

Case Study 1

In this essay, I will apply Utilitarianism to an ethical challenge faced by Tristan Harris in *The Social Dilemma*. Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google, struggles with whether he should continue working inside large technology companies that design addictive platforms or speak out publicly about the harm these platforms cause. His ethical challenge centers on loyalty to his company versus responsibility to the public. I argue that, according to Utilitarianism, Harris is morally required to speak out against harmful design practices because doing so promotes the greatest overall well-being. In what follows, I will first explain the core ideas of Utilitarianism, then describe Harris's ethical challenge, and finally show how Utilitarianism resolves his dilemma.

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory most closely associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The central principle of Utilitarianism is the Principle of Utility, which states that the right action is the one that produces the greatest overall happiness or well-being for everyone affected. Under this theory, consequences determine whether an action is right or wrong. Intentions matter less than outcomes. When making a moral decision, a person must consider the benefits and harms that will result from each possible action and choose the one that maximizes overall good. Utilitarianism is impartial, meaning that each person's happiness counts equally. The decision rule is clear because a person must calculate which option produces the greatest net benefit and choose that option.

In the film, Tristan Harris is introduced as a former Google employee who became concerned about how social media platforms manipulate users. He explains how algorithms are designed to keep people engaged for as long as possible because more engagement means more advertising revenue. Over time, Harris realizes that these systems contribute to anxiety, political polarization, and misinformation. His ethical challenge is whether to remain inside the system and attempt gradual change or leave and publicly criticize the industry. Speaking out could damage his career and relationships, but staying silent allows harmful practices to continue affecting millions of users.

Utilitarianism evaluates Harris's situation by comparing the consequences of his options. If he stays quiet, he protects his personal stability and avoids professional conflict. However, the broader consequences include continued harm to users, including teenagers struggling with mental health, and citizens exposed to misleading information. If he speaks out, he risks personal cost, but his actions could raise awareness, influence reform, and reduce long term harm. Because Utilitarianism requires considering everyone affected, Harris must weigh the well-being of millions of users against his own comfort and job security. The large-scale impact of exposing harmful systems likely creates more overall benefit than remaining silent.

According to Utilitarianism, Harris should speak out publicly about the dangers of persuasive technology. Although this choice may cause short-term hardship for him, it has the potential to reduce widespread harm and improve public awareness. By challenging unethical design practices, he contributes to changes that could protect users, more vulnerable and especially young people. Since Utilitarianism prioritizes the greatest total good, the morally correct action is the one that benefits the largest number of people. In this case, public advocacy produces greater overall well-being than silence.

In conclusion, Tristan Harris's ethical challenge in *The Social Dilemma* can be resolved through Utilitarianism. The theory holds that actions are right when they maximize overall happiness and reduce harm. When applied to Harris's dilemma, Utilitarianism shows that speaking out against manipulative technology is the morally required choice. Although it involves personal sacrifice, it does promote greater good for society.