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CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 03:

# The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- Explain key ideas of utilitarianism, Śāntideva's Buddhist ethics, and Kant's deontological ethics.
- Articulate the way these moral theories stress an impartial element in our moral duties.
- Evaluate reasons for and against accepting these moral theories.



# Outline

The following topics will be covered in this lecture:

- Moral Duty to do Good
- Utilitarianism
- Example to Illustrate Utilitarianism
- Pros of Utilitarianism
- Cons of Utilitarianism
- Śāntideva's Impartialist Ethics
- Kant's Deontological Ethics
- Principle of Universalisability
- Pros and Cons of Principle of Universalisability
- Principle of Humanity



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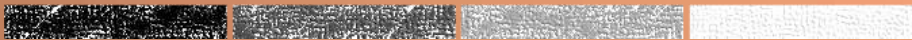
# Topic 01: Moral Duty to Do Good

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# Challenges in Today's World

There are many problems in the world today, such as the following:

- 750 million people live on less than 2 USD (PPP adjusted) per day (World Bank 2016).
- 7 million children die each year of easily-preventable causes such as malaria, diarrhea, or pneumonia (UNICEF 2018).
- By 2100, global average temperatures are predicted to increase by up to 4 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels. If this happens, the equatorial region of the earth will be uninhabitable for much of the year (Vince 2019).

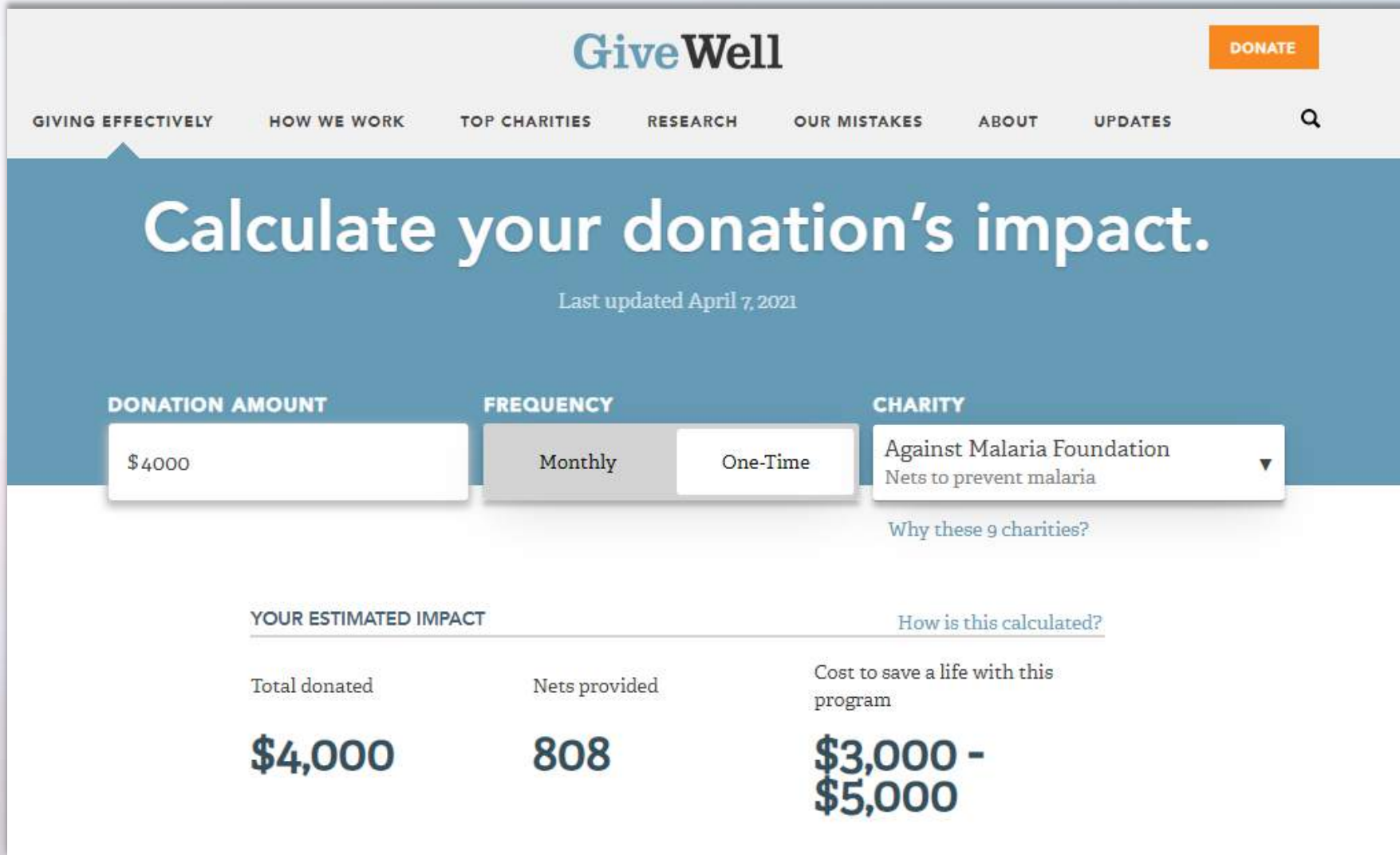


# Can We Help?

- Much good could be done if problems like extreme poverty, child mortality, and climate change could be solved.
- But is there anything we can do individually to help solve these problems?
- What good are you or I in a position to do?



# Impact of Donations



**GiveWell** [DONATE](#)

[GIVING EFFECTIVELY](#) [HOW WE WORK](#) [TOP CHARITIES](#) [RESEARCH](#) [OUR MISTAKES](#) [ABOUT](#) [UPDATES](#) [Q](#)

## Calculate your donation's impact.

Last updated April 7, 2021

**DONATION AMOUNT**

**FREQUENCY** ☒ Monthly ☐ One-Time

**CHARITY**   
Nets to prevent malaria ▼

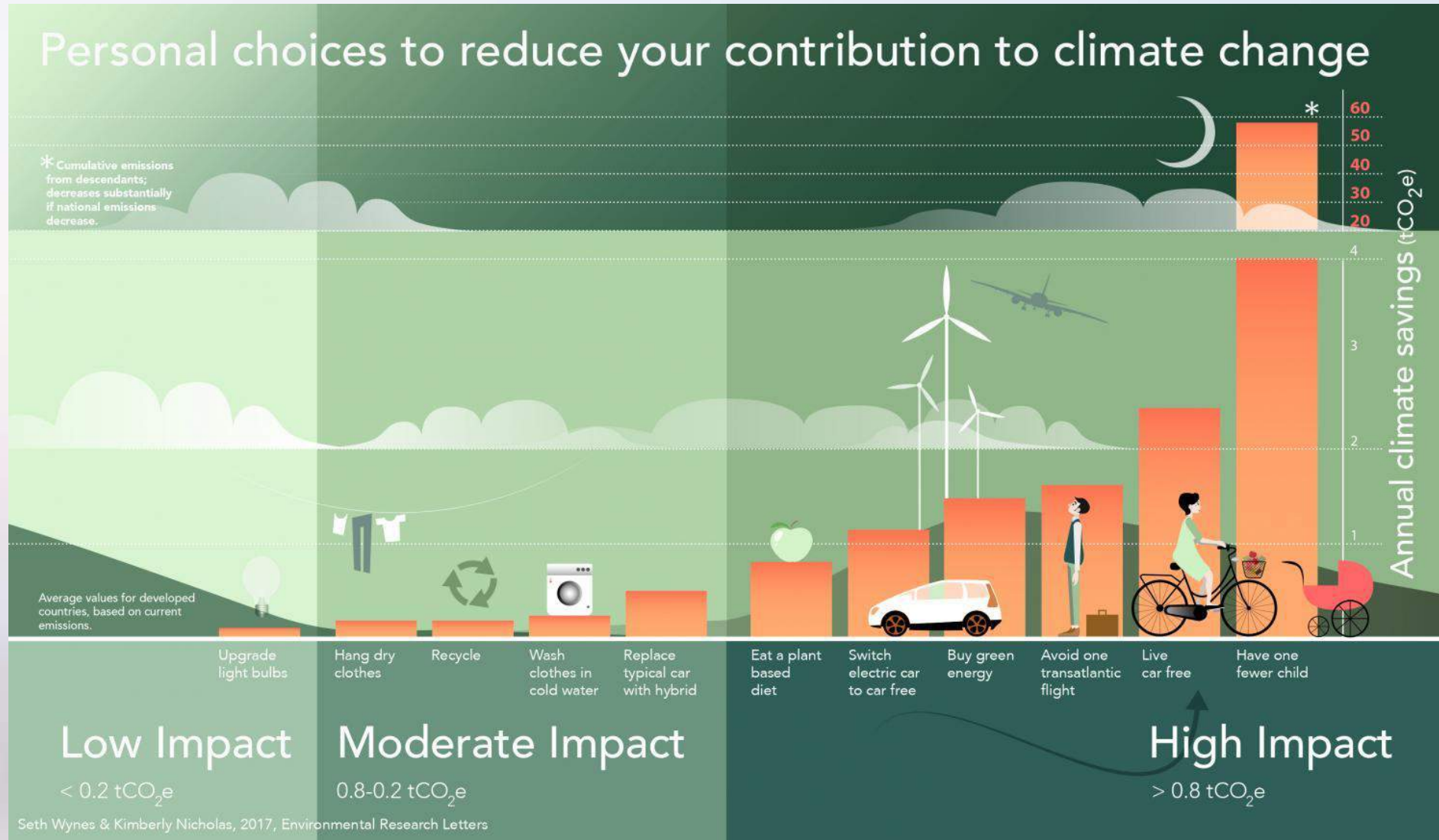
[Why these 9 charities?](#)

**YOUR ESTIMATED IMPACT** [How is this calculated?](#)

Total donated	Nets provided	Cost to save a life with this program
<b>\$4,000</b>	<b>808</b>	<b>\$3,000 - \$5,000</b>



# Personal Contribution to Climate Change





# Discussion Question 1

It turns out that there is much good that you are able to do. But do you also have a moral duty to do good? In other words, would it be morally wrong not to do good in the world?

In this lesson, we'll study two moral theories that, for different reasons, give an answer of "yes" to this question.

- Act utilitarianism
- Kant's deontological ethics



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Slide 5: World Bank Group. 2016. Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016 : Taking on Inequality. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25078> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

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Slide 8: Phys Org. 2017. The most effective individual steps to tackle climate change aren't being discussed. [online] Available at: <https://phys.org/news/2017-07-effective-individual-tackle-climate-discussed.html> [Accessed 4 July 2021].

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# Topic 02: Utilitarianism

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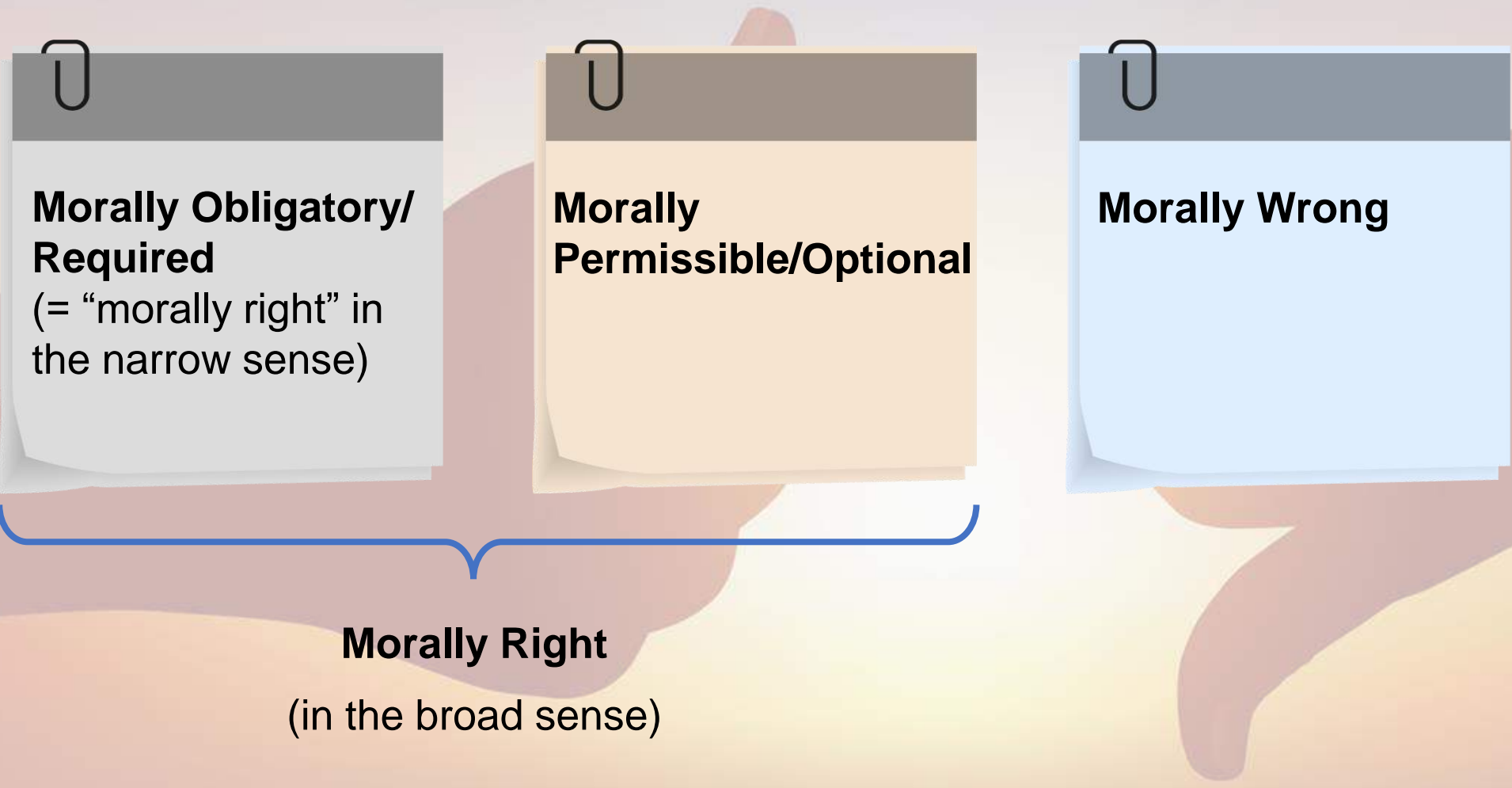
# Morally Relevant Features

