

Choosing a Utilitarian Career

By Brian Tomasik

First written: 29 December 2005

For an update on this piece, see "[Why Activists Should Consider Making Lots of Money](#)"

Note:

I modified this piece slightly on 3 Aug. 2014 to remove some excessively long quotations. The rest of the text is mostly the same as when I first wrote it in 2005. Due to what I've learned in the intervening years, I don't agree with everything written here. --Brian, 3 Aug. 2014

Introduction

Utilitarianism is an ethical philosophy holding that a decision maker ought to choose those particular courses of action which maximize the utility¹ of the universe. Of course, one of the most significant choices that an individual makes is that of his career. Conventional wisdom instructs one to "choose a job that makes a difference." But what exactly does this mean concretely? This question is the subject of the present evaluation.

To make a difference, in utilitarian terms, is to bring about a change in the aggregated utility of sentient beings. Indeed, utilitarianism can be defined as the doctrine that one ought to maximize

$$\text{marginal net utility} \equiv \Delta(\text{net utility})/(\text{units of resource employed}),$$

where $\Delta(\text{net utility})$, of course, represents the "difference" that one has made. This difference is best imagined in the counterfactual sense: What would have happened had one not made that decision? How would the world have been different had one not existed?

In the below discussion, I shall examine various career paths that a utilitarian might pursue and the ways in which each contributes to $\Delta(\text{net utility})$.² In so doing, I hope to construct a conceptual framework for thought, into which specific factual details—including the particular situation and talents of each individual—can be added.

Employment with an established utilitarian advocacy organization

Working for an organization committed to utilitarian ideals is often thought to be the obvious choice for someone who wants to change the world. For instance, this article from The Wall Street Journal takes that premise for granted as its central underlying assumption: "Social Principle vs. High Salary: Reconciling Ideals With Financial Goals Can Be a Struggle for Some in Their 20s".³

I am not so convinced that working for an established organization is such an "obvious" utilitarian decision, however. Nearly all advocacy groups have fixed financial resources, so that

¹ "Utility" is defined as happiness, satisfaction, or—most precisely—fulfillment of the subjective preferences of beings capable of having them (scilicet, sentient organisms), with consideration of preferences weighted in proportion to their strength.

² In all of what follows, I shall set equal the amounts of resources applied to each possibility. That is, I shall consider the effects of spending equal amounts of time and energy on each option. In this way, marginal net utility will remain precisely proportional to $\Delta(\text{net utility})$, so one can simply choose the option that maximizes $\Delta(\text{net utility})$.

³ http://www.idealists.org/about/press/actone_ideals.pdf

hiring one person means not hiring another. While you personally may be doing great things to reduce suffering in the world, you are also preventing someone else from doing the same by holding the position that this other person would have occupied. The common notion that to work for a utilitarian organization is to make a real difference in the world may be—at least in this respect—fallacious.

This is not to suggest, though, that a utilitarian would have no impact on the world at all by working for Natural Resources Defense Council or Vegan Outreach. The utilitarian would live frugally and donate all of her remaining income to utilitarian causes. Moreover, the utilitarian would spend her spare time on other pro-bono activism that would not otherwise have been undertaken. Finally, if the utilitarian is slightly more productive than the person she replaced at her advocacy job, she would also produce some positive Δ (net utility) thereby.

Employment with any other established institution (government, corporation, et cetera)

The idea of considering whether someone else would have been hired in your place leads to another possibility: a utilitarian might work for an institution that actively opposes utilitarian policies without necessarily causing a negative Δ (net utility). Vegan Outreach has noted this:

Before you decide to work with an animal rights group, you might want to ask yourself, “What would I do with my life if there were no animal suffering?” If you can answer with a career that holds your interest and that you would like to do, then I would follow whatever path is needed to pursue that career and do animal advocacy in your free time. [...]

Another note – we receive many letters from vegans asking if they should quit a job that involves using animal products in some way. Although this is a complex question that depends on the particulars, it's important to ask, “If I weren't working here, would someone replace me? Would I be doing any more harm than that person?”⁴

Moreover, governments and corporations tend to pay more than nonprofits, so the Δ (net utility) that results from giving away one's wealth would be even more positive in this case. Finally:

Sometimes taking a job allows us to do more good than our potential replacement, by promoting animal issues to fellow workers, to corporate giving programs, or even in reforming the organization's policies in some positive way.⁵

I see room for animal activists to get involved in continuing to improve technology to get past the point of using animals. Many vegans would shy away from getting into the sciences because they might have to do certain things that are animal-related. I don't mean vivisection or dissection, but many scientific methods do use animal products and one might need to use them during training. A vegan, working to change science from within, could help countless animals.⁶

⁴ <http://www.veganoutreach.org/starterpack/qa.html>

⁵ <http://www.veganoutreach.org/starterpack/qa.html>

⁶ <http://www.veganoutreach.org/articles/nonveganworld.html>

Employment with a powerful law firm, corporation, or government agency would give the utilitarian greater access to the halls of power, as well as a relationship network with other “movers and shakers” that might eventually prove useful in exerting influence.

