



Utilitarianism

Ben Eggleston

LAST MODIFIED: 29 NOVEMBER 2022

DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195396577-0431

Introduction

Utilitarianism is a moral theory that judges actions based on their consequences—specifically, based on their effects on well-being. Most utilitarians take well-being to be constituted largely by happiness, and historically utilitarianism has been known by the phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” As the second part of this phrase suggests, utilitarianism is concerned with the well-being of all people, not just the person who performs an action or the people most directly affected; in fact, because nonhuman animals can also experience pleasure and pain, their well-being also counts in the moral assessment of actions, according to most utilitarians. Thus, a simple statement of the utilitarian view is that an action is right if and only if it brings about at least as much overall well-being as any action the agent could have performed instead. Controversially, this means that, according to utilitarianism, in principle, any type of action—such as lying, stealing, or even killing someone—could conceivably be condoned by utilitarianism if, in the particular circumstances, it would produce at least as much overall well-being as anything else the agent could have done. Utilitarians tend to condemn such actions because they tend to reduce overall well-being, but they hold that the impact on well-being is what makes such actions wrong—not their being prohibited by conventionally accepted moral rules, the commands of a deity, principles of human rights, or other considerations that can conflict with the fundamental moral goal of maximizing overall well-being. In addition to the straightforward form of utilitarianism summarized above, there are other forms of the view, such as ones that judge acts not in terms of their direct effects on overall well-being, but in terms of their compliance with rules whose general acceptance tends to promote well-being. All forms of the view, however, hold that the moral assessment of acts derives directly or indirectly from the fundamental utilitarian moral criterion of the maximization of overall well-being.

General Overviews

For most readers, de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2017 is the best work to start with. They will then be well-situated to enjoy the debate between Smart 1973 and Williams 1973. They can then turn to Brink 2006 to appreciate the place of utilitarianism within consequentialism and several issues that arise there.

Brink, David O. “Some Forms and Limits of Consequentialism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*. Edited by David Copp, 380–423. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

An overview of the general consequentialist approach to ethics, situating utilitarianism within that approach. The chapter is divided into twenty sections, providing clarity of organization and enabling the reader to home in on topics of particular interest. The introduction and sections 1–8 (pp. 380–398) are especially important and accessible.

de Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna, and Peter Singer. *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

A brief and accessible introduction to utilitarianism, by two leading contemporary utilitarian theorists, covering the historical roots of the view, arguments in support of it, objections, different varieties of the view, and its contemporary relevance. Probably the best choice for most readers looking for a brief but substantial introduction presupposing no prior philosophical background.

Smart, J. J. C. “An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics.” In *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Edited by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, 3–74. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

One of the classic defenses of utilitarianism, emphasizing act utilitarianism in particular, and a hedonistic theory of well-being. Brief, direct, and uncompromising. Some aspects of Smart’s view have been superseded by subsequent developments in utilitarian thought, but Smart’s essay is still well worth the time required to read it. Best read just before Williams 1973.

Williams, Bernard. “A Critique of Utilitarianism.” In *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Edited by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, 77–150. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

One of the classic critiques of utilitarianism, by one of the most influential ethicists of the twentieth century, written with his customary verve. The essay’s examples and arguments on two topics—negative responsibility and what has come to be called the integrity objection—have become mainstays of the critical literature on utilitarianism. Even proponents of utilitarianism who consider Williams’s objections misguided generally acknowledge his critique as seminal. Best read just after Smart 1973.

Textbooks and Anthologies

Shaw 1999 is the best textbook on utilitarianism. The “Utilitarianism” website is also very good, as is Mulgan 2020, which features a distinctive focus on ethical issues pertaining to the future. Eggleston and Miller 2014 contains sixteen stand-alone chapters on various aspects of utilitarianism by leading scholars and is useful as either an overview or a focused look at particular areas of interest. Glover 1990 offers excerpts from many influential works exploring various aspects of utilitarianism.

Eggleston, Ben, and Dale E. Miller. *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

An overview of utilitarianism comprising five chapters on the history of utilitarianism (from before Bentham to the twentieth century), four on forms of utilitarianism (including act and rule), two on well-being (subjective and objective), two on contrasts with other views (Kantian ethics and virtue ethics), and three on applications (fairness, the ethics of war, and future people). Throughout, all of the authors maintain a high level of clarity and readability.

Glover, Jonathan, ed. *Utilitarianism and Its Critics*. New York: Macmillan, 1990.

A rich but compact collection of carefully chosen excerpts from dozens of authors addressing various aspects of utilitarianism. The excerpts are grouped into sections on the main idea of utilitarianism, well-being, justice and rights, issues of life and death, and rule utilitarianism and related topics. Most of the excerpts are highly relevant to current scholarly debates.

Mulgan, Tim. *Utilitarianism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

A clear and concise overview of utilitarianism, with special attention to the future, motivated by the concern that climate change and other forces may cause future generations to be successively worse off, in contrast to earlier utilitarians’ optimism about the future as they saw it.

Shaw, William H. *Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.

The best textbook on utilitarianism. It clearly situates the view vis-à-vis rivals, explains arguments and objections, explores refinements of the view, and applies the view to issues relating to rights, punishment, economic justice (including contrasts with Rawls and Nozick), and personal decision-making. Shaw is sympathetic to utilitarianism but entertains objections charitably. Extremely clearly written.

Utilitarianism.

Website including an online textbook, stand-alone articles on several topics, a list of major utilitarian thinkers, lists of utilitarian quotations, and a glossary of utilitarian terms.

Consequentialism

Works on consequentialism are critical to understanding utilitarianism because utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism and many of the battles over the plausibility of utilitarianism are actually fought on the terrain of consequentialism. Pettit 1991 offers a concise overview, while Driver 2012 is an accessible book-length overview. Parfit 1984 contains chapters that have heavily influenced the development of consequentialist thought in the ensuing decades, and Kagan 1989 is a rigorously argued book-length defense of consequentialism. Kamm 2013 sheds additional light on consequentialism by powerfully articulating its rejection, and Foot 1985 is important for its rejection of the idea that states of affairs can be judged better or worse than one another. Sinnott-Armstrong 2019 and Portmore 2020 are excellent resources for pursuing particular topics in more depth.

