

Are utilitarians right to prefer humanity in general over our family in particular?

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Our strongly felt preference for family can be separated into two intuitions. First is an intrinsic intuition, that the family structure itself creates unique obligations on its own.¹ The second is a non-intrinsic intuition, that special family obligations stem from their derivative moral value as channels of care and mutual responsibility.²

These are lived intuitions that deserve our attention. However, for differing reasons, both intuitions are unfit to challenge the validity of utilitarianism on moral grounds. Firstly, upon scrutiny, the intrinsic intuition's moral power is dissolved by strong objections of non-rational bias, which defenders are unable to anchor with broader moral principles. Secondly, the non-intrinsic intuition does not inherently contradict utilitarianism; rather, utilitarian theory cleanly accommodates the non-intrinsic intuition. As such, neither intuition provides a moral challenge to agent-neutral utilitarianism, which can be said to "prefer humanity in general" insofar as it maximizes the good of family members equally with the good of strangers.³

The non-rational bias of the intrinsic intuition for family obligations is exposed when we examine our conditions for weight-bearing moral intuitions. In a traditional reflective equilibrium, theories are tested to minimize conflict with our existing moral intuitions.⁴ However, our theories may be led astray if our existing moral intuitions are biased by non-morally relevant factors to begin with. As shown by historical intuitions supporting racism, the prevalence of irrational cultural, biological, and personal biases seemingly indicates the faultiness of many intuitions.⁵

¹ Samuel Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26, no. 3 (1997): 190, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2961935>.

² Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities," 190.

³ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, last modified 2025, accessed 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>.

⁴ Michael Huemer, "Revisionary Intuitionism," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2007): 2, accessed 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s026505250808014x>.

⁵ Huemer, "Revisionary Intuitionism," 6.

When we are faced with the challenge of immoral intuitions, the difficulty of implementing intuition-based reflective equilibrium becomes systematizing which intuitions still hold argumentative weight and which intuitions are immoral and should be undervalued. Should a racist moral intuition be devalued on account of its origin in non-rational bias, or its incoherence with other ethical intuitions? As Huemer argues, it should be devalued using a combination of both.⁶ Philosophers like Street are correct to argue that suspected non-rational intuitions cannot *solely* be rebutted by incoherence with adjacent intuitions, since we encounter a circularity issue where all of our intuitions may be non-rational.⁷ Alternatively, Huemer argues that we may use “undercutting” accounts of bias to first identify potentially faulty moral intuitions. When outside biological, cultural, or personal biases align with a moral intuition, there is reason to believe an intuition may be unduly influenced by non-rational considerations. Once this requirement is fulfilled, an intuition should be devalued if it additionally conflicts with other moral intuitions. Many intuitions, like the virtue of helping an older lady across the road, may align with cultural biases while remaining coherent with broader intuitions of care and respect. However, if an intuition is subject to undercutting bias *and* cannot ground itself in broader moral principles without conflicting with other moral intuitions—like an intuition supporting racism—it should be devalued in ethical analysis.

While this essay does not adopt Huemer’s full intuitionist ethical theory, it recognizes that Huemer’s approach to weighing intuitions can be applied to a reflective equilibrium of utilitarianism, without implying his larger intuitionist project. I adopt this framework because, despite objections of looseness and arbitrariness surrounding accounts of bias, it best balances the realities of non-moral intuitions without falling into a moral relativism that would make rigorous analysis of ethical theory impossible.⁸

Utilitarianism’s own basic intuitions can be scrutinized. Sidgwick’s utilitarianism, which is the broad act-utilitarianism I take for this essay, bases itself in self-evident “rational intuitions” to ground ethical theory, namely the intuition that the good of any individual is no more

⁶ Huemer, “Revisionary Intuitionism,” 10.

⁷ Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4321684>.

⁸ Huemer, “Revisionary Intuitionism,” 5.

important than the good of any other.⁹ This rational intuition, Sidgwick's agent-neutral "point of view of the universe," lacks significant undercutting non-rational bias. Agent neutrality directly opposes what we would expect from natural selection, which pushes humans to prefer the good of their offspring.¹⁰ Furthermore, although many cultures promote sacrifice for the greater good, agent neutrality posits the equal moral value of all persons you may sacrifice for, which reverses the common cultural bias for highly relational duties towards specific in-groups. While the lack of undercutting bias doesn't immunize utilitarian intuition from all skepticism, it does suggest that utilitarian intuition holds more argumentative weight than intuitions which do fall into non-rational bias.

Unfortunately, intrinsic intuitions for family obligations do not survive significant objections of non-rational bias. While the non-intrinsic family obligation derives its strength from additional moral intuitions of care obligations and responsibility obligations, the intrinsic family obligation argues that the family structure itself is what intrinsically creates the special obligation. Arguments that ground special obligations in more general features, like Keller's value in the obligation-creating person or Kolodny's value of the relationship itself, only generate family obligations above and beyond obligations to non-family members of equal moral status inasmuch as they rely on the intrinsic intuition.¹¹ Unfortunately, an intrinsic familial obligation is subject to objections of non-rational bias from all sides. From a biological standpoint, evolution and natural selection provide a compelling argument for the formation of intrinsic family bias.¹² Culturally, many belief systems from Islam to Confucianism underline care for one's own family as a fundamental value.¹³ Neither biology nor religious precedent is a source of moral rationality, and hence their influence represents an undercutting challenge.

⁹ Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe : Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 182, accessed 2026, <https://www.utilitarianism.com/view-universe.pdf>.

¹⁰ Lazari-Radek and Singer, *The Point*, 182.

¹¹ Simon Keller, ed., *Partiality* (Princeton University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400846382>; Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 2 (2003): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3595532>.

¹² J. Garay et al., "Caring for Parents: An Evolutionary Rationale," *BMC Biology* 16, no. 1 (2018): accessed 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12915-018-0519-2>.

¹³ Cynthia Lee Andruske and Deborah O'Connor, "Family Care across Diverse Cultures: Re-envisioning Using a Transnational Lens," *Journal of Aging Studies* 55 (December 2020): accessed 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100892>.

Despite aligning with non-rational sources of bias, if the intrinsic intuition of family obligations could ground itself in broader non-biased principles, it would retain its moral value. However, attempts by philosophers to do so either fall back into a form of consequentialism or merely act as a reframing of the question that ultimately collapses back onto the same narrow intuition subject to bias.

Samuel Scheffler attempts to ground the intrinsic intuition by arguing that our special obligations for family are grounded in our sense of value for familial relationships.¹⁴ When we value a relationship for its own sake, we allow the relationship to be a source of reasons for action, which actualizes as a special obligation.¹⁵ Consequently, when you have good reasons to value your relationship with your mom, your relationship with your mom is a reason-generating relationship, meaning that your relationship with your mom creates special obligations.¹⁶ Scheffler's account is genuinely compelling when one's reasons for valuing relationships are known, but I believe he merely relocates the problem of grounding special obligations into an adjacent problem of how to ground value. What justifies you in valuing a relationship with your aunt more than a relationship with an equally loving and influential non-family woman in your life? While Scheffler does not address this, I conceive two possibilities: 1) You may value your aunt more because valuing family relationships creates some instrumental good, perhaps through the honoring of the family unit, or 2) You may value your aunt more because it is simply an intrinsic intuition to specially value family members. The former transforms into a utilitarian argument, which I will address later, and the latter collapses into the same intrinsic intuition that is subject to bias, without extending to broader moral principles.

Hardimon similarly tries to ground the intrinsic intuition of family obligations, though he conceives of the intuition through role obligations. Hardimon argues that we can enter noncontractual role obligations when we enter a social role that is moral and "relatively acceptable" from a point of reason.¹⁷ Even though we may not consent to our relationships with

¹⁴ Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities," 196.

¹⁵ Diane Jeske, "Special Obligations," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, last modified 2019, accessed 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/special-obligations/>.

¹⁶ Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities," 196.

¹⁷ Michael O. Hardimon, "Role Obligations," *The Journal of Philosophy* 91, no. 7 (1994): 348, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2940934>.

family members, upon reflection we see that upholding our role within the family institution that we live in is a moral task, and hence we may substitute our consent for a “hypothetical” acceptance of our special obligations towards family.¹⁸ While Hardimon’s account is internally convincing, he ultimately relocates the question of intrinsic value rather than answering it, mirroring Scheffler. If your family is moral and that causes you to have reflectively acceptable reasons to care for them, Hardimon seems to attach the special obligation to the social role when it should be ascribed to the instrumental relationship of care, responsibility, or derivative moral value that actually makes your family moral. If your uncle and a non-family member provided you the relationship of care and love, Hardimon doesn’t explain why the family role structure creates moral reasons of its own, apart from 1) Utilitarian social benefits or 2) Our intrinsic belief in the goodness of family. Lacking extension to broader moral reasons, the intrinsic intuition for family obligations is left defenseless against objections of non-rational bias, and reasonably loses its argumentative weight.

Following this, I argue that the non-intrinsic intuition is actually accommodated by utilitarianism. While utilitarian concerns may certainly override family obligations in dire situations, sophisticated utilitarian reasoning can explain our lived intuitions for family obligations in day-to-day reasoning.

The key idea is that utilitarianism instrumentally recognizes the moral good provided by the derivative aspects of care and respect encapsulated within the non-intrinsic intuition of family obligations. As Sidgwick argues, a “well-considered” application of utilitarianism would accept the value of using special obligations to instrumentally uphold relationships that perpetuate further good throughout society.¹⁹ To illustrate, if a mother could only save her child or a stranger’s child, utilitarianism supports an obligation to save her own child because the world is benefited when mothers are disposed to uphold a particular sense of care for their own children. In Goodin’s view, such utilitarianism could be described as a method of distributing duties throughout society in a way that maximizes the greater good.²⁰

¹⁸ Hardimon, "Role Obligations," 348.

¹⁹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), 213, accessed 2026, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/sidgwick1874.pdf#page=168.12>.

²⁰ Robert E. Goodin, "What Is so Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?," *Ethics* 98, no. 4 (1988): 663, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2380890>.

The seminal objection to this application of utilitarianism, as outlined by Williams, is one of alienation.²¹ If familial obligations become simplified into instrumental happiness maximization problems, it seems that the demands of morality force us to alienate ourselves from the emotional nature of familial relationships, in which responses to obligation are seldom depersonalized into rational calculations of worldly happiness.²² As Williams argues, the man who reaches for a utilitarian calculation when deciding to save his wife or a stranger “thinks one thought too many.”²³

Williams’s objection addresses our deeper reasons for engaging in morality. In response, its accommodation involves a utilitarian justification of behaviors that proceed as if there are family special obligations, as long as such behaviors allow us to create the genuine relationships that build towards a utilitarian greater good.²⁴ This “sophisticated consequentialism,” forwarded by Railton, addresses alienation by positioning human relationships themselves as something that can be maximized in a utilitarian sense.²⁵ While Williams may respond that even the possibility of weighing a behavior’s value undercuts the nature of a true relationship, I contend that a more rational phenomenology actually better matches our understanding of fulfilling relationships. Love is a mutual understanding of the bounds of a relationship. An extension of blind obligation that forbids even judgements of behavior is closer to obsession rather than personal relation.

As a wrinkle, sophisticated consequentialism implies that a utilitarian agent may choose a course of action that maximizes the good of a relationship in the long-run, but does not maximize short-run situational good.²⁶ Since the overall long-run good is still maximized, such a situation would not create a paradox with act consequentialism.²⁷ However, the choice to forgo short-term

²¹ Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1984): 160, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265273>.

²² Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck : Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 18, accessed 2026, https://bibliotecamathom.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/williams_-_moral_luck.pdf.

²³ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 18.

²⁴ Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism," 153.

²⁵ Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism," 153.

²⁶ Jeske, "Special Obligations," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

²⁷ Richard J. Arneson, "Consequentialism Vs. Special-Ties Partiality," *The Monist* 86, no. 3 (2003): 394, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27903831>.

goods can still be considered a moral wrong, a situation Parfit describes as blameless wrongdoing because the motivations are still morally correct.²⁸

The implication is that while utilitarianism can explain intuitions for special family obligations, it never erases the harm that occurs when you choose the good of one moral agent over another. Even under Jackson's conception of operationalizing special obligations through the expected utility of relationships, if you were given the choice of saving 25 people or 1 family member, utilitarianism would argue that even instrumental benefits of the familial relationship are outweighed by the sheer number of lives hanging in the balance.²⁹ I contend this is a feature rather than a bug: utilitarianism allows as much family preference as is morally acceptable, and correctly rejects the rest.

The intrinsic intuition faces objections of non-rational bias that dissolve its moral weight, while utilitarianism realistically encompasses our non-intrinsic intuition of family obligation, outlining both how it operates and where it ends. Utilitarianism, thus, faces no challenge from intuitions to "prefer family."

²⁸ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Clarendon Press, 1984), 32, accessed 2026, <https://pdf.stafforini.com/parfit-1984-reasons-persons.pdf>.

²⁹ Frank Jackson, "Decision-theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection," *Ethics* 101, no. 3 (1991): 481, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381464>.

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