



# John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?": Lesson Plan

Topic	
<p>The answer to the titular question of Taurek’s essay, “Should the Numbers Count?”, is a resounding no. Few people would give up their own life for the life of another person or two or five, so we cannot ask one person to die for the sake of five others. Furthermore, Taurek finds fault with the utilitarian idea that suffering is calculable. He insists that the value of human life is inherently different from that of any object and thus should not be calculated like an object. In the moral dilemma of saving one life or five, or any similar moral dilemma, the most correct decision, barring any special circumstances like promises or obligations, could be reached by flipping a coin.</p>	
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed
Philosophy, Ethics, Religion, Sociology, Government, Politics	30-45 minutes
Video link:	
<a href="https://academy4sc.org/topic/john-taurek-should-the-numbers-count-less-is-equal-to-more/">https://academy4sc.org/topic/john-taurek-should-the-numbers-count-less-is-equal-to-more/</a>	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>	
<p>Students will be able to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate Taurek’s main argument against the idea that one is obligated to save the most number of people.</li> <li>• Explain why suffering cannot be additive.</li> <li>• Defend why flipping a coin could be considered the most morally fair way to determine one’s actions in a moral dilemma.</li> </ul>	
Key Concepts & Vocabulary	
Moral dilemmas, Utilitarian ethics	



### Materials Needed

Worksheet

### Before you watch

**Poll the class:** Record whether students agree or disagree with the following statement:

If you find yourself in a position where your actions directly affect who lives or who dies, you are morally obligated to save the most number of people.

### While you watch

1. What does Taurek mean when he declares that all other things are "equal" among the two groups save for size?
2. Why does Taurek reject the premise that since it's impossible for no harm to occur, we should strive to minimize it?
3. According to Taurek, what is the value of an individual human life?

### After you watch/discussion questions

1. What was your original answer to the opening dilemma? Is your answer different now? Why or why not?
2. Did you originally choose to save Sophie? Why or why not? Did either your answer or your reasoning change? Why or why not?
3. In any of the above scenarios, does your choice differ from what you believe is the morally correct choice? Do you even think there is a correct moral decision? Explain your reasoning.
4. In your opinion, what's Taurek's strongest point in his argument? What's his weakest?

### Activity Ideas

- Many critics dislike Taurek's conclusion that the only morally superior choice is to flip a coin. Write a short journal entry about your thoughts on this assessment. Do you agree? Why do you think they dislike this conclusion so much?
- Hold a class debate on whether the numbers really should count. Feel free to draw from different schools of ethics, but be sure to focus on Taurek arguments. What makes them persuasive or unappealing, well-founded or misinformed?
- Individually complete the Worksheet. Then review answers as a class.



### Sources/places to learn more

1. Chapman, Bruce. "Preference, Pluralism, and Proportionality." *University of Toronto Law Journal*, vol 60, issue 2, spring 2010, pp 177-196. Doi: [10.3138/utlj.60.2.177](https://doi.org/10.3138/utlj.60.2.177).
2. Lawlor, Rob. "Taurek, Numbers and Probabilities". *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol 9, issue 2, April 2006, pp 149-166.
3. Sanders, John T. "Why the Numbers Should Count Sometimes". *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol 17, issue 1, 1988, pp 3-14.
4. Taurek, John M. "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol 6, no 4, Summer 1977, pp 293-316.
5. "Taurek's Three Arguments". University of Pittsburgh. <http://www.pitt.edu/~mthompso/readings/taureknotes.pdf>.