

Utilitarianism

the best for the most



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

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Traditional society

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

Traditional society



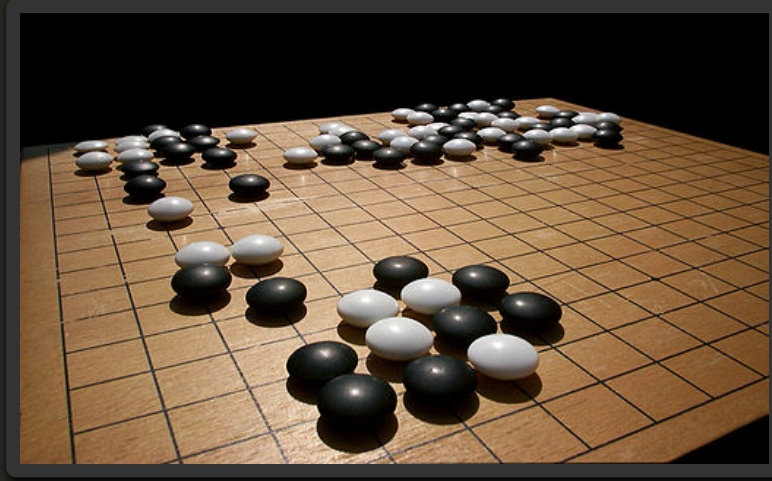
- Who you are matters, and some matter more than others for the sake of distribution of benefits, burdens and roles.
- **Assumption:** *the good of all* requires that we play the roles we are all assigned by nature and inherited social status.

Modern society

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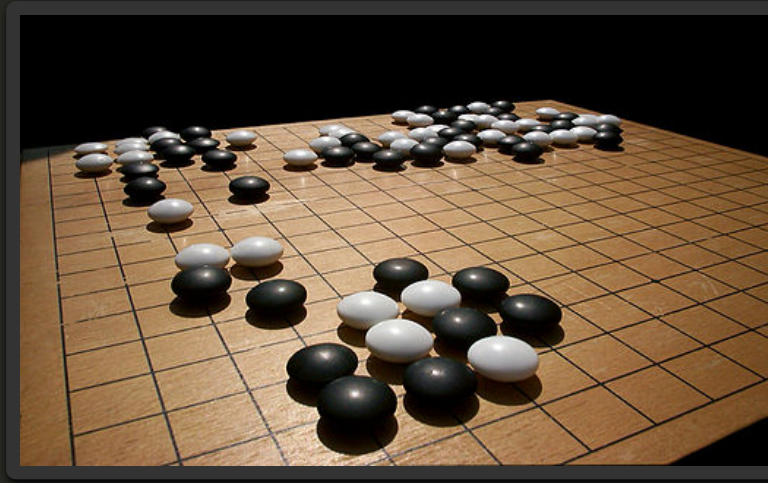


Modern society



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- 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.

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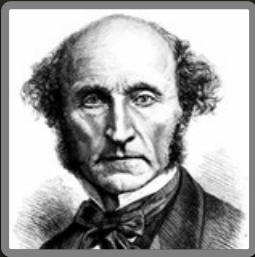
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- He attempted to quantify pleasures and pains and developed a method of moral calculation based on this.

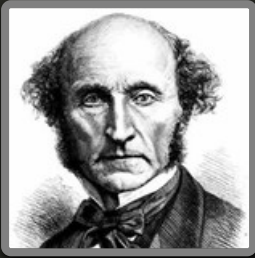
Mill's preference utilitarianism



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1806-1873

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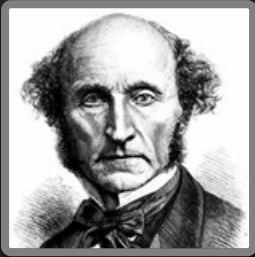
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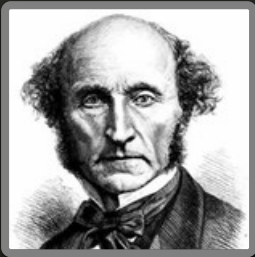


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- He tried to show how all moral rules could be explained as the attempt to help as many individuals satisfy as many of their preferences as possible.

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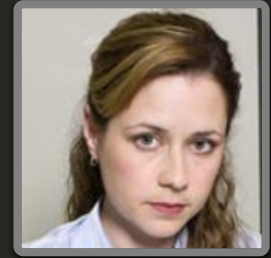
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How might we convince someone with Dwight's attitude to adopt Pam's view?

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The argument from maximization

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The more people who benefit from my actions the better the outcome.

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So we should always strive to get the best outcome from the most people.

- 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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- 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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"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?"

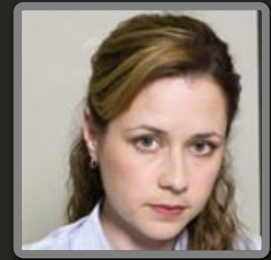


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How can we accurately measure and compare the amount of pleasure, benefit or utility different people get as a result of our actions?

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"If you do that again I am going to have to let you go."



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"But if you fire me, I'll start drinking heavily and will eventually set fire to the whole building in an out of control drunken rage."



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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?

Deeper problems

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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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"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."



"Don't I have the right to demand the same treatment as everybody else?"

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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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- Its problems might leave us wondering whether this is *all* there is to moral decision-making?

The good, the bad and the unethical

- Utilitarianism is a popular view on ethics and seems to capture some features of morality -- it's impartiality and the idea that we should strive to help others out whenever that is possible.

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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