

# Utilitarianism

## Chapter 8

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# What is Utilitarianism

## Definition:

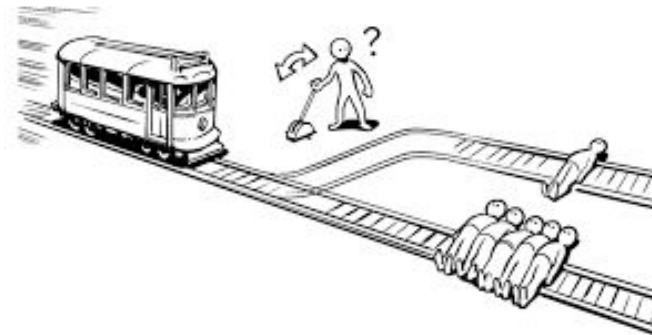
- A moral philosophy where the rightness of an action depends on its **consequences** based on its contribution to *happiness or utility*
  - Different between Kantian Ethics where the morality of an **action** is judged by its intentions / moral duty
  - ex) Lying is normally wrong or choosing to save 5 lives over 1 in The Trolley Problem

## Core idea:

- **Greatest Happiness Principle:** Right actions are those that produce the greatest amount of overall happiness in the world
  - Similarities with hedonism, but happiness is focused at a social level instead of a personal level

## Historical Context:

- “**Utilitarianism**” became a popular term in the early 19th century
- “Utility” is derived from “usefulness”
- Used to evaluate institutions by their usefulness



# POSIWID (The Purpose Of a System Is What It Does) Kantianism and Utilitarianism

- Real world example of a systems heuristic
  - Phrase used to point out how the actual purpose of a system is often at odds with the intentions of its creators
  - Ex: Bitcoin (and crypto as a whole), originally espoused with lofty goals of being some all powerful democratizing decentralized currency in practice is really no more than an glorified ponzi scheme/electricity sink
- Best example of the contrast between Kantianism and Utilitarianism
  - Kant argues that the intention and duty towards good will is what matters
  - Utilitarianism argues what is best for the greatest number of people is what matters

# Jeremy Bentham – Aadhil

- ❖ Entered Oxford at 12, graduated at 15; called to the bar at 19
- ❖ Spent life reforming the English legal system—criticized it as unjust and irrational
  - More legal reformer than academic philosopher, yet deeply influential
- ❖ *“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.”*
- ❖ *“It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.”*
  - Actions and laws should aim to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Principle of Utility)
  - Moral worth of any action judged by its consequences for happiness
  - Applied broadly: from individual actions to government policies
  - The basis for social institutions that people can live with contentedly

# Bentham's "Hedonic Calculus"

A method to quantify pleasure and pain by evaluating:

- ❖ **Intensity** – how strong is the pleasure or pain?
- ❖ **Duration** – how long will it last?
- ❖ **Certainty** – how likely is it to occur?
- ❖ **Proximity** – how soon will it occur?
- ❖ **Fecundity** – will it lead to more of the same sensation?
- ❖ **Purity** – is it mixed with the opposite sensation?
- ❖ **Extent** – how many people are affected?

# Egoism, Altruism, Utilitarianism – Hamza

- Egoism and Altruism correlate to Utilitarianism but they have key differences
- Egoism says you should place your interests above others, Altruism says you should place others interests over your own
- “Love your neighbor as yourself”
- Utilitarianism says that you should be concerned with others interests just as much as you should be concerned of your own

# How does one 'maximise' utility?

In the short term, or long term?

A dark blue, diagonal shape that starts from the bottom left corner and extends towards the top right, covering the lower half of the slide. It has a smooth, slightly curved edge.

# How does one 'maximise' utility?

If you had \$1,000 and wanted to give it to charity should you:

- a) Immediately donate it to charity
- b) Invest it in some relatively stable asset (such as government bonds or stock indices) to maximise its total value and then donate it



# How does one 'maximise' utility?

Should I spend my life:

- a) Immediately helping those in need by being a doctor at a hospital (saving 100s/1000s of people)
- b) Trying to find a cancer cure (would potentially save millions, but less likely)

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Utility must be quantifiable, maybe use a mathematical model:

Utility = Probability \* Reward



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Utility must be quantifiable, maybe use a mathematical model:

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However, this is also based off our limited, asymmetric information