Driver, Julia. *Consequentialism*. London: Routledge, 2012.

An introduction to consequentialism by one of the field's leading experts. Driver clearly situates utilitarianism as a form of consequentialism and explores different ways in which consequentialism can be formulated. In so doing, she shows the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of consequentialism.

Foot, Philippa. "Utilitarianism and the Virtues." *Mind* 94.374 (1985): 196–209.

Notable for its attack on the conceptual foundations of consequentialism—in particular, its skepticism about the cogency of the concept of better and worse states of affairs, at least in the sense required by consequentialist ethical theory.

Kagan, Shelly. *The Limits of Morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

A defense of consequentialism, focusing on two major objections: the objection that consequentialism is objectionably demanding, in the sacrifices that it requires of some people for the sake of promoting good consequences for other people; and the objection that consequentialism condones immoral actions as means to the pursuit of the good. Both of these objections are rooted in common-sense morality and Kagan attacks them intensively in this rigorously argued book.

Kamm, Frances. "Nonconsequentialism." In *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. 2d ed. Edited by Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson, 261–286. Oxford: Blackwell, 2013.

Illuminates the commitments and costs of consequentialism through a powerful articulation of a diametrically opposed perspective. Later sections of the chapter may be challenging for some readers, but the earlier sections present the main topics clearly and precisely.

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Among the most influential books on consequentialism in the twentieth century. Part I offers a penetrating examination of consequentialist principles and objections to them; especially influential have been its discussions of the alleged self-defeatingness of consequentialist principles. Part IV has also been seminal for consequentialists, due to its discussions of population ethics.

Pettit, Philip. "Consequentialism." In *A Companion to Ethics*. Edited by Peter Singer, 230–240. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

A concise and precise statement of some key elements of consequentialism. Generally regarded as the source of the distinction between promoting and honoring good, which is now a prominent criterion for distinguishing consequentialist from nonconsequentialist views. Also briefly addresses objections to consequentialism and some considerations in support of it.

Portmore, Douglas, ed. *Oxford Handbook of Consequentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

A collection of thirty-two essays grouped into four main topics: foundational issues; objections; forms and limits; and policy, practice, and social reform. An outstanding resource for pursuing particular aspects of consequentialism in depth.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. "Consequentialism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2019.

A free, thorough, clear, and well-organized resource, by a leading scholar of the field. Can be read from beginning to end or consulted on specific topics.

Well-Being

Works on well-being are critical to understanding utilitarianism because utilitarianism is distinguished from other forms of consequentialism by its commitment to the idea that the goodness of a state of affairs is determined by the well-being of the individuals in it. Crisp 2021 provides a concise overview of the topic. Lin 2022 focuses on the concept of well-being itself, and Bradley 2014 and Heathwood 2014 jointly provide a superb overview of the two main options for conceptualizing well-being—objectivism and subjectivism. Hurka 2011 offers a broadly objectivist perspective for the general reader. Dorsey 2012 and Sobel 2016 probe further into the prospects and merits of subjectivist approaches. Feldman 2004 is the leading contemporary defense of hedonism. Parfit 1984 is an indispensable touchstone for contemporary theorists of well-being, and Fletcher 2016 is a tremendous resource for further study.

Bradley, Ben. "Objective Theories of Well-Being." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 220–238. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

A very clear and readable introduction to objective theories of well-being, exploring different forms of the view. Also gives special attention to the surprisingly subtle question of how the distinction between objective and subjective views should be formulated.

Crisp, Roger. "Well-Being." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2021.

A clear and concise overview of the concept of well-being, covering challenges to the very idea, types of theories of well-being (hedonism, desire theory, and objective-list theories), and connections between well-being and morality.

Dorsey, Dale. "Subjectivism without Desire." *The Philosophical Review* 121.3 (2012): 407–442.

Argues for a form of subjectivism in which a person's valuing something (which subjectivists generally agree is the basis of something's contributing to the person's well-being) is understood not in terms of the person's desiring the item (the usual construal) but in terms of the person's judging it to be good for them.

Feldman, Fred. *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.

The leading contemporary defense of the view that well-being is constituted solely by pleasure.

Fletcher, Guy. *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*. London: Routledge, 2016.

A collection of forty-one papers grouped into six main topics: well-being in the history of moral philosophy, theories of well-being, particular goods and bads, theoretical issues, well-being in moral and political philosophy, and well-being in other disciplines. An outstanding resource for pursuing particular aspects of well-being in depth.

Heathwood, Chris. "Subjective Theories of Well-Being." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 199–219. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

An extremely readable introduction to subjective theories of well-being, sympathetically contrasting them with objective theories. This chapter also distinguishes different forms of the view and their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Hurka, Thomas. *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reflections on well-being from one of the leading figures in the field. Although Hurka is the author of several influential books in academic philosophy, this book is highly accessible to the general reader as well as very worthwhile for specialists.

Lin, Eden. "Well-Being, Part 1: The Concept of Well-Being." *Philosophy Compass* 17.2 (2022): e12812.

An examination of the concept of well-being, and related concepts. This article also explores some of the roles these concepts play in ethical thought and examines some attempts to analyze them. Readers who enjoy this article might note that the next article in the journal is a companion article, also by Lin, on theories of well-being.

Parfit, Derek. "Appendix I: What Makes Someone's Life Go Best." In *Reasons and Persons*. By Derek Parfit, 493–502. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Presents the tripartite taxonomy of theories of well-being comprising hedonistic theories, desire-fulfillment theories, and objective-list theories. Dense but probing and influential.

