

The Special Obligations Objection

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The Special Obligations Objection

[Impartiality](#) is clearly important within institutional contexts, where we want judges, policy-makers, and other civic actors to make fair and unbiased decisions. But a striking feature of utilitarianism is that it does not restrict impartiality to just those special contexts. It holds that, fundamentally, all individuals are *always* deserving of receiving full and equal consideration. This starkly conflicts with much of our ordinary decision-making, as in everyday life we would not usually think twice about prioritizing our friends and loved ones over total strangers. Indeed, many would think it outright *wrong* for a parent to fail to prioritize the needs of their own children. It's usually thought that certain relationships, like parenthood or guardianship, give rise to *special obligations* to protect those who fall under our care. If utilitarianism denied this, for example by recommending that parents neglect their own children in order to save a larger number of strangers, that could seem to count seriously against the theory. In this article, we explore this *special obligations objection* against utilitarianism.

Accommodating the Intuition

While utilitarianism *as a theory* is fundamentally impartial, it [does not recommend](#) that we attempt to naively implement impartiality in our own lives and decision-making if this would prove counterproductive in practice. This allows plenty of scope for utilitarians to accommodate various kinds of partiality on practical grounds. (Though it's a tricky empirical question just *how* partial or impartial we ideally ought to be.)

For example, most people need intimate bonds of friendship, family, and romantic partners to stay emotionally healthy and motivated. To build and maintain these strong relationships requires us to

invest a significant share of our time, attention, and resources in them. Utilitarianism may thus recommend investing significantly in such relationships, as this may better enable us, over the course of our whole lives, to *also* invest significant resources in doing as much good as possible. If we always tried to be purely impartial, by contrast, our personal capacities¹ might be so gravely impaired that we would risk having a greatly lessened lifetime impact (even just insofar as the impartial good itself is concerned).

This consideration may suffice to justify some degree of partiality given our actual emotional needs and dispositions. But what if these dispositions could be changed? Does utilitarianism imply that it would be *better* if we could (somehow) make ourselves capable of pure impartiality without falling into depression or other psychological impairments? While it's possible to imagine situations in which this would be true, even this more limited commitment to impartiality does not necessarily follow in real-life circumstances.

Besides the instrumental benefits to our agential capacities, caring relationships can be of vital importance to the recipients of our care, such as young children. As there are obviously good utilitarian reasons to want the next generation of people to grow up to be emotionally healthy and capable agents, there are thus good utilitarian reasons to endorse the social norms of parental care that help to promote this goal.

Robert Goodin suggests a utilitarian-friendly conception of special obligations as *distributed general duties*.² That is, the moral goal of providing care to children (generally) may be best pursued through the delegation of special obligations to individual parents and guardians, rather than by having everyone attempt to meddle in everyone else's upbringing. While this model seems to make good sense of special obligations, it strikingly does *not* justify wanton disregard for others. If it becomes clear that some children (for instance, orphans or refugees) are not being provided for, or that others are being abused by their parents or guardians, the full weight of their moral status—as no less important, in principle, than our own children—compels us to seek a remedy for their situation. And that is, arguably, just as it should be.

Utilitarianism thus plausibly endorses special obligations *as a moral practice*, even while denying them any foundational role in the theory. Your children are not *really* more important than anyone else's, even if it may be useful for you to prioritize them more than is objectively morally warranted. This can lead to a curious tension between the actions and the attitudes that utilitarianism recommends.

Imagine you have to decide between either saving the life of your child or the lives of five other children. According to utilitarianism, the morally *right* choice is to save the five children (any one of whom matters just as much as your child). But the right *attitude* is to love your child, and even to feel a special obligation for their well-being. Having the best attitude here will naturally incline you towards performing the worse action—saving your own child. Parfit describes such actions as

blameless wrongdoing, because they are wrong acts done from morally good motivations.³ Overall, it's better for society when parents feel strongly protective of their own children and are willing to go to great lengths to prevent them from being harmed. So it's worth endorsing and encouraging such motivations, even if they lead to suboptimal actions being performed from time to time.⁴

While utilitarianism can thus endorse some partiality in practice, this is importantly distinct from holding partiality to be *fundamentally* warranted. So critics may insist at this point that the utilitarian reply given so far is not *sufficiently* accommodating. They may insist that partiality is not *merely* useful, but rather is *rationally warranted*, on the grounds that relationships generate genuine normative reasons and associated special obligations that have intrinsic (non-instrumental and non-derivative) moral force, quite independently of whether the associated social practices are overall beneficial.⁵ For example, many people claim that we should prioritize local charities over global ones, even if they are less cost-effective. In the following sections, we will look at how utilitarians might address these stronger claims.

