

Ceteris paribus¹

If we are ever to awaken to the liberation of nirvana, we must give up all our views. If we are God-believers, we would never see nirvana because of our views of God, soul and sin, or we might not be inclined to do so. If we are unwilling or unable to let go of our eternalist views, how are we ever to see beyond them? On the other hand, if we are money-minded materialists, we would not be able to see nirvana, too. We might ask, “What do I get out of nirvana?” Even to answer that we get “nothing” out of “it” would not sound right.

Even to have a good meditation, or simply to be truly happy, we need to suspend all our views at least momentarily so that our mind can fully be itself without being distracted or defiled by thoughts and ideas. In short, we need to rise above our opinions if we are ever to know ourselves, much less to better ourselves. Otherwise, we are but mere tools and slaves of our own views and beliefs.

However, we (most of us anyway) are not yet awakened, and so we are reading (and writing) reflections such as this one. Such reflections still apply language, ideas and concepts. We need them if we are to communicate effectively. Indeed, if we are able to feel joy in reading these reflections, we are then assured that such language, thoughts and concepts have been able to touch the joy that is already within us. Hence, these thinking and writing tools are still useful for the unawakened.

Ourbrain, Ourbody

We will now examine two little words that can save us a lot of trouble when we think, write or speak. Those words are *ceteris paribus*, which is Latin, meaning “all other things being equal.” This may not be easy, so please read with generous patience, and read it as often as you like. Some parts, however, you have to think for yourself. Again, think over them a few times, and surprise yourself.

Let us conduct a simple thought experiment. Our brain is to be transplanted into another body, along with all our thoughts, memories, personality and so on. We’ll call the resulting person “Ourbrain.” Meanwhile, our body will receive the brain of another, and we’ll call that person “Ourbody.”

Before this operation, we are asked to sign over all our bank accounts, property deeds and so on either to Ourbody or to Ourbrain. Assuming that we are acting out of self-interest, which person would we choose? An experienced philosopher would probably assume that this thought experiment contains an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause. That is to say, it is assumed that, apart from the changes that are specifically made by the operation, all other things remain equal.

For example, there is no difference between the gender or health of the bodies concerned, one is not better looking or uglier than the other, neither is on the run from the law. This *ceteris paribus* clause is important, because the purpose of the thought experiment is to help us focus our minds on the relative significance of our bodies and our brains for making us the individuals that we are.

For that reason, these factors must be isolated from all other variables. Therefore, by declaring *ceteris paribus*, we, the deviser (the giver in a will) of the thought experiment, can omit all that are irrelevant to what we are trying to consider.²

Under normal circumstances

When we talk about “all other things being equal,” we often mean no more than “under normal conditions.” In other words, we assume that there are no unusual situations in what we are describing that might affect the reasoning. We should, especially in religious discussions, also understand this as not changing the rules to fit our arguments, or not moving the goal-posts, as some might put it.

¹ This reflection is adapted from Baggini & Fosl, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit*, 2010:81-83.

² For more on the significance of this, see **Self and selves @ SD 26.9 esp (1.6.1.1): [link](#)**. See also **Is there a soul? SD 2.16: [link](#)**.

For example, if we are discussing whether all things in this universe are impermanent or not, we assume to omit wordplays like “impermanence itself is permanent” or that there might be parallel universes or other realities (we imagine) where things might be “permanent.”

Understandably, the phrase “under normal conditions” does not capture the full scope of *ceteris paribus*, which, as we have seen, can be applied in thought experiments where conditions are, by definition, not normal. Again, what we mean by normal (“the norm”) is itself subject to how we decide to define it. So it helps to keep things “equal.”

In decision procedure

The *ceteris paribus* principle is useful when we are assessing the relative merits of two explanations and deciding between them, even where there is no overwhelming evidence for either. For example, do gods or ghosts exist?

The only sensible way to reach any useful conclusion here is to look at the available evidence (if any) and ask, *ceteris paribus*, which is the likelier explanation? Try analysing such claims: This world must have been created by a Creator; the sick villager must have been harmed by malevolent spirits.

Of course, in reality, all other things may not be equal. There may, for example, be undiscovered evidence that might prove conclusive. But in their absence, we have to focus on what we do know and assume that all other things are equal, until they are shown to be otherwise.

In counter-argument

Ceteris paribus is also important in moral reasoning, where we have to assess the strength of a counter-argument. For example, hedonic utilitarians (“whatever we do or don’t should bring us pleasure”) believe that, in any given situation, the morally correct thing to do is a decision that brings the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

A common objection to this theory is to describe a scenario that, although morally repugnant, fits the utilitarian criteria of morally correct action. One such case would be that of an innocent person accused of being a serial killer. He has neither family nor friends, neither is he rich nor well-schooled. If he is convicted, the angry masses will be appeased. If he is set free, there will be widespread fear and anger, with lynch mobs ready to serve their own justice.

But the serial killer has stopped killing and psychologists are confident that the killing spree (whoever is doing it) has ended. The utilitarians may still insist that in such a situation, the best thing to do is to convict the innocent man, as that results in the greatest overall increase in happiness in the population.

But this is clearly unjust. When faced with this sort of dilemma, there is a great temptation to respond by pointing out some of the other possible negative consequences of convicting the man. For example, the real serial killer could begin killing again.

But critics of the utilitarians can invoke a *ceteris paribus* clause, ruling that the only considerations should be the ones specified. All other things will remain equal for the purposes of this example. This forces the utilitarian to confront the key dilemma: if increasing happiness means denying justice, should the utilitarian deny justice? In other words here, the focus is on “justice,” not the utilitarian’s bias. The *ceteris paribus* clause thus keeps the focus of the discussion clearly on the relevant features of the argument.

Ceteris paribus clauses are often implicit, but since it is common in philosophy, it is a good rule of thumb that nothing should be assumed to be the case unless it is clearly stated to be so. Hence, whenever an argument assumes that all other things remain equal, we must add a *ceteris paribus* clause to avoid any potential confusion.

All things being equal, we need not believe in God nor even entertain the idea of one. All things being equal, too, we can never entertain the idea that whatever that exists in this universe is permanent. We have to

admit that everything in this universe or outside of it is impermanent. The point is that we might deny God, but we can never deny impermanence -- all things being equal.³

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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³ On the significance of reflecting on impermanence, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7: [link](#).