

A satisfactory  
alternative to  
utilitarianism  
proposals philosophy  
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A Theory of Justice by John Rawls presents a vastly more viable, workable, systematic, and satisfactory alternative to Utilitarianism proposals as a moral theory. While Utilitarianism attempts to spread benefits and burdens across society with the goal of maximizing utility, A Theory of Justice establishes the two first principles which ensure that each member of society first have access to basic liberties and secondly allows for social and economic inequalities to exist provided society is structured so as to benefit those who are the least well off. Additionally, Rawls' Original Position and veil of ignorance ensures that individuals will not set up society so as to give themselves a greater advantage, but rather will have an incentive to set up scheme of justice which treats all members of society fairly as they do not have the information through which they could, with any degree of certainty, stack the deck in their favor. In contrast with utilitarianism Rawls assumes that justice not utility is the overriding factor in creation of a good society.

Additionally, Rawls' principles are ones that free and rational persons would accept under the original position with a veil of ignorance limiting individuals from creating an unfair advantage from the outset. Social contract theory is superior to utilitarianism precisely because it affords each person equal rights to the most extensive basic liberty in alignment with others in society whereas utility as an aim boasts no such ability.

## FIRST PRINCIPLES

The difference principle is the idea that actions taken in society should improve the expectations of the least advantaged members of society.

However it shapes this in the lens of mutual advantage, or as I like to think of

it, “ a tide raises all boats.” Ultimately both persons are better off. Rawls states that “ Inequality in expectation is permissible only if lowering it would make the working class even more worse off.” With this in play, “ Greater expectations allowed to entrepreneurs encourages them to do things which raise the long term prospects of laboring class.” The difference principle in effect takes a small aspect of utility and applies it, in a different way to the least well off.

### DISTINCTION BETWEEN PERSONS

Perhaps Rawls’ greatest critique of Utilitarianism is in regards to the distinction of persons. Utilitarianism can only claim to protect individual rights in so much as the single paramount aim of utility achieves this through maximizes utility. As will be notes later, utility is a horrible tool for achieving this aim.

A Theory of Justice is Rawls’s creation with the goal to create a philosophy of justice that provides more satisfaction in the quest for a system which aptly preserves justice and individual liberties.

His first two principles achieve this and are as follows: The first is that “ each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.” The second is that “ Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that: a) they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle). b) offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity

From this ordering, equal liberty is first and foremost secured, followed by a more satisfactory “social safety net” that allows for economic advantage of some over others in so long as it benefits the least well off.

Transitioning from this basis which respects the distinction of persons, Rawls’ begins his attacks on Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism in a misguided effort, takes the logic that a single individual would rationally make to maximize the benefits and minimize burdens, and tries to apply them to society as a whole. You cannot apply the cost and benefit logic made by one person to the collective of persons society wide. Rawls contends that this lends itself to situations where there is neglect for the separateness of persons in favor of adding up the total happiness and is prone to the violation of basic rights and liberties, which in his view are paramount. While it is perfectly logical for an individual to strive for maximum happiness for themselves, utilitarian theory is flawed in its attempts to apply these concepts to society as a whole.

Social contract theory, in a vastly better way provides protection for individuals.

Rawls uses examples such as Slavery and Suppression of free speech to show how, conceivably, the suppression of one’s rights could be allowed under utilitarianism. For example, suppose a society was built of a strong majority of people, whose entire income was based upon the silence or labor of another class. Were this class of people to be given freedom of speech or rights to vote or freedom from forced labor, the entire society would collapse, resulting in a near complete depletion of utility for the whole. Under the

principles of utilitarianism this liberation should not happen. In the quest to maximize

utility for all citizens other members of society must necessarily be denied any meaningful right or liberties to prop up the whole. Rawls sets up what he calls the the impartial spectator to illustrate this. This individual “ feels” the wants and needs of all in society. From this all knowing snap shot, this person determines the best way to maximize utility overall. In doing this, the spectator may give certain groups higher priority over others due to the constraints of maximizing utility. Thus Rawls argues that potentially very little care will go toward the individual whose rights and freedoms could conceivably be neglected because they make up a minority or insignificant factor in the overarching goal to maximize societies’ utility. From here, he states that “ Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.”. Rawls asserts that his theory is an improvement from this since a theory of justice takes all person into account.

The utilitarian response to this is of course that it is precisely by the focus upon achieving utility and would thereby argue that utility is best achieved when individual rights are protected. However, in contrast with Rawls second principle, the utilitarian idea does not particularly care what the spread of utility is across people. It may well be that utility is best served when all members of society are provided equal rights, but Rawls’ point is that there are compelling examples of where this could be completely untrue(e. g. Slavery).

## EQUILIBRIUM

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The concept of equilibrium is also very important in Rawls' overall theory and the sustenance of the original position. "If a departure from this situation sets in motion tendencies which restore it, the equilibrium is stable." What he means by this is since the agreement is freely struck between individuals and it provides the best situation for all parties involved within this system, there is a built-in check on any activity threatening the system. Since the system maximizes individual interests, provided they are consistent with the rights and freedom of others, the majority of individuals will be benefiting from the system and will work to maintain it. In a way this is reminiscent of utilitarianism. While utility is not being directly calculated, by everyone playing by the rules, it is of maximum benefit to all involved. Essentially, his failsafe measure to preserve the Original Position is everyone's desire to maximize his or her own utility.