Moral Concept	Related or synonymous concept(s)	Moral feature(s) referred to by moral concept
Morally wrong	Immoral, unethical, morally impermissible, unfair, unjust	Actions* that one should/ought not do.
Morally permissible	Morally optional Morally OK to do	Actions* that are not wrong to do, and not wrong not to do.
Morally obligatory	Morally required Morally right (in the narrow sense) Moral obligation Moral responsibility Moral duty	Actions* that it would be wrong not to do, and hence, that one ought to do.
Morally good	Morally valuable Moral good Moral value	Things that ought to be pursued for their own sake; things that bring about other good things; things that improve one's life.
Morally bad	Moral bad	Things that worsen one's life.

\*Moral features of actions may also be moral features of practices, rules, laws, institutions, and policies. Practices, rules, laws, institutions, and policies are aggregations of many actions.



# Terminology



**Morally Obligatory/  
Required**  
(= “morally right” in  
the narrow sense)

**Morally  
Permissible/Optional**

**Morally Wrong**

**Morally Right**

(in the broad sense)

# Consequentialism

**Consequentialism** is a family of moral theories that “share the idea that the morality of actions, policies, motives, or rules depends on their producing the best actual or expected results” (Shafer-Landau 2020: 204).

- Consequentialist moral theories begin by identifying what is good, valuable, and desirable as opposed to what is bad and undesirable.
- Then they identify morally right actions as those actions that produce what is good, and wrong actions as those actions that do not produce what is good.
- According to consequentialism, facts about what is good or bad explain facts about what is right or wrong to do, but not vice versa (Suikkanen 2015: 80-81).



# Act Utilitarianism

There are several moral theories that fall into the consequentialism family. Act utilitarianism (henceforth simply “utilitarianism”) is the best-known consequentialist theory. It will be our focus.

## Utilitarianism’s principle of utility:

- An action is **morally required** iff it maximises overall well-being.
- An action is **morally permissible** iff it produces at least as much overall well-being as any other action you could have done in the circumstances.
- An action is **morally wrong** iff it does not produce at least as much overall well-being as any other action you could have done in the circumstances.

(Shafer-Landau 2020: 93; Timmons 2013: 115; Timmons 2020: 7)

# Clarifications on the Principle of Utility

**Overall well-being** is the net well-being of all individuals affected by an action.

**Everyone's well-being counts:** Overall well-being is the net well-being of all individuals affected by an action.

**Net well-being** is the net balance of benefits and losses to well-being produced by an action (Timmons 2020: 7).

**Everyone's well-being counts equally:** “the benefit (or loss) to one person counts just as much as the same size benefit (or loss) to anyone else affected by one's action” (Timmons 2013: 114).



# Utilitarian Views



Śāntideva

(c. late 7<sup>th</sup> – mid 8<sup>th</sup> century)

Buddhist philosopher w/ utilitarian-like views



Jeremy Bentham  
(1748–1832)

Classical utilitarian



John Stuart Mill  
(1806–1873)  
Classical utilitarian

# Presence of Well-being

Utilitarianism claims that only well-being is good / valuable.

- The British “classical utilitarians,” Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, thought well-being consists solely of pleasure (Timmons 2013: 116).
- Modern-day utilitarians have different theories of well-being. Peter Singer, a contemporary utilitarian, equates well-being with the satisfaction of desires.

# Absence of Well-being

Utilitarianism also claims that only two things are bad:

- The absence of well-being.
- The opposite of well-being: e.g., pain, suffering, frustration of desires, sickness.

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Slide 12 - 15: Pict rider (n.d.). Concept de la prise de décision, avec deux gestes exprimant des opinions contraires. Une main, le pouce en l'air, donne un avis favorable, une autre le pouce pointé vers le bas, s'y oppose. [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/concept-de-la-prise-de-decision-avec-deux-gestes-exprimant-des-opinions-contraires-une-main-le-pouce-en-l'air-donne-un-avis-favorable-une-autre-le-pouce-pointe-vers-le-bas-s'y-oppose/258049847>

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Slide 16: Fizkes (n.d.). Perfect choice for everyone. Close up of multiethnic men and women hands raised in thumbs up gesture approving recommending best contract or loan terms conditions, qualified goods service assistance [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/perfect-choice-for-everyone-close-up-of-multiethnic-men-and-women-hands-raised-in-thumbs-up-gesture-approving-recommending-best-contract-or-loan-terms-conditions-qualified-goods-service-assistance/392620260>

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Slide 18: Ipopba (n.d.). Woman praying and free bird enjoying nature on sunset background, hope concept [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/woman-praying-and-free-bird-enjoying-nature-on-sunset-background-hope-concept/311664549>

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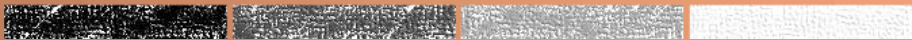
# Topic 03: Example to Illustrate Utilitarianism

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## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

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# Illustration of Utilitarianism

To help you understand what utilitarianism prescribes, consider an illustration.

- Imagine you have a choice between doing one of only three actions: A, B, or C. We suppose that you can only do one of these three actions.
- Each action affects only four people—you, Bob, Cheryl, and Dian.
- Imagine that a **util** is a unit of well-being, such that 1 util measures the same amount of well-being in any person. (A util is only an imaginary unit.)

# MCQ 1

According to utilitarianism, which action should you take?

	Utils resulting from A	Utils resulting from B	Utils resulting from C
You	500	200	-100
Bob	250	200	0
Cheryl	250	200	600
Dian	-100	200	1000
<b>Overall Well-Being</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>1500</b>

# MCQ 1: Solution

According to utilitarianism, C is the morally required action.

	Utils resulting from A	Utils resulting from B	Utils resulting from C
You	500	200	-100
Bob	250	200	0
Cheryl	250	200	600
Dian	-100	200	1000
Overall Well-Being	900	800	1500



# MCQ 2

Now suppose you can only choose between actions A, C, and D. According to utilitarianism, are any of these actions morally wrong? Are any morally permissible?

