

## Learning Guide Unit 5

**Reading Assignment**

As you read the learning resources, consider the following:

1. Is utilitarianism a viable moral theory? Can we know enough about the consequences of our actions to make an accurate judgement about possible outcomes?
2. In what ways do *act utilitarianism* and *rule utilitarianism* differ in evaluating moral actions?
3. How does the trolley problem example demonstrate the potential ethical dilemma between utilitarianism and individual rights?

**Read:**

1. Matthews, G., & Hendricks, C. (2019). *Introduction to philosophy: Ethics*. Rebus Community.  
<https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/introduction-to-philosophy-ethics> Licensed under CC 4.0

- View the Online Book
- Read Chapter 5 - [Utilitarianism](#)

The chapter provides an in-depth exploration of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, exemplified through a hypothetical scenario involving Peter's act of theft to aid his family, values actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The text delves into the core principles of utilitarianism, including the calculation of consequences, Bentham's "felicific calculus," and the distinction between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Additionally, the chapter examines criticisms of utilitarianism, such as its potential to prioritize collective well-being over individual rights, and debates the moral implications of sacrificing individuals for the benefit of the majority. The discourse prompts readers to reflect on whether utilitarianism's emphasis on maximizing utility stands up to ethical scrutiny and rational evaluation.

**Additional Reading:**

1. Dimmock, M., & Fisher, A. (2017). Utilitarianism. In *Ethics for A-Level* (1st ed., pp. 11–29). Open Book Publishers. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wc7r6j.5>

This book provides a more extensive introduction to utilitarianism than the one found in our textbook. It looks at hedonism which is a precursor to utilitarianism and Robert Nozick's famous thought-experiment called "The Experience Machine" that makes us question whether pleasure is the supreme good.

2. Brandt, R. B. (1984). Utilitarianism and moral rights. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1), 1–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40231349>

Virtually all philosophers now agree that human beings—and possibly higher animals—have moral rights in some sense. This article looks at the debates as to whether a utilitarian can affirm that there are moral rights.

**NOTE:** To access these articles, visit the UoPeople Library and click on the link to JSTOR. Search for the complete name of the article.

**Watch:**

1. McCombs School of Business. (2018, December 18). *Utilitarianism / Ethics defined* [Video]. YouTube.

Enjoy this nice, short introduction to utilitarianism. It contains at the end a penetrating critique of utilitarianism that is worth considering.

## Utilitarianism | Ethics Defined