There could, however, be some drawbacks to getting a job with Monsanto or Exxon Mobil. For one thing, the workload of a top-paying corporate position would be far steeper than at a regular nonprofit, which would leave less time for pro-bono activism. Secondly, if the utilitarian were more productive than the employee he replaced, he might—depending on the specific type of work he does—thereby cause a small negative Δ (net utility). Finally, outside activists might doubt the utilitarian’s sincerity or altogether misunderstand his strategy, instead perceiving work for a corporation as hypocritical. On the other hand, publicity of the utilitarian’s efforts might encourage others to try the same approach; if working for a profit-minded employer actually was the best decision in the first place, then encouraging others to do the same would produce a further positive Δ (net utility).

Independent activist

Peter Singer’s Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement presents an inspiring portrait of the work that a single person can accomplish largely on his own.⁷ The downside to working as an independent activist, though, is that one does not have income to donate to other useful causes. Indeed, one has to actively seek out sources of funding—perhaps donations from wealthy friends as in Henry’s case. If one’s supporters would have otherwise given the money to a different utilitarian cause, Δ (net utility) would be greatly diminished, since it would then represent only the margin by which one’s own activism was more effective than the work that otherwise would have been done, not the absolute magnitude of one’s accomplishments.

Social entrepreneur

Like independent activism, social entrepreneurship has the potential to bring about changes that would not have otherwise occurred but often requires funding to do so. As before, the magnitude of Δ (net utility) depends both on the effectiveness of the project and whether the money would have otherwise been spent on a different utilitarian cause.

A note on the value of money

Many activists view money and wealth as evil. As a source of power, money can be used to promote either evil or good. Just think how much better the animals would be if vegans had significant amounts of money. If each vegan had enough money to buy and distribute multiple copies of educational materials, the animals would greatly benefit. Someone who works a job that isn’t directly promoting animal rights, but who can use their money to fund the resources needed by our movement, will be doing much to help the animals.⁸

[A] single dollar donated to Vegan Outreach would be expected to prevent 4.4 years of abject suffering. [...]

⁷ <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1998----.htm>

⁸ <http://www.veganoutreach.org/articles/nonveganworld.html>

And of course, [this figure] reflect[s] only the direct harm done to the farmed animals themselves. [It does] not include the countless wild animals that would be given the chance to live happy lives on account of the greatly reduced ecological impacts that conversion to a vegan diet entails.⁹

People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief. (Indeed, the alternative does not occur to them.) This way of looking at the matter cannot be justified. [... W]e ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called “supererogatory”—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.¹⁰

The last quotation—from Peter Singer’s famous essay, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”—makes it clear that a utilitarian will live as frugally as possible in order to donate his remaining wealth toward reducing suffering. This does not mean that the disposable income which the utilitarian earns from his job will be given away immediately. To the contrary, investing in the stock market or some other interest-earning venue will ultimately create more wealth capable of reducing more suffering. Waiting to give away one’s money also allows one to spend a lifetime deciding what sorts of causes would be most efficient and effective.

One might alternatively choose to finance social entrepreneurial projects that others have contrived. This, too, is already being done:

The implications for introducing competition and free market principles into the world of nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations are substantial. By highlighting the success of several innovative social entrepreneurs, How to Change the World presents a credible argument for moving towards such an approach. The book seeks to inspire people to want to become or fund social entrepreneurs, challenges conventional ways of solving social problems, and provides a compelling view in what should be a sustained and healthy debate on the future of the nonprofit/nongovernmental world. For these reasons, it is a must-read for anyone interested in where social change is headed.¹¹

As these selections show, the income that salaried careers provide is significant; if great enough, this wealth could conceivably support several independent activists or social entrepreneurs, potentially causing a far greater Δ (net utility) than directly becoming an activist or entrepreneur oneself.

Summary

I. Established utilitarian advocacy organization

A. Factors with positive Δ (net utility)

1. Modest disposable (scilicet, donatable) income

⁹ “How Much is a Dollar Worth? Some Conservative Estimations” by Brian Tomasik—a previous essay in The Tomasik Reader.

¹⁰ <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.onphilanthropy.com/reviews/rv2004-01-09.html>

- 2. Some time for unpaid activism
- B. Factors with unknown Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Productivity compared against the person replaced
- II. Established corporation, law firm, or government agency
 - A. Factors with positive Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Significant disposable income
 - 2. Contact with influential members of society
 - 3. In rare circumstances, opportunities to improve policies
 - 4. Set an example for other utilitarians to follow
 - B. Factors with negative Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Apparent contradiction of strategy could hamper relationships
 - C. Factors with unknown Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Productivity compared against the person replaced; this depends not only on the productivity differential but also on whether the work that the employer does has a positive or negative Δ (net utility) value
- III. Independent activist
 - A. Factors with positive Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Lots of time to spend on effective advocacy
 - B. Factors with negative Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Would funding take away money from other utilitarian efforts?
- IV. Social entrepreneur
 - A. Factors with positive Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Work creatively and effectively for a utilitarian cause
 - B. Factors with negative Δ (net utility)
 - 1. Would funding take away money from other utilitarian efforts?