



# Lecture 6

# Workable Ethical Theories I

Addison-Wesley  
is an imprint of

PEARSON

Based on slides © 2011 Pearson Education, Inc. Publishing as Pearson Addison-Wesley

# Participation Quiz

Pick an answer between A – E at random.

What answer (A – E) do you think will have been selected most frequently in the previous poll?

# Recap: Unworkable Ethical Theories

- What is an ethical theory?
- What do we mean by a workable theory?
- What does each unworkable theory consist of?
  - subjective relativism
  - cultural relativism
  - divine command
  - ethical egoism

## 2.6 Kantianism

- Key goal: derive morality from more basic principles
- Is anything good regardless of its consequences?
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will (desire to do the right thing)
  - other things we might call good (e.g., giving to charity) really depend on consequences
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing. Make this precise?



# Categorical Imperative (1<sup>st</sup> Formulation)

**Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.**

# Illustration of 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
- Proposed rule: “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”
- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.
- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & then break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

# Categorical Imperative (2<sup>nd</sup> Formulation)

**Act so that you treat both yourself  
and other people as ends in themselves  
and never only as a means to an end.**

---

**“This is usually an easier formulation to work  
with than the first formulation of the  
Categorical Imperative.”**

*...but it depends critically on the “only”.  
IMO, it’s “unworkable”.*

# Second formulation follows from the first

From Wikipedia (“Categorical Imperative”):

*The free will is the source of all rational action. But to treat it as a [means to an end] is to deny the possibility of freedom in general. Because the autonomous will is the one and only source of moral action, **it would contradict the first formulation to claim that a person is merely a means to some other end, rather than always an end in themselves.***



# Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all people as moral equals

# Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
  - Examples: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duties are still duties that can be inferred by the application of “pure reason”: i.e., the first or second formulations of the categorical imperative. But they’re:
  - Activities you couldn’t keep doing forever; never “done”
  - Cause for praise if you do it; not cause for blame if you don’t.
- So what *are* imperfect duties?
  - Examples: helping others; developing your talents.
- More generally:
  - Furthering the ends of ourselves and others.
  - Not following maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs (as distinct from logical contradictions) when universalized
- Not everything we think of as “good” is even an imperfect duty (e.g., doing my chores)

# Case Against Kantianism

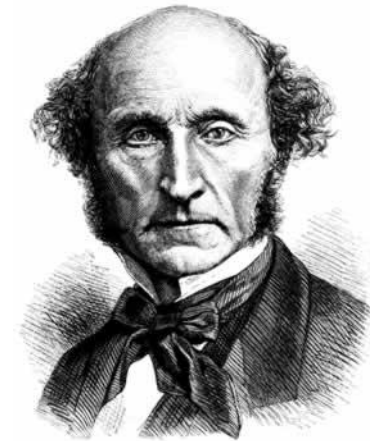
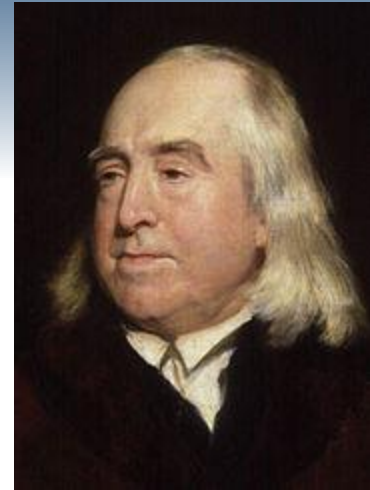
- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
  - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
  - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
  - Doesn't allow for tradeoffs between moral imperatives
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
- Second formulation of the categorical imperative is really easy to misuse (as, indeed, is Kantianism in general)

# Exercise

- In groups of four, identify two ethical issues at the intersection of computers and society:
  - One that is ethical from a Kantian perspective
  - One that is not
- Be prepared to explain your reasoning, using the categorical imperative.

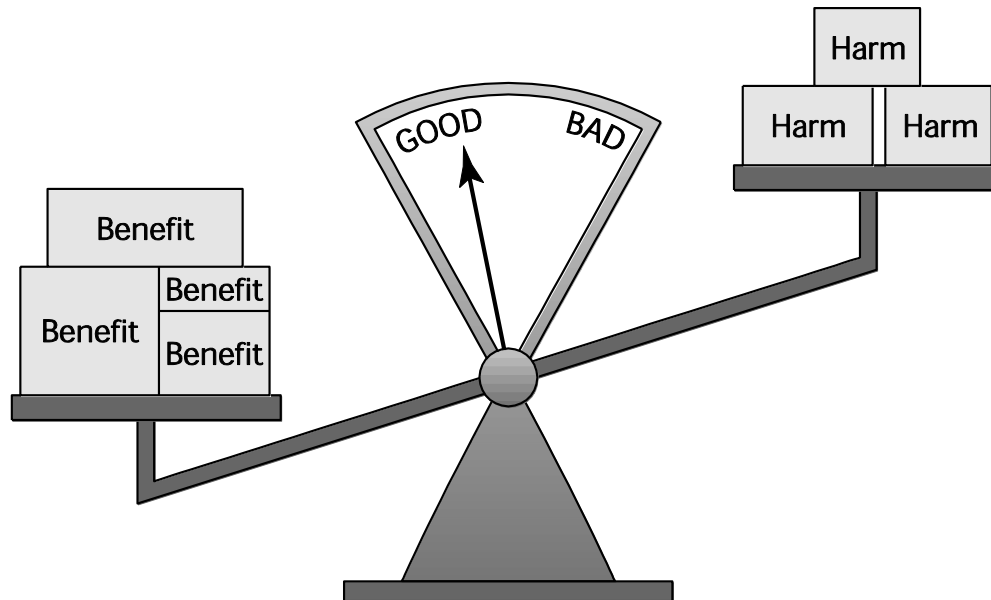
# Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if it benefits someone
- An action is bad if it harms someone
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = cost = evil = pain



# Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)

**An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.**



# Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
  - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
  - Focuses on the consequences
    - A “consequentialist” theory
- Act utilitarianism
  - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
  - Sum  $> 0$ , action is good
  - Sum  $< 0$ , action is bad

# How useful is act utilitarianism?

- discuss



# Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness, which is intuitive
- Down-to-earth (practical)
  - Straightforward to apply
  - Can therefore be helpful in resolving disputes
- Comprehensive
  - Allows an agent to trade off different aspects of a situation
  - Contrast with Kantianism: we needed to find one rule

# Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include in calculations
  - Utilitarians might say you should never exclude anyone...
- Too much work
  - But it's OK to follow a "rule of thumb" most of the time.
- Ignores our innate sense of duty
  - Suppose I make a promise, but can get \$1 for violating it.
    - Seems to miss the sense that I care about my word.
  - Author claims: "Note that it does no good for an act utilitarian to ... say that the hard feelings caused by breaking my word to A will have a negative impact on total happiness of  $-N$  units, because then all I have to do is change the scenario so that breaking my promise to A enables me to produce  $1,001 + N$  units of good for B. We've arrived at the same result."
  - But is this a problem?
- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck
  - Whether an action is moral depends on outcome, which can depend on circumstances beyond your control

# Rule Utilitarianism

- We ought to adopt **moral rules** which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness
  - Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions
  - Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules