

Utilitarianism

the best for the most



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

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Traditional society

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Traditional society



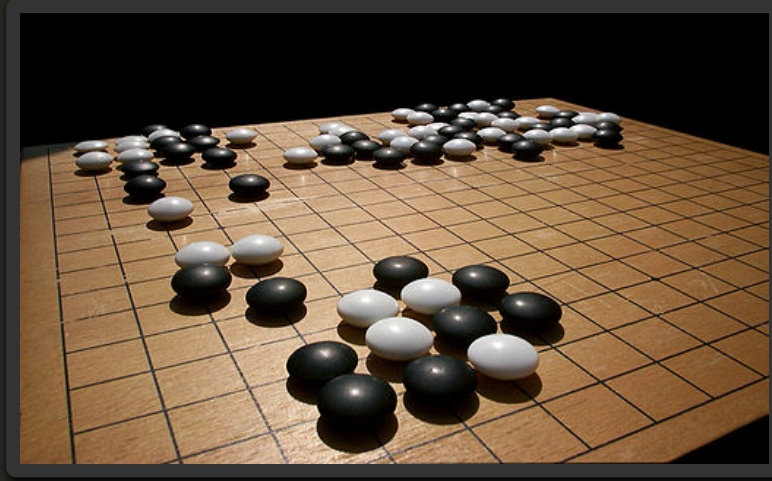
- Who you are matters, and some matter more than others for the sake of distribution of benefits, burdens and roles.
- **Assumption:** *the good of all* requires that we play the roles we are all assigned by nature and inherited social status.

Modern society

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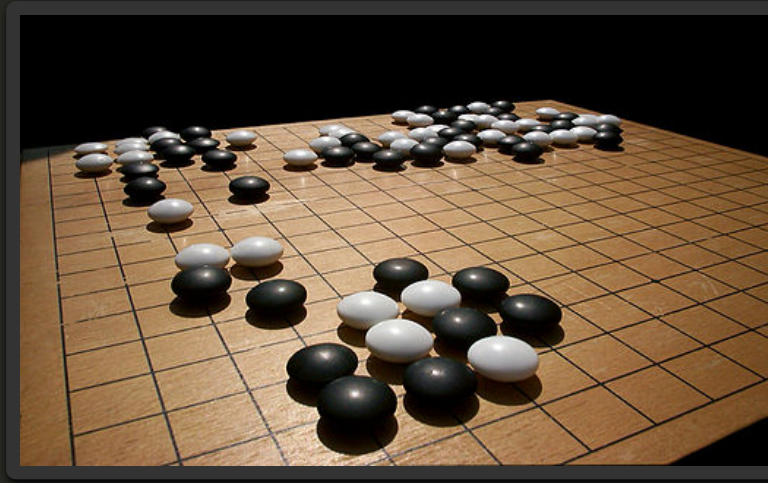


Modern society



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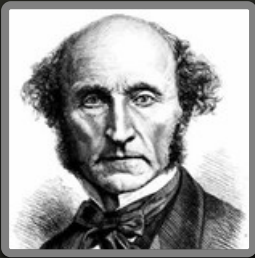
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- He attempted to quantify pleasures and pains and developed a method of moral calculation based on this.

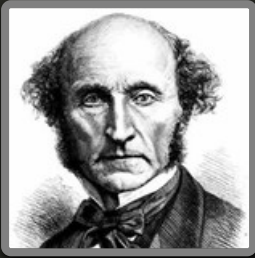
Mill's preference utilitarianism



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1806-1873

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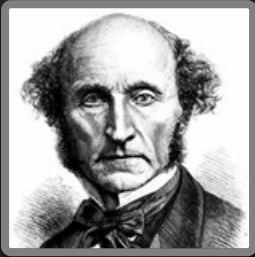
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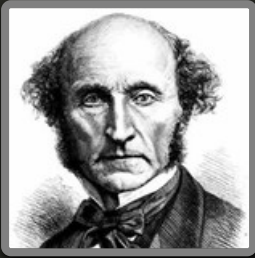


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- He tried to show how all moral rules could be explained as the attempt to help as many individuals satisfy as many of their preferences as possible.

Rational choice

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2. Estimate the likelihood that different courses of action will satisfy your wants.
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How might this work?

From self-interest to morality

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Dwight



Pam

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"I care about others and will set aside my own interests to help them satisfy their goals, since they count just as much as I do."



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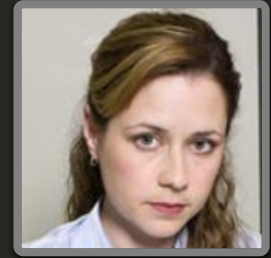
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How might we convince someone with Dwight's attitude to adopt Pam's view?

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The argument from maximization

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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.

Thus as long as rationality requires public defense, I have to accept that others count as much as I do.

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- 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?

How to make a moral decision

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A step by step guide

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2. Figure out which one leads to the best overall consequences for all people who are affected by them.
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How to make a moral decision

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Utilitarianism as a moral philosophy is the claim that this is just what morality consists in: acting to get the best outcome for the most people by *maximizing overall utility*.

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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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"But I see things differently, so who are you to say?"

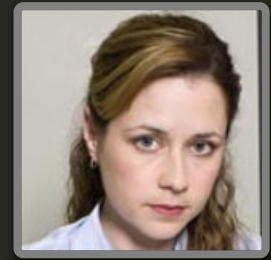


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How can we accurately measure and compare the amount of pleasure, benefit or utility different people get as a result of our actions?

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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?

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

Deeper problems

"It is cheaper to be sued for product liability than it is to fix the problem so let's pretend we didn't know about it. Our profitability is beneficial to the economy!"

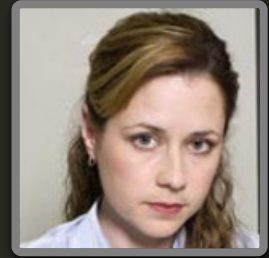


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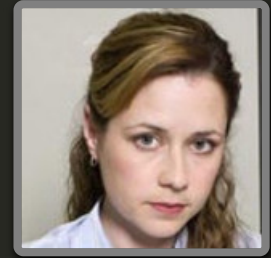
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Do the ends really justify the means? Doesn't this reduce the value of human life to numbers on a spreadsheet?

Deeper problems

"I'm going to have to ask you not to take any more weekends off, everyone one else needs your extra contributions to support their time off."



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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**?*

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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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