	Utils resulting from A	Utils resulting from C	Utils resulting from D
You	500	0	-200
Bob	250	0	250
Cheryl	250	500	250
Dian	-100	1000	1200
Overall Well-Being	900	1500	1500

# MCQ 2: Solution

According to utilitarianism, A is wrong, while both C and D are permissible.

	Utils resulting from A	Utils resulting from C	Utils resulting from D
You	500	0	-200
Bob	250	0	250
Cheryl	250	500	250
Dian	-100	1000	1200
Overall Well-Being	900	1500	1500

# Acknowledgements:

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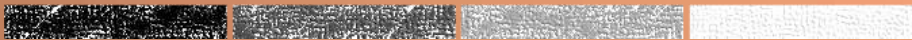
# Topic 04: Pros of Utilitarianism

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# Impartiality

One good reason to accept utilitarianism seems to be that it is committed to a principle of impartiality.

**Utilitarian impartiality** (Shafer-Landau 2020: 94):

- Everyone's well-being counts.
- Everyone's well-being counts equally: "the benefit (or loss) to one person counts just as much as the same size benefit (or loss) to anyone else affected by one's action" (Timmons 2013: 114).



# Other Moral Starting Points

Utilitarianism is arguably compatible with a number of “moral starting points”: moral beliefs that are very plausible, and thus reasonable places from which to begin our moral thinking (Shafer-Landau 2019: ch.1, 4-6). These starting points include (Shafer-Landau 2020: 94):

- Slavery is wrong.
- Rape is wrong.
- Humiliating defenseless people is wrong.
- Killing innocent victims is wrong.
- Helping the poor is right.
- Keeping promises is right.
- Telling the truth is right.

# Discussion Question 2

For utilitarianism to be compatible with the moral beliefs listed below, the statement following “because” has to be true. Is it true in every case?

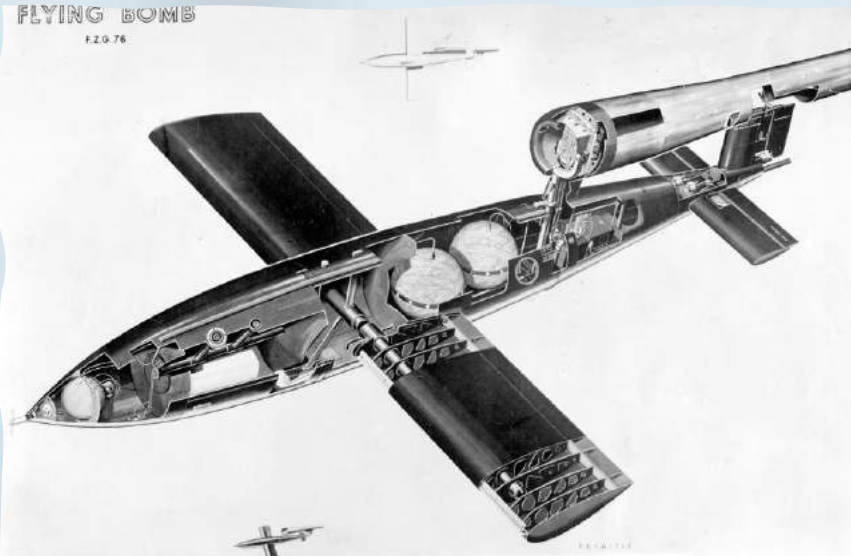
Moral Beliefs	Utilitarian Rationale for Moral Beliefs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slavery is morally wrong...</li><li>• Rape is morally wrong...</li><li>• Humiliating defenseless people is morally wrong...</li><li>• Killing innocent victims is morally wrong...</li></ul>	... <b>because</b> it does not produce at least as much well-being as any alternative action one could have done in the circumstances.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Helping the poor is morally right...</li><li>• Keeping promises is morally right...</li><li>• Telling the truth is morally right...</li></ul>	... <b>because</b> it produces as much or more well-being than any alternative action one could have done in the circumstances.



# Guidance in Moral Dilemmas

A third reason to accept utilitarianism is that it provides guidance in moral dilemmas (Shafer-Landau 2020: 94).

- A **moral dilemma** (also known as a “moral conflict”) is “a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two courses of action, either of which entails transgressing a moral principle” (Google’s English Dictionary).
- For example, consider Churchill’s Dilemma (Edmonds 2014: 3-7).





# Discussion Question 3

- Do you think utilitarianism would support Churchill's decision to divert the German V1 bombs south of central London, reducing (but not entirely eliminating) British casualties?
- Do you think Churchill did the right thing by diverting the German V1 bombs south of central London?



