



# Lecture 7

# Act and Rule Utilitarianism

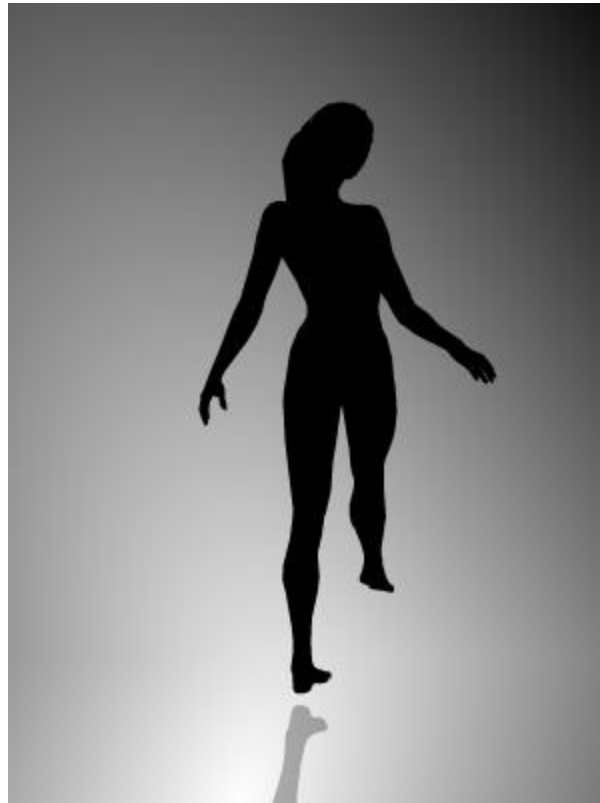
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# Participation Quiz

- Is she spinning clockwise (A) or counter-clockwise (B)?

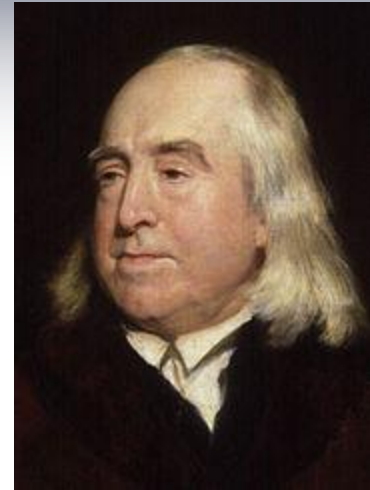


# Imperfect Duties

- We asked last time: what distinguishes an imperfect duty from something you are morally allowed to do or not do?
  - Improving my character vs. mowing the lawn
- 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
  - Furthering the ends of ourselves and others
  - Not following maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs (as distinct from logical contradictions) when universalized
- Overall: Imperfect duties are:
  - Activities you couldn’t keep doing forever; they’re never “done”
  - Cause for praise if you follow them; not cause for blame if you don’t.

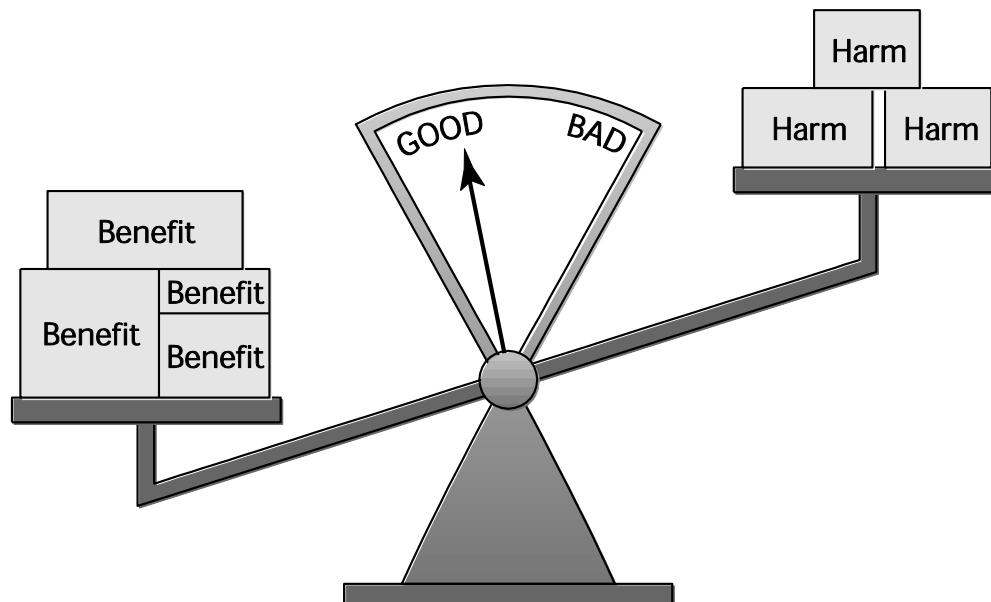
# Principle of Utility

- 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

# Highway Routing Scenario

- The province may replace a curvy stretch of Highway 1
- New highway segment 1 Km shorter
- 150 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed



# Evaluation

- **Costs**
  - \$20 million to compensate homeowners
  - \$10 million to construct new highway
  - Lost wildlife habitat worth \$1 million
- **Benefits**
  - \$39 million savings in automobile driving costs
- **Conclusion**
  - Benefits exceed costs
  - Building highway a good action



# Exercise

- Work in groups of 4 to consider this scenario:
- Google Books aims to digitize a vast number of books and put them online. Many books have unclear copyright status (e.g., the owner may have died without transferring the rights, or might just be hard to find). In these cases, Google treats the book as though it was out of copyright, but allows copyright holders to appeal, in which case they take the scans offline. Google argues that they provide a valuable service, because no other company has the technology to scan these books, and hence many works that would be inaccessible or lost are now available to all. Is Google's behavior ethical from an act utilitarian perspective?

# Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
  - This 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

# Anti-Worm Scenario

- August 2003: Blaster worm infected thousands of Windows computers
- Soon after, Nachi worm appeared
  - Took control of vulnerable computer
  - Located and destroyed copies of Blaster
  - Downloaded software patch to fix security problem
  - Used computer as launching pad to try to “infect” other vulnerable PCs

# Evaluation using Rule Utilitarianism

- Proposed rule: If I can write a helpful worm that removes a harmful worm from infected computers and shields them from future attacks, I should do so.
- Who would benefit
  - People who do not keep their systems updated
- Who would be harmed
  - People who use networks
  - People whose computers are invaded by buggy anti-worms
  - System administrators
- Conclusion: Harm outweighs benefits.  
Releasing anti-worm is wrong.

# Exercise

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# 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 Utilitarianism in General

- 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
  - 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?