, or when owing somehow cancels out or conflicts with other owing, or as providing reasons that conflict with what we owe and can sometimes override what we owe to each other (as in a case where we have to sacrifice an innocent person to save the world). In short, it provides reasoning that complements reasoning concerning what we owe to each other as individuals.

² From ISUS-X, Mark Nelson, “What the Utilitarian Cannot Think,” ISUS-X, Tenth Conference of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies, Kadish Center for Morality, Law and Public Affairs, UC Berkeley; <http://escholarship.ucop.edu/uc/item/30d818rq>