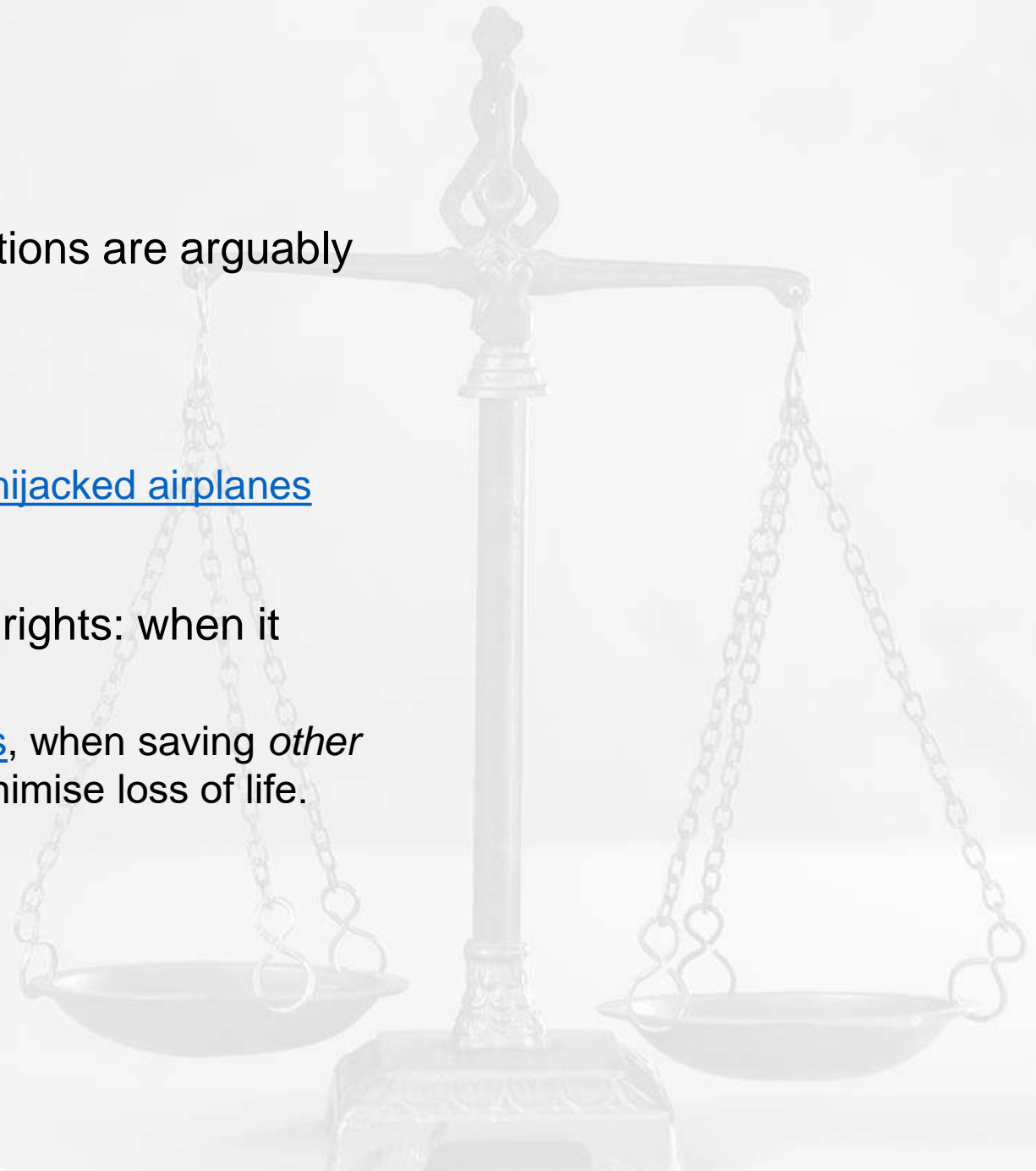
# Moral Flexibility

A fourth argument in favor of utilitarianism is that it allows for moral flexibility (Shafer-Landau 2020: 94-95).

- It seems that actions are not right without exception, nor are actions wrong without exception. Rather, what is right or wrong depends on the circumstances.
- Utilitarianism supports this idea:
  - Actions like lying, stealing, and killing the innocent are right whenever those actions produce at least as much well-being as any other action.
  - Actions like telling the truth, respecting property rights, and saving innocent lives are wrong whenever those actions do not produce at least as much well-being as any other action.

# Moral Flexibility

- In the following circumstances, these actions are arguably right according to utilitarianism:
  - Lying: [White lies](#)
  - Stealing: [The Heinz dilemma](#)
  - Killing innocent people: [Shooting down hijacked airplanes](#)
- Telling the truth and respecting property rights: when it would “do more harm than good.”
  - Saving people’s lives: in [triage situations](#), when saving *other* people’s lives would more effectively minimise loss of life.



# Acknowledgements:

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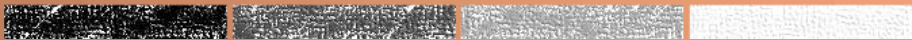
# Topic 05: Cons of Utilitarianism

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# Demandingness

On the other hand, there are objections to utilitarianism. One objection to utilitarianism is that it is excessively “demanding” i.e., it expects too much of people in two different ways (Shafer-Landau 2020: 95-96):

- First, hardly anyone is psychologically motivated to maximise overall well-being, as utilitarianism prescribes. Only a saint could live up to utilitarianism.
- Second, acts of great self-sacrifice are not morally required, even if they maximise overall well-being. It is not the case that people ought to make great sacrifices to maximise overall well-being.

# Injustice

A second objection to utilitarianism suggests that it can sometimes be wrong to maximise well-being, because doing so would involve committing a serious injustice (Shafer-Landau 2020: 99-102).

- In March 2020, several European medical associations published triage recommendations for hospitals that were overwhelmed with patients suffering from COVID-19 ([Ehni et al. 2020](#); [Mounk 2020](#)).
- Some of the guidelines recommend that older patients not be admitted to Intensive Care Units (ICUs), because older patients are less likely to survive than younger patients.
- However, refusing intensive care to older patients is potentially a form of unjust discrimination known as [ageism](#).



# Impartiality(?)

- Earlier it was suggested that the utilitarian commitment to impartiality is an argument in favour of the theory.
- However, a third objection against utilitarianism is that we should not always count everyone's well-being equally (Shafer-Landau 2020: 97-98). Contrast the following two cases:

1

**Nepotism:** A respected commercial airline pilot uses his influence to get his son a job at the same airline. The son, however, barely passed his training and is a terrible pilot.

2

**Caring for loved ones:** A father spends \$4000 of his money to pay for extra tuition so that his son will pass his exams, even though donating that money to the Against Malaria Foundation could've prevented one person from dying of malaria ([GiveWell Impact Calculator](#)).



# Judgement given by Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism would almost certainly tell us that the father pilot should not have gotten his incompetent son the job as a pilot. The son now poses a danger to passengers who fly with him. So, getting the son a job as an airline pilot would not maximise overall well-being.

1

Utilitarianism seems to give the correct judgment here. The father should be concerned about the well-being of those who may be harmed by his son's incompetence.

- On the other hand, utilitarianism arguably also implies that the father should not spend \$4000 on tuition for his son, if he could instead save a stranger's life by donating the money to the AMF.

2

If this is the judgment that utilitarianism implies, many people may not find it intuitive. Some may argue that the father should care more about his own son's well-being than the well-being of strangers. Perhaps, then, we should not always count everyone's well-being equally.

# Acknowledgements:

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# Topic 06: Śāntideva's Impartialist Ethics

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 03:

## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# Who was Śāntideva?



- Śāntideva was an Indian Buddhist monk, philosopher, and poet.
- Śāntideva offered arguments for a principle of impartiality that closely resembles utilitarian impartiality.

Śāntideva  
(c. late 7<sup>th</sup> – mid 8<sup>th</sup> century)

# Who was Śāntideva?

[Buddhism](#) is a major world religion. It's also a long-lived tradition in moral philosophy. Śāntideva's writings are hugely influential in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

- According to Tibetan historians, Śāntideva was a prince from Saurāṣṭra - a coastal region that is part of the present-day Indian state of Gujarat ([Goodman 2016](#)).
- Two main works are attributed to Śāntideva:
  - The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) or *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*
  - The *Śikṣā-samuccaya* (ŚS), or *Training Anthology*





# Śāntideva's Verse

In ŚS verse 1, Śāntideva suggests that there is no good reason to care more about one's own well-being than those of others, because there is nothing "special" about one's own well-being that makes it more important than the well-being of others:

“When fear and suffering are disliked  
by me and others equally,  
What is so special about me,  
so that I protect myself and not others?”  
(Quoted in Goodman 2017: 330)



# Ownerless Suffering Argument

In a series of verses that appear in the BCA, Śāntideva sets out what has become known as the **Ownerless Suffering Argument** (see Goodman 2017: 330):

“IX.97. If I give them no protection because their suffering does not afflict me, why do I protect my body against future suffering when it does not afflict me?

99. If you think it is for the person who has the pain to guard against it, a pain in the foot is not of the hand, so why is the one protected by the other?

