Lecture 2-3: Utilitarianism
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
    • Sum > 0, action is good
    • 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.