### Responsibility

Another appeal for the theory of justice is its upholding of personal responsibility and that dynamic between society and individuals. While under his first principles, society is charged with ensuring liberties the flip side to this is that with this as a starting point,

each individual is responsible for his or her life plan and choices as well as the consequences that emanate from them. A "default" on life plans, does not bring about legitimate grounds for compensation by society. Conversely, if a member succeeds well beyond those around them, this merit-based achievement and wealth/happiness disparity is allowable, provided it benefits the least well-off in society. In society owes the individual only to uphold the

first principles, from there, unlike utilitarianism there is a sort of empowerment of the individual.

## VEIL

Rawls states that for this system to work, all citizens must see themselves as being behind a “ veil of ignorance”. By this he means that all deciding parties

in establishing the guidelines of justice (all citizens) must see themselves as equal to everyone paying no mind to there economic situation or anything else

that they could keep in mind to negotiate a better situation to those qualities. For example, someone who will become wealthy would not be made aware of this due to the veil, and therefore would not attempt to set up the tax code so as to benefit him over others. The individual has an incentive to do this as he or she may end up with the bad end of the deal when all the cards are laid on the table. This sets up a vastly more fair system than utilitarianism can provide. With utilitarianism, a majority could very easily take a look at the way this will play out, and shift them to be in their favor, and this would be allowed should it maximize the total utility.

Another weak area for utilitarianism is in regards to what Rawls asserts in his statement that “ even where laws and institutions are unjust, it is often better that they should be consistently applied. In this way those subject tot them at least know what is demanded and they can try to protect

themselves accordingly.” Expectations are critical. It is important that even if the law is unjust, that it is consistent and clear. The situation that arises out of an unjust and inconsistent law, is that you have a populace unable to shield themselves or judge what their behavior should be to avoid punishment. Utilitarianism, by its very nature offers no such similar consistency since its goal is not justice, but rather utility. It is possible that randomly, one act or another could be made illegal or taxed with the known result that it will increase utility. Of course the counter claim to this is that maximizing utility leads to justice, but again there are countless examples where this would be untrue. I find in solidarity with Rawls in that justice is better served in the contractarian system over the utilitarian system. If the utilitarian system aims to simply have the most happiness spread to the most people possible, where is the justice for those who fall between the cracks of this system and are “sacrificed” as a necessary evil to the happiness of the many?

Additionally, the idea that one injustice will compensate for the other, which on the surface, seems to be what utilitarianism promotes I find no basis in human reasoning. Under the veil of ignorance this would never be allowed. His concept of democratic equality is an alternative to utilitarianism which is vastly more appealing.

He goes on to claim that the reason for the predominance of utilitarianism is due to the vast amount of well refined and impressive writings on the subject. He notes that the great writers for this system were social theorists and economists first and foremost and secondly worked to hash out theories in their writings with which to support and fine tune their beliefs. Throughout <https://assignbuster.com/a-satisfactory-alternative-to-utilitarianism-proposals-philosophy-essay/>



the 19th and 20th century there was near monopoly of thought from the major philosophical theorist in support of utilitarianism.

I tend to agree with Rawls in his assertion that these theories received a very secluded amount of scrutiny toward Utilitarianism's weak points. While the positives of the system were well distributed and known, the skeptical voices were given a less widespread audience.

I also agree with Rawls in his belief that there must be an alternative option available to people and that pointing out the flaws of utilitarianism isn't enough. A choice must be given and is given in A Theory of Justice.. It is never enough to simply sit back and point the finger in a critique. Rather, an alternative must and is provided by Rawls.

Rawls also defeats utilitarianism in the battle for a balance between liberty and equality. Under his first principles, liberty is adequately served in that he understands that there will always arise a disparity of wealth within society, but then with his second principle he establishes a check upon the trampling of the lowest in society. In Rawls' view, this is fair due to the veil and essential aspect is the securing of basic liberties for all as in his first principle. In contrast however, when utility becomes the be all end all to be achieved in a society, you end up in a system that will result in the complete disregard for individual differences and desires.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the huge differences between utilitarianism and the social contract system which Rawls supports, both theories have the same aims. Both

attempt to put its actors onto an even playing field, but go about different ways in trying to achieve this. It seems clear that A Theory of Justice gives us a vastly more satisfactory alternative to Utilitarianism. A Theory of Justice establishes the two first principles which provide for basic liberties and secondly allows for individual success in society and inequalities to exist provided the and increase in inequality would benefit those who are the least well off. The veil of ignorance also lays out an incentive for fairness. In essence, Rawls appears to have better grasp upon the basic motivation and nature of human beings. He shows this in his emphasis on individual differences within society and his acceptance of the values of justice, not utility as the measure of a good society.