

# Lecture 2-3: Utilitarianism

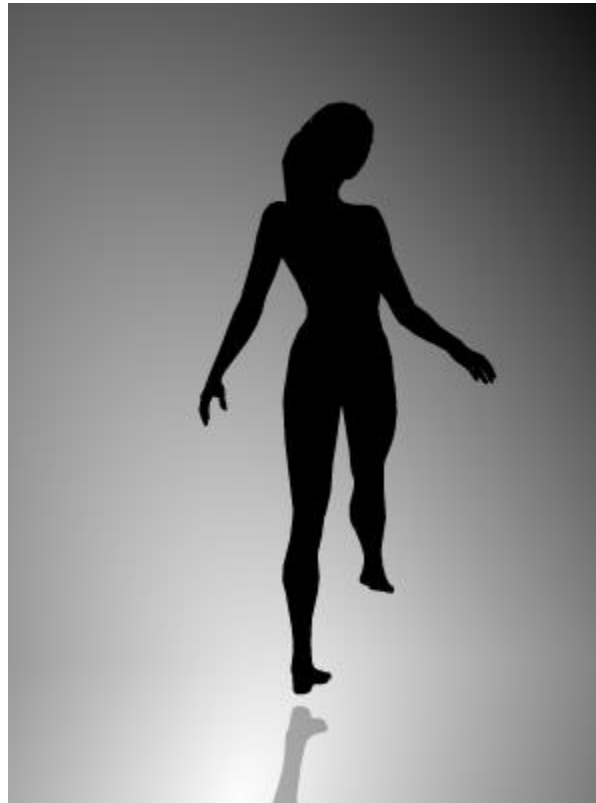
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# Participation Quiz

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



# 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 following from a given action
    - $\text{Sum} > 0$ , action is good
    - $\text{Sum} < 0$ , action is bad

# How useful is act utilitarianism?

- discuss with the person beside 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
    - decomposes big issues into lots of little questions
- 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.
  - Quinn 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

# 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 individual outcomes

# Case Against RU, and Utilitarianism in General

- 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
  - BUT: good arguments from utility theory
  - We have to figure out what this utility function is!
- 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.