Sobel, David. *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

A collection of essays from one of the leading writers on subjectivism about well-being and reasons, articulating and supporting the fundamental commitments of the view and defending it against a wide range of objections. Notable for its attention to the tension between subjectivism and morality.

Act versus Rule Utilitarianism

Whereas act utilitarianism holds that the rightness of any given act depends on whether it maximizes overall well-being, rule utilitarianism holds that the rightness of any given act depends on whether it complies with rules whose general acceptance would maximize overall well-being. The divide between these two kinds of utilitarianism is one of the most important intramural debates within utilitarian theorizing of the past century. Eggleston 2014 and Miller 2014 jointly provide a good overview of the two sides of this debate and their points of contrast. Hooker 2015 provides a clear and authoritative overview of rule consequentialism (equally useful as an introduction to rule utilitarianism), and Miller 2021 provides a notable advance on the topic of the general adoption of rules. Good access points into the views of the most influential contributors to the development of rule utilitarianism are provided in Harrod 1936, Smart 1956, Lyons 1965, Brandt 1996, Hooker 2000, and Hooker 2021.

Brandt, Richard B. *Facts, Values, and Morality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

The last and most comprehensive presentation of the moral views of one of the leading moral theorists of the second half of the twentieth century, and one of the two leading contributors to rule-utilitarian thought (along with Brad Hooker). Chapter 5, "Optimal Social Moralities," is especially relevant for this topic.

Eggleston, Ben. "Act Utilitarianism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 125–145. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

An introduction to act utilitarianism, explaining the basic components of the view, its contrast with rule utilitarianism, the main arguments in support of it, and the main objections to it.

Harrod, R. F. "Utilitarianism Revised." *Mind* 145.78 (1936): 137–156.

Arguably initiated the 20th-century emergence of rule utilitarianism as a distinct alternative to act utilitarianism.

Hooker, Brad. *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

The best book-length presentation of a moral theory of interest to rule utilitarians. Although Hooker's consequentialism is not a form of utilitarianism, his work on rule consequentialism addresses the major issues of rule utilitarianism and makes him, along with Richard Brandt, one of the two leading contributors to rule-utilitarian thought.

Hooker, Brad. "Rule Consequentialism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2015.

An overview of rule consequentialism, including why it is best formulated as a non-utilitarian form of consequentialism, different possible formulations of the view, and objections to it.

Hooker, Brad. "Parfit's Final Arguments in Normative Ethics." In *Principles and Persons: The Legacy of Derek Parfit*. Edited by Jeff McMahan, Tim Campbell, James Goodrich, and Ketan Ramakrishnan, 213–232. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Traces the evolution of the normative-ethical views of the twentieth century's greatest influence on the development of consequentialist thought, from defending act consequentialism against objections to finding rule consequentialism more plausible. Illuminates key issues and points of contrast in ways accessible even to readers unfamiliar with Parfit's works.

Lyons, David. *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.

A pivotal contribution to the development of rule utilitarianism, due to its penetrating examination of the different possible forms of the view. Especially influential for its diagnosis of some forms of rule utilitarianism as "extensionally equivalent" to act utilitarianism. Subsequently, rule utilitarians tended to scrupulously heed Lyons's warnings and ensure their views did not fail in that manner.

Miller, Dale E. "Rule Utilitarianism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 146–165. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

An introduction to rule utilitarianism, explaining the basic components of the view, its various versions, the main arguments in support of it, and the main objections to it.

Miller, Dale E. "Moral Education and Rule Consequentialism." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71.1 (2021): 120–140.

Investigates the question, crucial for rule consequentialists, of how to understand the idea of the general adoption of a code of rules. Criticizes prevalent approaches, such as understanding the adoption of a code as consisting of the following of it, or the general acceptance of it. Proposes a novel approach on which the general adoption of a moral code consists of its being generally taught.

Smart, J. J. C. "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 6.25 (1956): 344–354.

Early contribution to the debate between act and rule utilitarianism (referred to by Smart as "extreme" and "restricted"). Short, highly readable, and still relevant.

Two-Level Act Utilitarianism

Many proponents of utilitarianism who have sought to meaningfully incorporate rules into the theory without departing from the act-utilitarian standard of rightness (as rule utilitarians do) have advocated a two-level form of the view. (This form of act utilitarianism is sometimes called "indirect utilitarianism," though that label is confusing because it is also sometimes applied to rule utilitarianism itself.) On one level stands the principle of act utilitarianism as a criterion of rightness, and the other level comprises rules that effectively function as a decision-procedure for promoting well-being. Although this view can be found in many utilitarian works of the past several centuries, it was formulated with heightened explicitness in the second half of the twentieth century in the works of R. M. Hare and others.

Works by R. M. Hare

R. M. Hare (b. 1919–d. 2002) was known for articulating a form of act utilitarianism with two prominent features. First, it was explicitly based on a particular meta-ethical view, which was based in turn on the linguistic analysis of moral terms. Using this approach, Hare argued that moral claims are prescriptive, and that they are universalizable. While these theses are not controversial in themselves, Hare's provocative contribution was to argue that they entail the truth of act utilitarianism. The other prominent feature of Hare's view was the two-level structure of his act utilitarianism. Although contemporary discussions of act utilitarianism rarely include meta-ethical justifications of the view, they often advocate two-level structures that can plausibly be seen as influenced by Hare's. Hare 1989c and Hare 1989a provide good overviews of Hare's entire agenda. For more on his two-level act utilitarianism, see Hare 1989b and chapters 1–3 of Hare 1981. Seanor and Fotion 1988 is a rich resource for closer study of Hare 1981. Hare 1989, cited under Other Authors, provides Hare's response to the objection that utilitarianism is an unacceptable moral theory because it implies that slavery is sometimes morally permissible.

Hare, R. M. *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Hare's most influential articulation of his moral philosophy. Chapters 1–3 are a frequently cited source for his two-level utilitarianism.

Hare, R. M. "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism." In *Essays in Ethical Theory*. By R. M. Hare, 212–230. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989a.

Like Hare 1989c, this essay offers an overview of Hare's ethics, ranging from his meta-ethics to his two-level act utilitarianism. It also contains some additional material, such as remarks on the (then recently published) theory of justice of John Rawls. (An earlier version of this essay was published in 1976.)

Hare, R. M. "Principles." In *Essays in Ethical Theory*. By R. M. Hare, 49–65. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989b.

An excellent articulation of two-level moral thinking. (An earlier version of this essay was published in 1973.)

Hare, R. M. "The Structure of Ethics and Morals." In *Essays in Ethical Theory*. By R. M. Hare, 175–190. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989c.

Concise overview of Hare's entire ethical theory, including his theses of prescriptivity and universalizability, their supposed entailment of act utilitarianism, and the two-level structure of that view. Unlike most of the chapters of the book in which this essay appears, this one was not published previously.

Seanor, Douglas, and N. Fotion. *Hare and Critics: Essays on Moral Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

A collection of essays on Hare 1981, followed by nearly a hundred pages of replies by Hare. A rich resource for a deeper consideration of Hare's most important book.

Works by Other Authors

Toward the end of the twentieth century, several other authors wrote papers clearly articulating two-level act utilitarianism. Railton 1984 is probably the most prominent of these, but Bales 1971, Sprigge 1989, and Crisp 1992 are all valuable contributions with their own distinctive emphases. Stocker 1976 and Wolf 1982 can be read as raising concerns of the kind that these authors are attempting to address.

Bales, R. Eugene. "Act-Utilitarianism: Account of Right-Making Characteristics or Decision-Making Procedure?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8.3 (1971): 257–265.

Generally recognized as the earliest explicit articulation—evident even in the subtitle of the article—of the distinction on which two-level act utilitarianism is based.

Crisp, Roger. "Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42.167 (1992): 139–160.

Proposes a form of two-level act utilitarianism on which living a life of virtue provides the second, or decision-making, level of the view.

Railton, Peter. "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13.2 (1984): 134–171.

Perhaps the most widely read articulation of two-level act utilitarianism. Clearly explains the motivation for the view and presents the view systematically. Especially relevant are sections I–VII (pp. 134–160).

Sprigge, T. L. S. "Utilitarianism and Respect for Human Life." *Utilitas* 1.1 (1989): 1–21.

Argues for two-level act utilitarianism with special attention to the respect for human life that should be a major component of the second, or decision-making, level of the view.

Stocker, Michael. "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories." *The Journal of Philosophy* 73.14 (1976): 453–466.

Argues that being motivated to act as utilitarianism requires is incompatible with the personality traits that are essential for love, true friendship, and other deep attachments to other people—or that if one manages to maintain those personality traits while embracing utilitarian ethics, the person will experience a disharmony or a kind of "schizophrenia."

Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79.8 (1982): 419–439.

Argues that a “moral saint”—someone entirely committed to a certain moral outlook, even a correct one—would be denied many of the fundamental goods of human lives, such as certain kinds of relationships and full enjoyment of goods such as humor, culture, and sports.

Satisficing

Another modification proposed by some utilitarians to address objections to standard forms of the view is to replace the traditional maximizing standard of rightness with a “satisficing” one, on which an act is right if it is “good enough” in a specified way. The debate between Slote 1984 and Pettit 1984 is an excellent starting point, and Bradley 2006 and Rogers 2010 offer another illuminating exchange. Byron 2004 is an excellent resource for further study.

Bradley, Ben. “Against Satisficing Consequentialism.” *Utilitas* 18.2 (2006): 97–108.

Rejects satisficing consequentialism by formulating several versions of the view and showing that each permits agents to gratuitously prevent goodness—i.e., bring about a less-than-optimal outcome in order to prevent a better outcome from obtaining.

Byron, Michael, ed. *Satisficing and Maximizing: Moral Theorists on Practical Reason*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

A collection of eleven papers exploring the merits of sacrificing with reference to various ethical viewpoints as well as practical reason more generally.

Pettit, Philip. “Satisficing Consequentialism, Part II.” *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 58.1 (1984): 139–163.

Concedes the rationality of a satisficing strategy in some circumstances but rejects satisficing as a generally rational standard for the assessment of action.

Rogers, Jason. “In Defense of a Version of Satisficing Consequentialism.” *Utilitas* 22.2 (2010): 198–221.

Offers a qualified defense of a version of satisficing consequentialism, primarily in response to objections offered in Bradley 2006.

Slote, Michael. “Satisficing Consequentialism, Part I.” *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 58.1 (1984): 139–163.

Argues that satisficing consequentialism can be defended both with reference to common-sense morality and with reference to the rationality of satisficing in individual choice as studied in economics.

Other Forms of Utilitarianism

In addition to rule utilitarianism, two-level act utilitarianism, and satisficing utilitarianism, other forms of utilitarianism have emerged with varying degrees of prominence. Jackson 1991 and Feldman 2006 show the advantages and limitations of incorporating expected-utility reasoning into consequentialism—a maneuver advocated by many utilitarians and other consequentialists. Pettit and Smith 2000 explore the merits of a reorientation of standard consequentialist methods of assessing various kinds of items of evaluation. Finally, Norcross 2020 proposes that utilitarians abandon the notion of rightness, at least at the fundamental level of the theory, and focus instead on some actions’ being better or worse than others.

Feldman, Fred. "Actual Utility, the Objection from Impracticality, and the Move to Expected Utility." *Philosophical Studies* 129.1 (2006): 49–79.

Casts doubt on the concept of expected utility as a device for making utilitarianism easier to apply, or more action-guiding.

Jackson, Frank. "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection." *Ethics* 131.3 (1991): 461–482.

Incorporates expected-utility reasoning from decision theory and economics into consequentialism, leading to a form of the view according to which the rightness of an action depends not on the value of its actual consequences, but on the expected value of its possible consequences. Although Jackson was not the first to propose this approach, his article is widely regarded as an especially clear presentation and defense of it.

