

# *Utilitarianism*

*the best for the most*



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

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- Who you are matters, and some matter more than others for the sake of distribution of benefits, burdens and roles.

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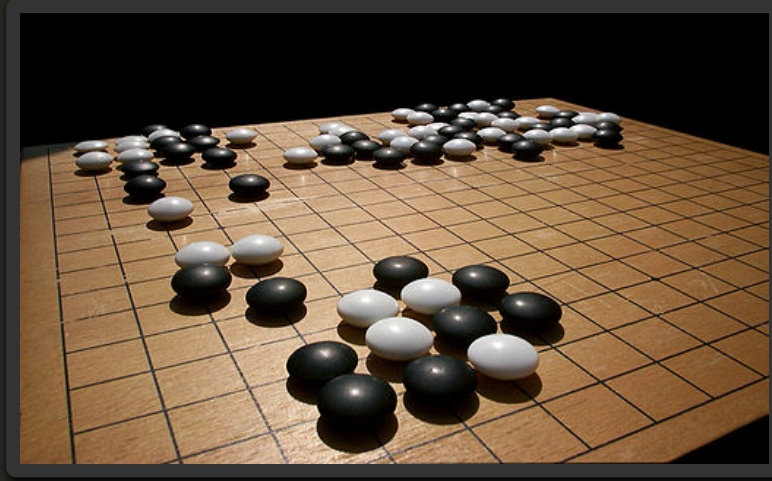
- Who you are matters, and some matter more than others for the sake of distribution of benefits, burdens and roles.
- **Assumption:** *the good of all* requires that we play the roles we are all assigned by nature and inherited social status.

# *Modern society*

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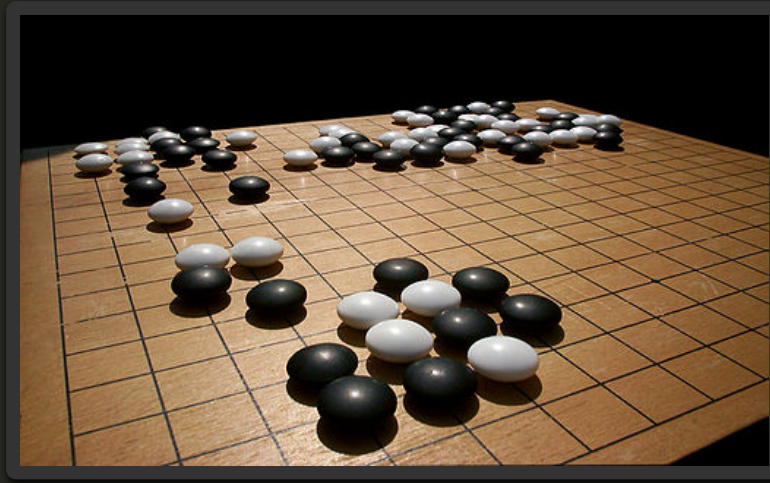
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- **Assumption:** *the good of all* is best served by allowing individuals to pursue their own conceptions of what is good for them.

# *Utilitarianism*

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Happiness is the highest good, the ultimate aim of all human activity.

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- Utilitarianism offers itself as a common sense solution to the problem of finding moral common ground.
- We need not worry about the fact that we disagree on the *content* of a good life, since we all can agree that *whatever* it is that we are after in life, more satisfaction of our goals is always preferable to less.

# *Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism*



Jeremy Bentham  
1748-1832

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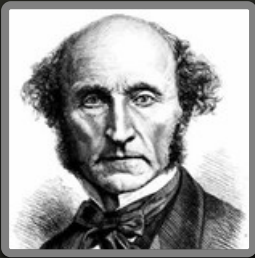
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- He attempted to quantify pleasures and pains and developed a method of moral calculation based on this.

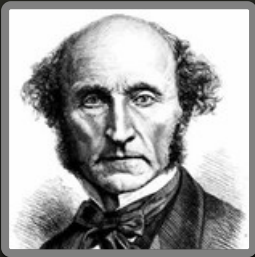
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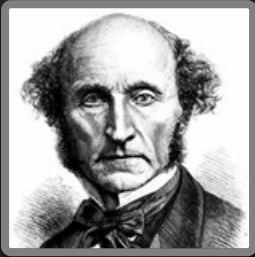
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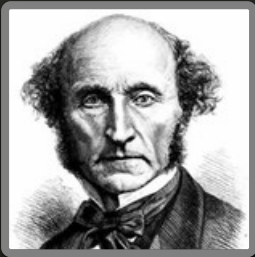


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- He tried to show how all moral rules could be explained as the attempt to help as many individuals satisfy as many of their preferences as possible.

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How might this work?

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*How might we convince someone with Dwight's attitude to adopt Pam's view?*

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- But why should I even *care* about other people getting what they want in the first place?
- Rational actors are *individuals* and what we want to know is why individuals would *ever* find it more rational to set their interests aside.

# *From Self-interest to Morality*

## *The public defense argument*

Suppose I selfishly cause harm to others for my personal gain.

I might get away with this, but what I can never do is convince others who know exactly what I am doing to let me get away with it.

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- Public accountability does seem to support the moral ideal that we all count.
- Utilitarianism thus claims to have found a rational standard for measuring the morality of all actions -- do they genuinely serve the good of all or not?

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## *If Utilitarianism is true...*

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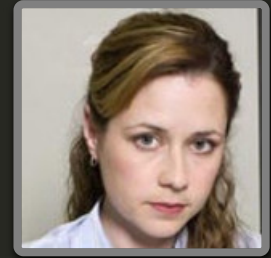
"What's not to love about utilitarianism? Let's all work to get the best outcomes for the most people!"



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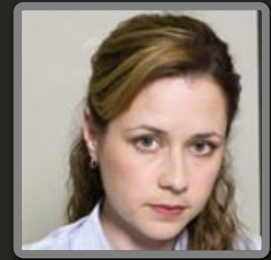


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*How can we accurately measure and compare the amount of pleasure, benefit or utility different people get as a result of our actions?*



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*How can we predict the consequences of our actions, and when do indirect, distant effects of what we do now no longer matter?*

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*Gathering information about the likely consequences of our actions is another cost, so how can we tell when we have enough information to act?*

# *Deeper problems*

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*Can the good consequences of our actions really serve as an excuse for what might seem like unethical behavior?*

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*Do the ends really justify the means? Doesn't this reduce the value of human life to numbers on a spreadsheet?*

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*If the good outcomes of our actions determine whether they are right, doesn't that undermine the whole concept of **rights**?*



*The good, the bad and the unethical*

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## *However...*

- Its problems might leave us wondering whether this is *all* there is to moral decision-making?
- Aren't there some limits to how we *should* treat each other than go beyond considerations of the beneficial outcomes that result?

## *Find out more*

**Utilitarianism**, Frank Aragbonfoh Abumere, *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*.

**Utilitarianism: Act and Rule**: The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a comprehensive account including lots of discussion of contemporary versions of the theory.

**Poverty and Our Response to it**: in this Crash Course video, Hank Green discusses the morality of our responses to poverty and the work of a contemporary Utilitarian philosopher, Peter Singer.



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