

This excerpt is from Michael J. Sandel,
[Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?](#),
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2. THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE / UTILITARIANISM

In the summer of 1884, four English sailors were stranded at sea in a small lifeboat in the South Atlantic, over a thousand miles from land. Their ship, the *Mignonette*, had gone down in a storm, and they had escaped to the lifeboat, with only two cans of preserved turnips and no fresh water. Thomas Dudley was the captain, Edwin Stephens was the first mate, and Edmund Brooks was a sailor—"all men of excellent character," according to newspaper accounts.¹

The fourth member of the crew was the cabin boy, Richard Parker, age seventeen. He was an orphan, on his first long voyage at sea. He had signed up against the advice of his friends, "in the hopefulness of youthful ambition," thinking the journey would make a man of him. Sadly, it was not to be.

From the lifeboat, the four stranded sailors watched the horizon, hoping a ship might pass and rescue them. For the first three days, they ate small rations of turnips. On the fourth day, they caught a turtle. They subsisted on the turtle and the remaining turnips for the next few days. And then for eight days, they ate nothing.

By now Parker, the cabin boy, was lying in the corner of the lifeboat. He had drunk seawater, against the advice of the others, and become ill. He appeared to be dying. On the nineteenth day of their ordeal, Dudley, the captain, suggested drawing lots to determine who

would die so that the others might live. But Brooks refused, and no lots were drawn.

The next day came, and still no ship was in sight. Dudley told Brooks to avert his gaze and motioned to Stephens that Parker had to be killed. Dudley offered a prayer, told the boy his time had come, and then killed him with a penknife, stabbing him in the jugular vein. Brooks emerged from his conscientious objection to share in the gruesome bounty. For four days, the three men fed on the body and blood of the cabin boy.

And then help came. Dudley describes their rescue in his diary, with staggering euphemism: “On the 24th day, as we were having our breakfast,” a ship appeared at last. The three survivors were picked up. Upon their return to England, they were arrested and tried. Brooks turned state’s witness. Dudley and Stephens went to trial. They freely confessed that they had killed and eaten Parker. They claimed they had done so out of necessity.

Suppose you were the judge. How would you rule? To simplify things, put aside the question of law and assume that you were asked to decide whether killing the cabin boy was morally permissible.

The strongest argument for the defense is that, given the dire circumstances, it was necessary to kill one person in order to save three. Had no one been killed and eaten, all four would likely have died. Parker, weakened and ill, was the logical candidate, since he would soon have died anyway. And unlike Dudley and Stephens, he had no dependents. His death deprived no one of support and left no grieving wife or children.

This argument is open to at least two objections: First, it can be asked whether the benefits of killing the cabin boy, taken as a whole, really did outweigh the costs. Even counting the number of lives saved and the happiness of the survivors and their families, allowing such a killing might have had consequences for society as a whole—weakening the norm against murder, for example, or increasing people’s ten-

dency to take the law into their own hands, or making it more difficult for captains to recruit cabin boys.

Second, even if, all things considered, the benefits do outweigh the costs, don't we have a nagging sense that killing and eating a defenseless cabin boy is wrong for reasons that go beyond the calculation of social costs and benefits? Isn't it wrong to use a human being in this way—exploiting his vulnerability, taking his life without his consent—even if doing so benefits others?

To anyone appalled by the actions of Dudley and Stephens, the first objection will seem a tepid complaint. It accepts the utilitarian assumption that morality consists in weighing costs and benefits, and simply wants a fuller reckoning of the social consequences.

If the killing of the cabin boy is worthy of moral outrage, the second objection is more to the point. It rejects the idea that the right thing to do is simply a matter of calculating consequences—costs and benefits. It suggests that morality means something more—something to do with the proper way for human beings to treat one another.

These two ways of thinking about the lifeboat case illustrate two rival approaches to justice. The first approach says the morality of an action depends solely on the consequences it brings about; the right thing to do is whatever will produce the best state of affairs, all things considered. The second approach says that consequences are not all we should care about, morally speaking; certain duties and rights should command our respect, for reasons independent of the social consequences.

In order to resolve the lifeboat case, as well as many less extreme dilemmas we commonly encounter, we need to explore some big questions of moral and political philosophy: Is morality a matter of counting lives and weighing costs and benefits, or are certain moral duties and human rights so fundamental that they rise above such calculations? And if certain rights are fundamental in this way—be they natural, or sacred, or inalienable, or categorical—how can we identify them? And what makes them fundamental?