

## Utilitarianism

*the best for the most*



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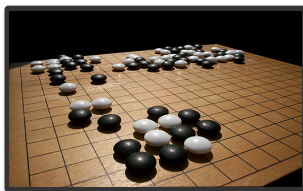
## Traditional society



- 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.

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## Modern society



- We all matter equally -- benefits and burdens are distributed according to a set of neutral decision procedures.
- **Assumption:** *the good of all* is best served by allowing individuals to pursue their own conceptions of what is good for them.

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## Utilitarianism

The point of morality is to make the world a better place.

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

So an action is right to the extent that it promotes greater happiness and wrong if it leads to greater unhappiness.

- 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.

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## Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism

"We are ruled by two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain."



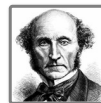
Jeremy Bentham  
1748-1832

- Bentham was a legal reformer who wanted to eliminate laws that caused more harm than they did good.
- For him the whole point of social and moral rules was to make our lives better.
- He attempted to quantify pleasures and pains and developed a method of moral calculation based on this.

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## Mill's preference utilitarianism

"It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be a Socrates satisfied than a fool satisfied."



John Stuart Mill  
1806-1873

- Mill was an economist who advocated liberty for all -- men and women.
- For him some desires are more inherently worthy of satisfaction than others so he rejected Bentham's simple hedonism.
- 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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### *Rational Choice*

1. Figure out what you want and rank it.
2. Estimate the likelihood that different courses of action will satisfy your wants.
3. The rational choice is the choice that brings you the most benefits for the least costs.

- Everything we do has costs -- time, effort, money, opportunity costs, etc.
- The rational choice in any situation is the one with the best payoff -- the most favorable balance of benefits minus costs.
- Utilitarianism endorses this cost/benefit analysis model of rational choice as the basis of morality.

How might this work?

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### *From Self-interest to Morality*

"I am a rational agent out to satisfy as many preferences as I can, if others also benefit that's great for them, but it's not really essential to me."



Dwight

"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."



Pam

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

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