101. The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong?

102. Without exception, **no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?**”



# Discussion Question 4

- If other people dislike suffering just as you dislike suffering, is there any good reason to care more about **your** suffering than other people's suffering?
- By a similar token, if other people enjoy being happy just as you enjoy being happy, is there any good reason to care more about **your** happiness than other people's happiness?



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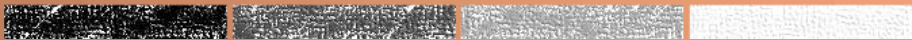
# Topic 07: Kant's Deontological Ethics

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 03:

## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# Who was Kant?

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a German philosopher. He made lasting contributions to many areas of philosophy.
- Kant's deontological ethics is another moral theory.



NO, THIS WAY

# Deontology

- Deontological ethics, more simply, deontology is a whole family of moral theories. Kant's moral theory is a particularly influential version of deontological ethics.
  - The word “deon” means **duty** in Greek. Thus, “deontology” means **study of duty**.
- Deontology begins with a theory of what our moral duties are, then explains right actions in terms of fulfilling those duties, and wrong actions in terms of violating those duties (Wolff 2021: 369).
  - In contrast, consequentialism starts with a theory of what is good / valuable. Then it explains right actions in terms of bringing about what is good, and wrong actions in terms of failing to bring about the good.

# Deontology

- Kant is a powerful critic of utilitarianism. He once wrote, in opposition to utilitarianism, that “[m]orals is not properly the doctrine of how to make ourselves happy but of how we are to be worthy of happiness” (Kant 1788/1956: 130).
- On the other hand, Kant’s deontology shares with utilitarianism a commitment to impartiality.
- Yet as we will see, Kant’s theory offers a different view of what impartiality is.
  - The Principle of Universalisability (Shafer-Landau 2020: 112-119).
  - The Principle of Humanity (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119-125)



# The Categorical Imperative

The centre-piece of Kant's moral theory is a fundamental moral principle that he called **The Categorical Imperative** (Timmons 2020: 15).

- Kant offered various “formulations” of the Categorical Imperative.
- We will study two such formulations that are most often applied to concrete moral problems:

**The Principle of  
Universalisability**  
(Shafer-Landau  
2020: 112-119).

**The Principle of  
Humanity** (Shafer-  
Landau 2020: 119-  
125)

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# Topic 08: Principle of Universalisability

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

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## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# What is the Principle of Universalisability?

The Principle of Universalisability holds that:

An action is **morally required** iff the maxim of refraining from that action is not universalisable.

An action is **morally permissible** iff the maxim of the action is universalisable.

An action is **morally wrong** iff the maxim of the action is not universalisable.

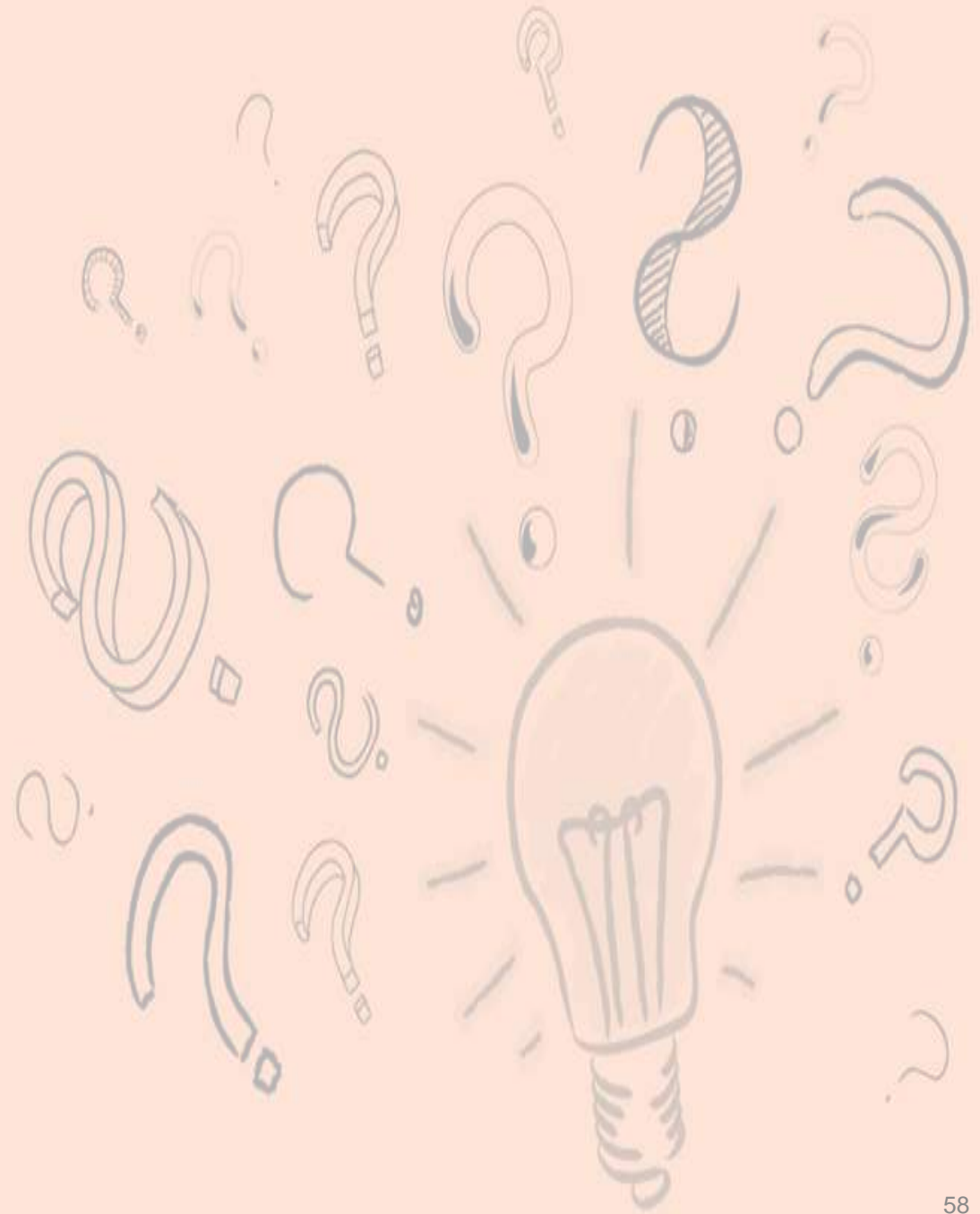
(Shafer-Landau 2020: 112; Timmons 2013: 221)



# Maxim of an Action

The **maxim** of an action is “the principle of action you give yourself when you are about to do something” (Shafer-Landau 2020: 112).

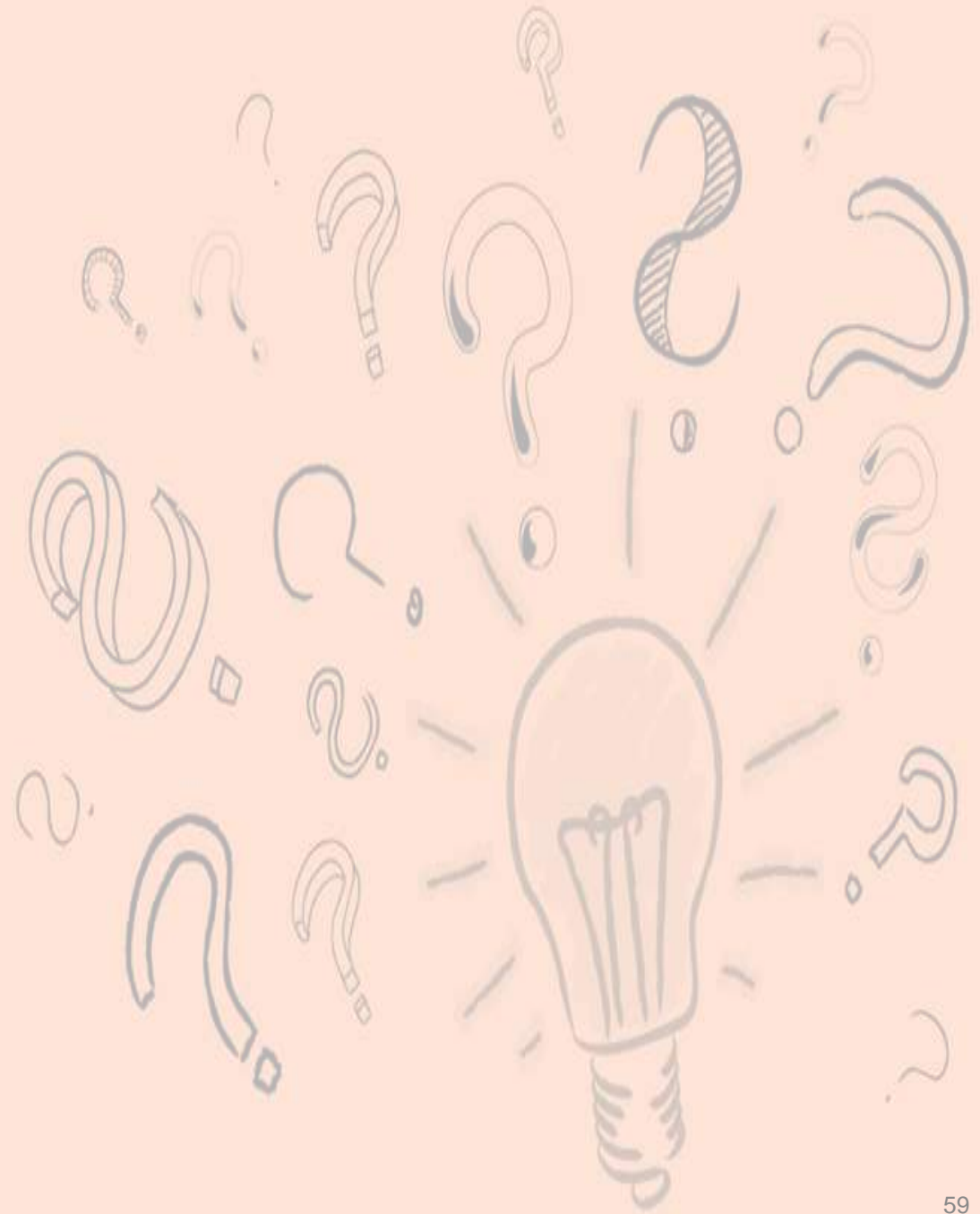
- A maxim has two parts:
  - 1) It states what you are about to do, and
  - 2) why you are about to do it.
- For example, suppose you give your friend a lift to the airport. The maxim of your action would presumably be:
  - I will drive my friend to the airport,
  - to help her catch her flight.



# Universalisability Test

For a maxim of your action to be universalisable, it has to pass the “universalisability test” (Shafer-Landau 2020: 113):

- 1) **Formulate your maxim clearly.** State what you intend to do and why you intend to do it.
- 2) **Imagine a world in which everyone supports and acts on your maxim.** Note that this is a hypothetical world - a world to be imagined.
- 3) **Then ask: Can the goal of my action be achieved in such a world?** If the answer is “yes”, then the maxim is universalisable. If the answer is “no”, then the maxim is not universalisable.



# First Example: Lying

- Kant famously applied the Principle of Universalisability to two examples (Suikkanen 2015: 92-94).
  - **Lying to get a loan:** Imagine that someone needs money to pay for something he wants. He asks his friend to lend him some money, and promises to pay the friend back. But the promise is a lie: the requestor has no intention whatsoever of repaying his friend.
- Kant thought the act of making a lying promise to get a loan in this case is morally wrong.
- Moreover, Kant suggested that this action is wrong because the maxim of the action is not universalisable.



# First Example: Lying

Let's apply the universalisability test to the act of making a lying promise to get a loan.

- **Formulate the maxim:** The maxim of this action seems to be:

I will make a lying promise to repay a loan I need to get.

- Here, the action is the making of the lying promise, and the reason why the action is done is to get the loan one needs.
- **Imagine** a world in which everyone makes a lying promise to repay a loan they need to get.
- **Ask:** Can the goal of the action be achieved in such a world? Kant reasoned that the answer is “no”.





# Second Example: Never Helping

- Here's the second example to which Kant applied the Principle of universalisability (Suikkanen 2015: 94):
  - **Never helping those in need.** A person does not want to sacrifice even a little bit of her own happiness by helping others. So, she always refrains from helping others in need, no matter how urgently they needed help.
- Kant thought that never helping others in need is wrong. He thought it is morally required to help others, at least sometimes.
- Kant argued for these views on the basis of the Principle of universalisability.





# Second Example: Never Helping

Apply the universalisability test to the omission of never helping anyone in need.

- **Formulate the maxim:** The maxim of this omission seems to be:

I will never help anyone in need in order to avoid sacrificing my own happiness.

- Here, the omission is never helping someone in need, and the reason for the omission is not wanting to sacrifice one's own happiness.
- **Imagine** a world in which no one ever helps anyone in need, to avoid sacrificing their own happiness.
- **Ask:** Can the goal of the omission be achieved in such a world? Kant reasoned that the answer is “no”.



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# Topic 09: Pros and Cons of Universalisability

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

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## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

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# Pros: Principle of Universalisability



- There are some compelling arguments in favour of the Principle of Universalisability.
- For one thing, it's compatible with a variety of highly plausible moral beliefs i.e., “moral starting points” (Shafer-Landau 2019: ch. 1, 4-6):
  - It seems quite reasonable to think that it's wrong to making lying promises to get loans, and to never help anyone.
  - The Principle of Universalisability is compatible with these secure moral beliefs.