Debunking the Intuition

Many utilitarians are suspicious of gut intuitions favoring partiality, as there are obvious social and [evolutionary pressures](#) that could have distorted our judgments here.⁶ Most of us intuitively favor our [fellow citizens over distant strangers](#), [humans over non-human animals](#), and [present people over future generations](#). But on reflection, it can be hard to believe that these broader forms of partiality (towards loosely-affiliated strangers) are truly objectively warranted; they seem arbitrary and biased. The [moral reasoning in support of impartiality](#), by contrast, seems better supported. As a result, we might be justified in dismissing our pro-partiality intuitions as ill-founded.

Some pro-partiality intuitions may also stem from conflating moral theory and practice. That is, one might start from the view (shared by many utilitarians) that we should in practice endorse norms of special obligation, and mistakenly conclude from this that morality must be partial at the fundamental theoretical level. But the practical endorsement of partiality is, as we've seen, actually perfectly compatible with utilitarianism, and so poses no essential threat here. (Though the precise contours of partiality justified by utilitarianism may differ significantly from those assumed by commonsense morality.)

Rivals Fare No Better

Critics of utilitarian impartiality might prefer a [partialist](#) form of welfarist consequentialism, which assigns extra weight to the interests of one's nearest and dearest, instead of counting everyone equally. But this alternative view can seem troublingly unprincipled, as we may bring out in a few different ways.

First, consider that morality is often thought to be essentially about striving for a neutral, unbiased, or impartially justifiable perspective that can peacefully resolve conflicts between competing interests. But partialism does not fully resolve our interpersonal conflicts. It gives different aims to different people, and no guidance—beyond the obviously amoral default outcome of “might makes right”—about how to balance these when they conflict.

As Parfit shows, these conflicting aims make partialism *directly collectively self-defeating*. Consider Parfit’s *Parent’s Dilemma*, modeled after the famous [Prisoner’s Dilemma](#). Suppose that you and I each have one child. We are each given a choice: (1) benefit our own child slightly, or (2) enable the other to benefit their child more.⁷ It would be nice if we could agree to both choose option (2), so that both of our children receive the greater benefit. But suppose that we cannot communicate, and must decide without seeing what the other has chosen. Whatever I choose, your child will do better if you choose option (1). Partialism thus directs you to make this choice. (And likewise for me, as my child does better by *my* choosing (1), whatever choice you make.) But if we both successfully follow this guidance, we will each have achieved our partialist aims *worse* than if we had both chosen the second option instead. (Each child ends up with a slight benefit, whereas if we had both opted for (2), each child would have received the greater benefit.) That is a serious problem for partialism. As Parfit puts it: “If there is any assumption on which it is clearest that a moral theory should not be self-defeating, it is the assumption that it is universally successfully followed.”⁸

Second, any appropriately *moderate* form of partialism will have to draw arbitrary lines. *Absolutist partialism* claims that you should always save the life of your own child, regardless of how many other lives are at stake. But this extreme view becomes untenable as the stakes increase: the Absolutist insists that you should save your own child, even if that meant that a billion other children had to die instead. Most partialists would instead accept the *Moderate* view that you can give *some* (finite) extra weight to the interests of your own child, but when the stakes are sufficiently high you may be required to instead save many others.

The Moderate must draw a line past which it becomes impermissible to save the life of your child. But why draw the line precisely at that point, rather than higher or lower? What is so special about this particular number?⁹ Yet the same question can be asked for any specific number of other lives at stake. The only non-arbitrary positions are that of the Absolutist, for whom there is no number of lives at which it becomes impermissible to save your child, and that of the utilitarian, who counts all lives equally.¹⁰ Since Absolutism is untenable, that leaves utilitarianism as the best view on offer here.