Norcross, Alastair. *Morality by Degrees: Reasons without Demands*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Argues that utilitarians and other consequentialists should abandon the principle that an act is right if and only if it produces the best possible outcome, and indeed should abandon the notion of rightness altogether, at least at the fundamental level of the theory. Argues they should, instead, simply assess actions as better or worse than one another. Lively, clear, and brief.

Pettit, Philip, and Michael Smith. "Global Consequentialism." In *Morality, Rules, and Consequences: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Brad Hooker, Elinor Mason, and Dale E. Miller, 121–133. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

Argues against the tendency, found in some forms of act consequentialism and rule consequentialism, to privilege some specific item of evaluation such as acts or rules. Argues that such "local" forms of consequentialism should be rejected in favor of "global" consequentialism, which applies the consequentialist standard of assessment directly to all possible evaluands.

Contrasts with Other Views

Although countless works in moral philosophy address the contrasts among various ethical views, some merit particular note here because of the proximity of those other views to utilitarianism or because of the directness of the contrasts that the authors draw. Contractualism and utilitarianism are sharply contrasted in Scanlon 1982. Kantian ethics is generally considered antithetical to utilitarianism, but the connections between them are intriguing, as discussed by Hare 1993, Timmermann 2005, and Timmermann 2014. Consequentialists critique deontological views more generally as being vulnerable to the "paradox of deontology"; this issue is discussed in Scheffler 1994 and Heuer 2011. Driver 2001 articulates a consequentialist theory of virtue, and Russell 2014 explores areas of potential overlap between utilitarianism and virtue ethics. Finally, prioritarianism is at odds with but closely related to utilitarianism; rather than giving equal weight to all persons' increases in well-being, it prioritizes the people who are worst off. Parfit 1997 is the canonical paper articulating this view, and Arneson 2022 is a more substantive overview compassing developments in the ensuing decades.

Arneson, Richard J. *Prioritarianism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

An overview of prioritarianism, explaining the motivation for the view and contrasting it with alternatives, including utilitarianism.

Driver, Julia. *Uneasy Virtue*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

A challenge to Aristotle's classic theory of virtue, claiming that it fails to account for virtues that involve apparent intellectual deficiencies such as ignorance. Articulates a consequentialist perspective on which a virtue is simply a character trait that systematically produces good consequences.

Hare, R. M. "Could Kant Have Been a Utilitarian?" *Utilitas* 5.1 (1993): 1–16.

Argues that although Kant was clearly not a utilitarian, he could have been, without violating his core philosophical commitments. Rebutted by Timmermann 2005.

Heuer, Ulrike. "The Paradox of Deontology, Revisited." In *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*. Vol. 1. Edited by Mark Timmons, 236–267. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Clearly explains the paradox of deontology and offers a qualified rebuttal to it in support of some deontological constraints.

Parfit, Derek. "Equality and Priority." *Ratio* 10.3 (1997): 202–221.

Generally regarded as originating the now-sprawling literature on prioritarianism. Admirably clear and still highly relevant.

Russell, Daniel C. "What Virtue Ethics Can Learn from Utilitarianism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 258–279. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Notes that virtue ethics would be improved by incorporating some insights from utilitarianism—such as the proper role of cost-benefit analysis in some situations—but also maintains that utilitarian reasoning should not influence other kinds of decisions.

Scanlon, T. M. "Contractualism and Utilitarianism." In *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Edited by Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, 103–128. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Motivates a contractualist approach to ethics as avoiding the shortcomings of utilitarianism. Highly influential in framing the contrast between these two perspectives.

Scheffler, Samuel. *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions*. Rev ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Examines consequentialism closely and advocates a particular modestly nonconsequentialist alternative. The fourth chapter and the first appendix discuss the paradox of deontology thoroughly.

Timmermann, Jens. "Why Kant Could Not Have Been a Utilitarian." *Utilitas* 17.3 (2005): 243–264.

Thorough rebuttal of Hare 1993, on the grounds (inter alia) that Kant's theory of value is essentially anti-utilitarian, that utilitarianism cannot accommodate the central Kantian principle of rational contradiction as the source of moral imperatives, and that utilitarianism cannot accommodate the Kantian centrality of motivation as a determinant of the moral quality of actions.

Timmermann, Jens. "Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, 239–257. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Explores the points of similarity and contrast between utilitarianism and Kantian approaches to ethics. Especially helpful for its highlighting of surprising similarities and its critique of attempts to assimilate Kantian ethics into utilitarianism, such as Hare 1993.

Utilitarianism and Rights

A traditional objection to utilitarianism is that it would permit or even require actions that would violate individual rights, such as the right of people not to be punished for crimes they did not commit, or otherwise have their important interests sacrificed for the greater good. McCloskey 1965 and Sprigge 1965 debate the plausibility of the implications of utilitarianism regarding punishment. Dworkin 1984 powerfully articulates the image of rights as overriding utilitarian calculations, and Lyons 1984 expresses pessimism about the possibility of utilitarianism providing a solid account of moral or legal rights. Gray 1984 explores the possibility of such an account being provided by two-level act utilitarianism, and Sumner 1987 presents a book-length account of a consequentialist theory of rights. Brandt 1996 critiques the project of accounting for rights via two-level act utilitarianism and defends a rule-utilitarian account of moral rights against the objections of Lyons 1984. Norcross 2011 defends act utilitarianism as capturing what is morally important about rights.

Brandt, Richard B. "Utilitarianism and Moral Rights." In *Facts, Values, and Morality*. By Richard B. Brandt, 196–212. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Argues that rule utilitarianism is capable of accommodating moral rights, and rebuts objections stated in a precursor of Lyons 1984. Also critiques the prospects of moral rights being accommodated in a Hare-style two-level act utilitarianism. This chapter is a lightly revised version of a paper first published in 1984.