# Pros: Principle of Universalisability



- In addition, the Principle of Universalisability upholds a principle of impartiality (Shafer-Landau 2020: 110-112, 114).
- Kant's Principle of Universalisability requires that you always act in a way that is impartial, in the sense of being consistent and fair.
  - The Principle of Universalisability tells us to always act on maxims that are universalisable.
  - When you act on maxims that are universalisable, you act for reasons that everyone could act on.
  - So, following the Principle of Universalisability is a way of subjecting your own actions to the same standards that you would apply to everyone else. In other words, it's a way of treating everyone (including yourself) equally.

# Pros: Principle of Universalisability

- Although Kant's ethics upholds the principle of impartiality, its interpretation of what impartiality requires is different from that which we find in utilitarianism.
- Arguably, Kant's principle of universalisability implies that it's morally permissible not to be equally concerned with everyone's well-being.
  - In a world where everyone cared more for friends and loved ones, it would be possible to succeed in giving more care, support, and help to them than to others.
- So, by the principle of universalisability, caring more for friends and loved ones does not conflict with treating everyone equally, provided that everyone else is able to care more for their friends and loved ones.

# Cons: Principle of Universalisability

- However, there are objections to the Principle of Universalisability. One is that the Principle of Universalisability fails to count as wrong some actions that surely are wrong (Shafer-Landau 2020: 116-117).
  - Vindictive theft: A thief robs money from a bank not to gain riches for herself, but to put it out of business.
  - Genocide: A genocidal dictator kills every member of a culture / nationality / religion simply because he despises them.
- It would seem that the maxims of both the actions described are universalisable. Hence, by the principle of universalisability, both actions are morally permissible.
- Yet surely, neither of these actions are permissible. They are wrong.



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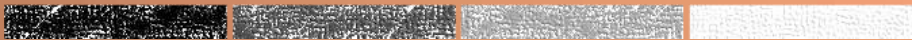
# Topic 10: Principle of Humanity

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 03:

## The Scope of Our Moral Duties: Impartiality

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco





# What is the Principle of Humanity?

Fortunately for Kant, there is a second formula of the Categorical Imperative called the Principle of Humanity (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119-125; Timmons 2013: 218; Timmons 2020: 15). This formula may avoid the problems with the Principle of Universalisability.

An action is **morally required** iff refraining from the action would fail to treat persons (including oneself) as ends.

An action is **morally permissible** iff neither refraining from the action nor doing the action would fail to treat persons (including oneself) as ends.

An action is **morally wrong** iff it would either fail to treat persons (including oneself) as ends, or it would involve treating a person as a mere means.

# Two Important Ideas

- In his own words, Kant expressed the Principle of Humanity as follows:

“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant: 1785/1997, 4:429; p. 38).

- To understand what the Principle of Humanity means, we have to understand two ideas:

1

**Treating persons as ends:** the Principle of Humanity says you should always do this.

2

**Treating persons as mere means:** the Principle of Humanity says you should never do this.

# Treating Persons as Ends

- **Treating a person as an end** is treating them with the respect they deserve (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119-120).
- But what is the respect that persons deserve? Kant's answer to this question lies in his theory of what a "person" is.
  - By a "person," Kant wasn't merely referring to members of the species *Homo sapiens*.
  - Instead, for Kant a "person" refers to a **rational and autonomous** being (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119-120).
  - In principle, if a non-human being were found to be rational and autonomous, then it would count as a person in Kant's view (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119).

# Rational and Autonomous Beings

- Being **rational** involves using reason to figure out what to do in a morally acceptable way (Shafer-Landau 2020: 120).
- Being **autonomous** is to be in control of one's own life (Shafer-Landau 2020: 120).
- Kant held that the rationality and autonomy of persons makes them supremely valuable and worthy of respect.
  - Thus, **to treat a person as an end and to respect them as they deserve, one must support their rationality and autonomy.**
  - Moreover, since all persons are rational and autonomous beings, **this respect is owed to every person equally.**



# Treating Persons as *Mere Means*

The principle of humanity prohibits treating someone as a mere means. What is meant by this?

- Some interpreters of Kant suggest that to **treating a person as a mere means** is to use them in a way that they could not rationally consent to being used (Timmons 2013: 212).
- Many kinds of actions are not rationally consented to, and thus amount to treating people as mere means:
  - Deception
  - Coercion (e.g., slavery, sexual assault)
  - Exploitation
  - Violations of privacy



# Using Others to Achieve Personal Goals

- However, it's important to bear in mind that Kant did not think that it's *necessarily* wrong to use persons as means to achieving your own goals (Shafer-Landau 2020: 119).
- For instance, it would not be wrong, under the principle of humanity, to engage in consensual, voluntary exchanges with other persons.
  - When you purchase a good or service from someone, you are in a sense “using” them to get something you want.
  - However, as long as the seller rationally and voluntarily consents to the arrangement, you are not using the seller as a “*mere* means” to get something you want. On the contrary, you’d be respecting the seller as a rational and autonomous person, treating them as an end.

# Moral Starting Points

The Principle of Humanity is compatible with many plausible moral beliefs, or “moral starting points” (Shafer-Landau 2019: ch. 1, 4-6; Shafer-Landau 2020: 121-122):

- It would count as wrong the actions in the Vindictive Theft and Genocide cases described previously.
- It implies a moral duty to develop attitudes of benevolence and sympathy for others (Timmons 2013: 215).
- Kant believed the Principle of Humanity makes it permissible to blame and punish wrongdoers for their misdeeds (Shafer-Landau 2020: 122).

# Commitment to Impartiality

- The Principle of Humanity also expresses a commitment to impartiality. It says that all persons deserve equal respect due to their rationality and autonomy.
- Because of its commitment to impartiality, the Principle of Humanity is compatible with a large number of other moral starting points (Shafer-Landau 2019: ch. 1, 4-6).
  - Justice: The Principle of Humanity offers an attractive explanation for what is wrong with discrimination (e.g, sexism, racism, ageism).
  - Human rights (Shafer-Landau 2020: 122).

# Cons: Principle of Humanity

- Notwithstanding the attractions of the Principle of Humanity, there are objections to it.
- A main problem is that the notion of treating persons as ends and not as mere means is vague (Shafer-Landau 2020: 123).
- The vagueness of the Principle of Humanity can be seen in these examples:
  - **Non-consensual blame and punishment?**
  - **Paternalism?**
  - **Suicide?**



Brittany Maynard  
(1984 – 2014)



# Discussion Question 5

- What we might call Kantian impartiality holds that:
  - You should perform actions that everyone could do for the same reasons, and
  - All rational, autonomous beings should be respected equally.
- Many people have the intuition that we ought to care more about friends and loved ones than we do about strangers. Is Kantian impartiality compatible with this intuition? Why or why not? And if not, should we reject the intuition, or should we reject Kantian impartiality?



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