Finally, it’s worth flagging that the history of partiality includes many examples of group discrimination, such as discrimination based on race, sex, or religion, that we now recognize as morally unacceptable. While this certainly does not prove that all forms of partiality are similarly problematic, it should at least give us pause, as we must consider the possibility that some of our

presently-favored forms of partiality (or discrimination on the basis of perceived similarity or closeness) could ultimately prove indefensible.

Conclusion

We've seen that utilitarianism supports many forms of partiality in practice, including social practices of parenting, friendship, and other close relationships that are vital to us as human beings. But it is a fundamentally impartial theory. It only supports these practices of partiality insofar as they serve to promote *overall* well-being in practice.

Against those who insist upon partiality at a fundamental theoretical level, utilitarians may respond that their intuitions are ill-founded, and that their resulting view is troublingly unprincipled (and even self-defeating). If we start to think of (fundamental) impartiality as the moral default, and partiality as something that stands in need of special justification, then utilitarianism may look to be on much firmer footing.

Next: The Equality Objection

Other Objections to Utilitarianism

How to Cite This Page

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Resources and Further Reading

- Jim A.C. Everett, Nadira S. Faber, Julian Savulescu, and Molly J. Crockett (2018). [The costs of being consequentialist: Social inference from instrumental harm and impartial beneficence](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 79: 200–216.
- Robert Goodin (1988). [What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?](#) *Ethics*, 98(4): 663–686.
- Frank Jackson (1991). [Decision-theoretic consequentialism and the nearest and dearest objection](#). *Ethics*, 101(3): 461–482.
- Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek & Peter Singer (2012). [The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason](#). *Ethics*, 123(1): 9–31.

- Derek Parfit (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
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1. ‘Personal capacities’ here could include mental health, willpower, moral motivation, etc.— basically anything that enables you to be effective in achieving your goals—in contrast to things like depression, burnout, etc., that could be expected to significantly reduce your ability to achieve things. ↩

2. Goodin, R. (1988). [What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?](#). *Ethics*, 98(4): 663–686. See also Jackson, F. (1991). [Decision-theoretic consequentialism and the nearest and dearest objection](#). *Ethics*, 101(3): 461–482. ↩

3. Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. ↩

4. Furthermore, there may be reputational costs to utilitarians failing to prioritize their family members, which could reverse the long-run expected value of so acting, once the risk of social backlash is taken into account. Acting in ways that are widely regarded as wrong is socially risky, which gives utilitarians extra practical reasons to think twice before violating widely-accepted norms of “special obligation”.

See: Everett, J.A.C., Faber, N.S., Savulescu, J., and Crockett, M.J. (2018). [The costs of being consequentialist: Social inference from instrumental harm and impartial beneficence](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 79: 200–216. ↩

5. This is closely related to the “moral schizophrenia” objection to sophisticated utilitarianism, discussed in the article on [the alienation objection](#). The current objection seems weaker however. The alienation objection concerned things that utilitarianism putatively failed to value *at all*. Whereas in this case, utilitarianism certainly values the well-being of your child; the question is just whether *even more* concern is warranted. Firm confidence on such matters of degree seems inherently more difficult to establish. ↩

6. de Lazari-Radek, K. & Singer, P. (2012). [The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason](#). *Ethics*, 123(1): 9–31. ↩

7. Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. 1987 revised edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 97. ↩

8. Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. 1987 revised edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 103.

As Parfit notes, a minimal revision would temporarily prohibit partiality in just these sorts of situations where greater cooperation is in *everyone’s* interests (conditional on your expecting a sufficient number of others to likewise cooperate). This minimal revision may seem ad hoc if partiality is *fundamental* to ethics, but makes much more sense on utilitarian accounts which take partiality to be merely instrumentally justified in the first place. ↩

9. Utilitarians who endorse partiality for instrumental reasons have a simple criterion for determining this answer: we should draw the line in whatever way would have the effect of maximizing overall well-being. But this answer is not available to those who take partiality to be intrinsically rather than instrumentally justified. ↻
10. Assuming, for simplicity, that the lives are all relevantly similar in terms of their expected future well-being. ↻