Dworkin, Ronald. "Rights as Trumps." In *Theories of Rights*. Edited by Jeremy Waldron, 153–167. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Source of the influential metaphor of rights as "trumps," in the sense that they override normally important social goals such as the promotion of aggregate well-being. Adapted by Dworkin from a 1981 journal article.

Gray, John. "Indirect Utility and Fundamental Rights." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1.2 (1984): 73–91.

An "avowedly exploratory paper" tentatively presenting some considerations suggesting that utilitarians might provide a good account of fundamental rights by availing themselves of the option of two-level act utilitarianism (referred to by Gray as "indirect utilitarianism").

Lyons, David. "Utility and Rights." In *Theories of Rights*. Edited by Jeremy Waldron, 110–136. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Argues that utilitarianism not only conflicts with the idea of moral rights, but is also incapable of providing a sound basis for legal and other institutional rights. Reprinted from a 1982 collection of essays.

McCloskey, H. J. "A Non-Utilitarian Approach to Punishment." *Inquiry* 8.3 (1965): 249–263.

Criticizes utilitarianism for prescribing unjust punishment, and argues for a retributivist approach instead. Replied to by Sprigge 1965.

Norcross, Alastair. "Act-Utilitarianism and Promissory Obligation." In *Promises and Agreements: Philosophical Essays*. Edited by Hanoach Sheinman, 217–236. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Defends act utilitarianism as providing a fully satisfactory account of the moral considerations relevant to promising.

Sprigge, T. L. S. "A Utilitarian Reply to Dr. McCloskey." *Inquiry* 8.3 (1965): 264–291.

A reply to McCloskey 1965, defending utilitarianism as providing plausible moral guidance on the topic of punishment.

Sumner, L. W. *The Moral Foundations of Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Begins with an intensive analysis of the concept of rights, then critiques natural-law and contractarian bases for moral rights before presenting a consequentialist account of such rights. A formidable contribution to this topic.

Aggregation

An aspect of utilitarianism that has attracted considerable criticism is its commitment to aggregation, whereby the benefits and harms experienced by different people are conceived as combined into one total. On this topic, two relatively self-contained subtopics have emerged: the question of the moral significance of different numbers of people being affected by different possible actions, and the question of whether many small harms and benefits can outweigh a few large ones.

The Number Problem

A special case of the aggregation question is what is sometimes called the number problem—the question of the moral importance of different numbers of people being positively or negatively affected by different possible actions. Rawls 1971 claims that utilitarianism, by being concerned with total numbers of people, ignores the separateness of persons; Brink 1993 replies. Taurek 1977, Parfit 1978, and Taurek 2021 debate the principle that benefits to more people count for more, morally, than benefits to fewer. Otsuka 2006, Lawlor 2006, and Liao 2008 offer astute commentaries on that debate. Hirose 2014 offers a book-length articulation of a distinctive theory of aggregation.

Brink, David. “The Separateness of Persons, Distributive Norms, and Moral Theory.” In *Value, Welfare, and Morality*. Edited by R. G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris, 252–289. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Closely analyzes the “separateness of persons” objection (as found in Rawls 1971 and other sources) and denies the claim that such considerations undermine utilitarianism and favor contractualism.

Hirose, Iwao. *Moral Aggregation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

One of the few book-length discussions of aggregation. The first part of the book analyzes the concept of aggregation and defends a new theory intended to distinguish cases in which aggregation is justified from those in which it is not. The second part of the book applies the theory to the number problem using a series of illuminating examples.

Lawlor, Rob. “Taurek, Numbers and Probabilities.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9.2 (2006): 149–166.

Argues that the numbers of people who stand to be benefited or harmed by possible actions do count, but that this does not imply that one should always save more people from harm rather than fewer. Also argues that there is moral value in giving each person in danger of suffering harm a chance of being saved, but that this does not imply that one should randomly select which action to choose.

Liao, S. Matthew. “Who Is Afraid of Numbers?” *Utilitas* 20.4 (2008): 447–461.

Argues that one does not need to reject aggregation in order to respect the separateness of persons. Primarily intended to show an attractive conceptual possibility for nonconsequentialists (to show that they can support saving more people from harm rather than fewer, without abjuring the separateness of persons), but of interest to utilitarians and other consequentialists as well, since their commitment to aggregation is often criticized as neglecting the separateness of persons.

Otsuka, Michael. “Saving Lives, Moral Theory, and the Claims of Individuals.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 34.2 (2006): 109–135.

Examines the number problem from the perspective of several moral theories, including utilitarianism.

Parfit, Derek. "Innumerate Ethics." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7.4 (1978): 285–301.

A reply to Taurek 1977.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971.

The most influential work in moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Acknowledges the dominance of utilitarianism in modern moral philosophy but argues it is flawed, largely because its aggregating perspective fails to take seriously the separateness of persons. This objection is found in sections 5 and 6 (pp. 22–33); utilitarianism is also critiqued in sections 27 and 28 (pp. 161–175). Brink 1993 replies.

Taurek, John M. "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6.4 (1977): 293–316.

Famous denial of the view that (e.g.) it is worse for five people to needlessly die than for one to do so. Together with Parfit 1978, this paper has spawned a considerable literature.

Taurek, John M. "Reply to Parfit's 'Innumerate Ethics.'" In *Principles and Persons: The Legacy of Derek Parfit*. Edited by Jeff McMahan, Tim Campbell, James Goodrich, and Ketan Ramakrishnan, 311–322. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

A reply to Parfit 1978.

Harms and Benefits of Different Degrees

Another aspect of the aggregation question concerns whether many small harms and benefits can outweigh a few large ones. Norcross 1997 is an excellent starting point, arguing in the affirmative, followed by a reply from Ridge 1998 and a rejoinder from Norcross 1998; Paul, et al. 2009 provides fourteen papers on the topic of utilitarianism and aggregation, and Voorhoeve 2014 offers a novel principle of aggregation intended to be more intuitively plausible than prior views.

Norcross, Alastair. "Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26.2 (1997): 135–167.

Advocates a strong form of the aggregationist perspective, defending the implication that there is some number of people such that saving them from headaches would justify the taking of an innocent person's life.

Norcross, Alastair. "Speed Limits, Human Lives, and Convenience: A Reply to Ridge." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27.1 (1998): 59–64.

A reply to Ridge 1998, defending the claims of Norcross 1997.

Paul, Ellen Frankel, Fred Dycus Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, eds. *Special Issue: Utilitarianism: The Aggregation Question*. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 26.1 (2009).

A special issue of the journal, containing fourteen papers on the aggregation question.

Ridge, Michael. "How to Avoid Being Driven to Consequentialism: A Comment on Norcross." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27.1 (1998): 50–58.

A reply to Norcross 1997, criticizing Norcross's defense of taking one life in order to prevent many headaches.

Voorhoeve, Alex. "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?" *Ethics* 125.1 (2014): 64–87.

Offers a novel principle of aggregation in order to conform to both of the following intuitions: (1) we ought to save a large number from being permanently bedridden rather than save one from death; (2) we ought to save one from death rather than a multitude from a very minor harm, no matter how large this multitude.

The History of Utilitarianism: John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill is the most influential figure in the history of utilitarianism. Mill 1963–1991 provides access to his work. Mill 1998, Mill 2017, Crisp 1997, and West 2004 provide further insight into his utilitarianism specifically, and Donner 1991, Miller 2010, and Macleod 2017 provide broader perspectives. Macleod and Miller 2017 is an outstanding resource for further study.

Crisp, Roger. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*. London: Routledge, 1997.

A book-length guide to Mill's *Utilitarianism*, closely examining the major elements of the essay. Also draws connections between Mill's thought and later developments in utilitarian thought. A uniquely valuable resource for readers of Mill's essay.

Donner, Wendy. *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Subtle corrective to conventional Mill scholarship, countering the traditional focus on Mill's account of moral rightness and obligation with a turn toward Mill's complex account of the good for human beings.

Macleod, Christopher. "Mill." In *The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy*. Edited by Sacha Golob and Jens Timmermann, 436–447. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

An overview of Mill's moral philosophy, distinguished by its special strength of situating Mill's ethics within his broader naturalistic outlook. Also strong on the historical context within which Mill worked and Mill's views on in the higher pleasures and freedom.

Macleod, Christopher, and Dale E. Miller, eds. *A Companion to Mill*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

A collection of thirty-seven essays grouped into sections on Mill, influences on his thought, the foundations of this thought, his moral philosophy, his social philosophy, and his influence on later movements in philosophy. An outstanding resource.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Online Library of Liberty, 1963–1991.

Edited by J. M. Robson and originally published by Toronto University Press from 1963 to 1991, these thirty-three volumes are an invaluable resource for Mill scholars. Essential works include *Utilitarianism* (arguably the single most important work on utilitarianism) and "Whewell on Moral Philosophy" (both in volume X).

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Edited by Roger Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Superb edition of Mill's essay, including a detailed introduction that introduces readers to utilitarianism in general as well as Mill's essay, a paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the text, and detailed notes to explain potentially unfamiliar references in the text.

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism: With Related Remarks from Mill's Other Writings*. Edited by Ben Eggleston. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2017.

Unique edition of Mill's essay, supplementing the text with fifty-eight related remarks carefully selected from Mill's other writings, ranging from his treatise on logic to his personal correspondence. In these remarks, Mill comments on specific passages of *Utilitarianism*, elaborates on topics he handles briefly in *Utilitarianism*, and discusses additional aspects of his moral thought. Short introductory comments accompany the related remarks, and an editor's introduction provides an overview of *Utilitarianism* crafted specifically to enhance accessibility for first-time readers of the essay.

Miller, Dale E. *J.S. Mill: Moral, Social and Political Thought*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010.

Outstanding survey of Mill's contributions to moral, social, and political philosophy, by a leading Mill scholar. One portion of the book offers a probing analysis of Mill's utilitarian thought and others address his views on political philosophy and political economy. Invaluable for situating Mill's ethics in the context of his views on human interactions more broadly.

West, Henry R. *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

A thorough overview of Mill's moral theory. Especially notable for its awareness and incorporation of Mill's remarks on utilitarianism in other sources than his *Utilitarianism*, enabling West to assemble a much more detailed and nuanced account of Mill's moral theory than just the central text would provide.

The History of Utilitarianism: Other Figures

Although the roots of utilitarian thought go back to Epicurus and other ancient thinkers, a reasonable starting point in studying the history of utilitarianism is a pair of 18th-century works: Hutcheson 2004 and Hume 2006, first published in 1726 and 1748, respectively. Crisp 2014 provides a helpful overview of the next phase in the history of utilitarianism, including Bentham 1996 (first published in 1789), the works of John Stuart Mill (see *The History of Utilitarianism: John Stuart Mill*), and Sidgwick 1981 (first published in 1907). Rosen 2003 discusses the period from Hume to Mill in more detail, and Crimmins 2021 offers a closer look at Bentham specifically. For more on Sidgwick, Crisp 2015 analyzes his major work and de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014 develops his insights in a contemporary context. Moore 1993 (first published in 1903) arguably concludes the "classical" era of the history of utilitarianism.

Bentham, Jeremy. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Edited by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

First published in 1789, this is the first systematic treatise on utilitarianism.

Crimmins, James E. "Jeremy Bentham." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2021.

A thorough overview, by a leading Bentham scholar. Sections 3–5 provide a concise overview of Bentham's utilitarianism.

Crisp, Roger. "Taking Stock of Utilitarianism." *Utilitas* 26.3 (2014): 231–249.

An examination of how lessons from major historical figures—particularly Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick—can inform contemporary utilitarian thought, especially with regard to the intuitionist method of justifying utilitarianism. An illuminating synoptic perspective from a leading scholar of the history of utilitarianism.

