

Utilitarianism and equality

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One of the most powerful objections to utilitarianism as a public philosophy is that it has unacceptably inegalitarian implications. If we must distribute resources in the way that maximises total utility, it seems that we must give more to those who are relatively efficient at converting resources into utility, and less to those who are relatively inefficient. This appears to licence diverting resources, for example, from those with severe medical needs to those who are healthy. One does not have to have very strong commitment to egalitarian ideals to find this implication troubling. Most contemporary theories of distributive justice agree that those with severe medical needs should not get *less* than average levels of resources, as utilitarianism seems to imply.

This paper examines the egalitarian challenge to utilitarianism. We may distinguish two questions raised by the challenge. (1) How egalitarian, or inegalitarian, are the implications of utilitarianism, in its various forms? (2) How egalitarian must a theory be in order to be acceptable? My focus will be on (1). I will examine the theoretical resources available to those within the utilitarian tradition who wish to meet the egalitarian challenge.