Lecture 6
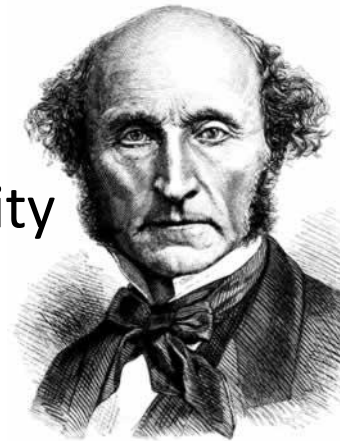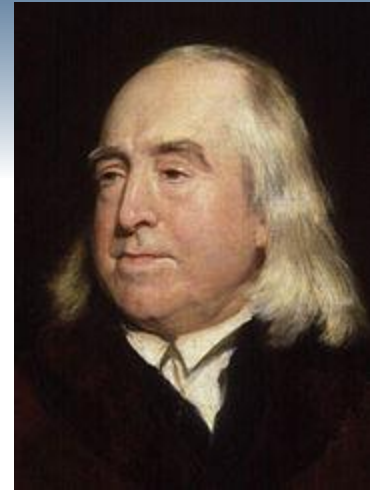# Utilitarianism

Participation Quiz

Where is Kevin?

a) On a beach in Barbados

b) In a rotund building in Berkeley, CA

c) In a castle in Germany

d) At an institute in the Rockies

e) Behind you

What is my name?

a) June

b) Jude

c) Kevina

d) Frau Professor Doktor Walker

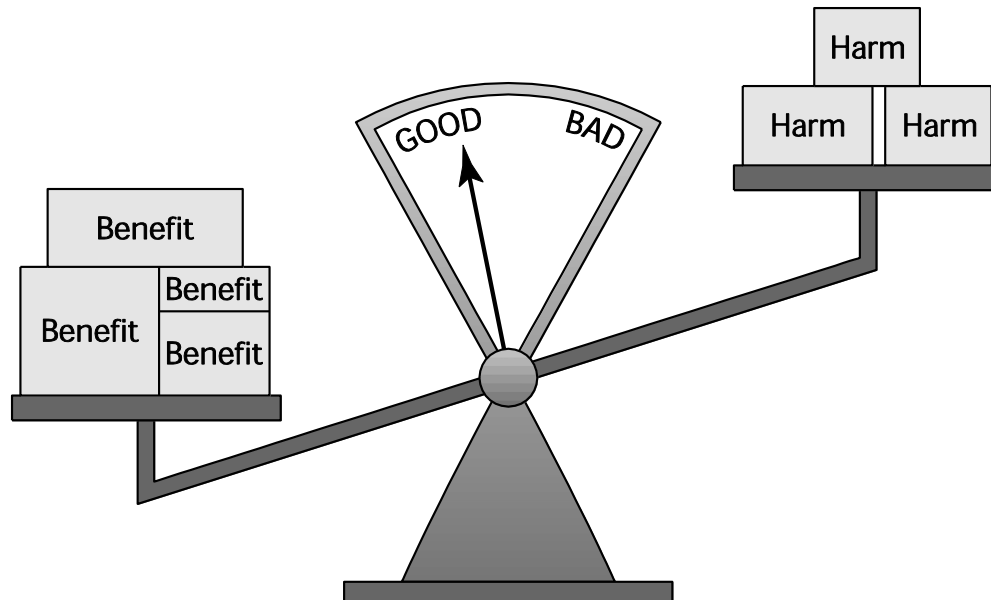e) Whatever name that is easiest to remember

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

- Unhappiness = cost = evil = pain

- Happiness = benefit = good = pleasure

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 with the person(s) next to you
- Report back

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 where 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.
- 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

Case for Rule Utilitarianism

- Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus.

  - You only have to work out the morality of rules.

- Moral rules survive exceptional situations

  - A rule utilitarian can reason (a bit like a Kantian) that it's better for everyone to keep their promises than to lie, and so reject lying for a $1 gain

- Avoids the problem of moral luck

  - We look at the overall usefulness of the rule, not the outcome.

Case Against RU & Act Utilitarianism

- RU: need to identify a single rule to describe situation
- All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
  - All units must be the same in order to do the sum
  - In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
  - We have to figure out what our utility is!
  - BUT: good arguments from utility theory
- Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences.
  - Utilitarianism (as defined here) doesn't mean "the greatest good for the greatest number"
    - That requires a principle of justice
  - We can try to combine these ideas. However, what happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and our principle of justice?

Exercise

- In groups of four, identify two ethical issues at the intersection of computers and society:

  - One that is ethical from at least one Utilitarian perspective

  - One that is not ethical from either perspective

- Be prepared to explain your reasoning.

A) I'm totally convinced

B) I'm somewhat convinced

C) I'm not really convinced

D) Totally unconvincing