Crisp, Roger. *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015.

A comprehensive close study of Sidgwick 1981, illuminating many aspects of that challenging treatise and providing a critical assessment of its major claims.

de Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna, and Peter Singer. *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

A defense of the key elements of Sidgwick's ethics, including his objectivism about moral truth, his hedonistic utilitarianism, his most famous metaphor—that we must take “the point of view of the universe” in order to do ethics soundly. Plausibly seen as the articulation of a contemporary Sidgwickian ethics rather than a primarily historical study.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Hume deemed this essay, first published in 1748, his best work. Although it is more descriptive of moral sentiment than prescriptive of action, it still represents an important moment in the history of utilitarianism for its assertion of the prevalent role of considerations of usefulness or agreeableness in moral thought, including concepts that are often assumed to be independent of considerations of utility, such as justice.

Hutcheson, Francis. *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. Rev ed. Edited by Wolfgang Leidhold. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2004.

First published in 1726, this book provides a primitive but seminal statement of a utilitarian approach to morality, including the first occurrence of the phrase “the greatest Happiness for the greatest Numbers.”

Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Rev ed. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

First published in 1903, this book is best known for representing (if not causing) the turn toward meta-ethical questions that dominated in the twentieth century. However, it is also an important stage in the development of utilitarian thought. Although Moore was a non-utilitarian consequentialist, utilitarian thought is illuminated by the form of consequentialism he developed, especially his act consequentialism combined with an emphasis on the role of rules in moral decision-making. Especially relevant is chapter 5, “Ethics in Relation to Conduct.”

Rosen, Frederick. *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*. London: Routledge, 2003.

An analysis of the development of utilitarian thought in the works of David Hume, Adam Smith, Claude Adrien Helvétius, Jeremy Bentham, William Paley, and John Stuart Mill. Focuses on the idea of utility, its role in the foundation of morality, and its relationship to the ideas of justice and liberty.

Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. 7th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981.

This edition is a reprint of the authoritative 1907 edition of Sidgwick's treatise, which is regarded as articulating utilitarian thought with unprecedented subtlety and rigor, especially in regard to questions of the relationship between utilitarianism and common-sense morality, the relationship between utilitarianism and egoism, and the justifications of those three views.

Applications

Although most scholars of utilitarianism focus on assessing and improving its theoretical components, applications of utilitarianism to contemporary moral issues illuminate both those issues and utilitarianism itself.

Peter Singer

Peter Singer (b. 1946) is by far the most influential figure in the application of utilitarian reasoning to contemporary moral issues in publications and speeches for general audiences. His writings are invariably clear and engaging. In 2021, these contributions were recognized with the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture. Singer 2000 provides excerpts from prior writings by Singer, Singer 2011 is a textbook on contemporary moral issues, and Singer 2016 focuses on issues in global ethics.

Singer, Peter. *Writings on an Ethical Life*. New York: Ecco Press, 2000.

A collection of excerpts from Singer's 20th-century writings on topics such as the ethical treatment of nonhuman animals, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, and the obligations of the rich to aid the poor. The volume also contains excerpts of autobiographical writings about some of his experiences as a controversial figure.

Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. 3d ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

A textbook on contemporary moral issues written from a utilitarian perspective, providing both practical examples and investigations of the theoretical subtleties those examples raise. Topics discussed include the moral status of nonhuman animals, taking the lives of human embryos and human fetuses, economic inequality, and environmental ethics.

Singer, Peter. *One World Now*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

A trade book addressing issues in global ethics, including climate change, international trade, international law, and aid to poor countries.

Other Authors

Many other authors have written articles and books offering lucidly expressed perspectives on the practical applications of utilitarianism. Hare 1989 tackles the question of whether utilitarianism condones slavery in certain circumstances. Goodin 1995 shows how utilitarianism can be especially helpful in shaping public policy. Unger 1996 is an unflinching application of utilitarian reasoning to the question of the obligations of the rich to provide aid to the poor. MacAskill 2015 uses utilitarian reasoning to ascertain how people can direct their altruistic efforts as effectively as possible. Finally, Shaw 2016 shows the plausibility of utilitarian reasoning in making decisions about war.

Goodin, Robert E. *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Argues that even if critics of utilitarianism are correct in their claim that utilitarianism is a poor guide to personal conduct, the theory can still be a good guide to public decision-making. Of particular interest are chapter 10, on the conflict between utilitarianism and liberalism; chapter 14, on basic income; and chapter 18, on environmental ethics.

Hare, R. M. "What Is Wrong with Slavery." In *Essays on Political Morality Theory*. By R. M. Hare, 148–166. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

An earlier version was published in 1979. This essay confronts the objection that utilitarianism implies that slavery is sometimes morally permissible. Rather than attempting to discuss the objection categorically, Hare allows for the possibility that utilitarianism permits slavery in some circumstances, but argues that such circumstances are extremely unlikely to occur, meaning that utilitarianism's allowing of slavery is less damaging to the view than its critics tend to suggest.

MacAskill, Will. *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.

Addresses the question of which kinds of altruistic donations and activities do the most good, in jargon-free prose peppered with relatable examples. The broadly utilitarian orientation of MacAskill's approach is reflected in his five guiding questions: How many people benefit, and by how much? Is this the most effective thing I can do? Is this area neglected? What would have happened otherwise? What are the chances of success, and how good would success be?

Shaw, William H. *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Defends a utilitarian approach to military ethics. Unusual because this field has traditionally been dominated by nonconsequentialist approaches. Concise, clear, and well-argued.

Unger, Peter. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Thoroughly explores the objection to utilitarianism claiming that it is implausibly demanding because it criticizes the wealthy (those who are "living high") for failing to adequately aid others (and "letting them die"). Unger considers the objection in its basic form and explores related issues that naturally arise. Throughout, the book is propelled by a series of ingenious and engaging thought experiments.

[back to top](#)

Copyright © 2022. All rights reserved.