

# *Utilitarianism*

*the best for the most*



George Matthews

2020

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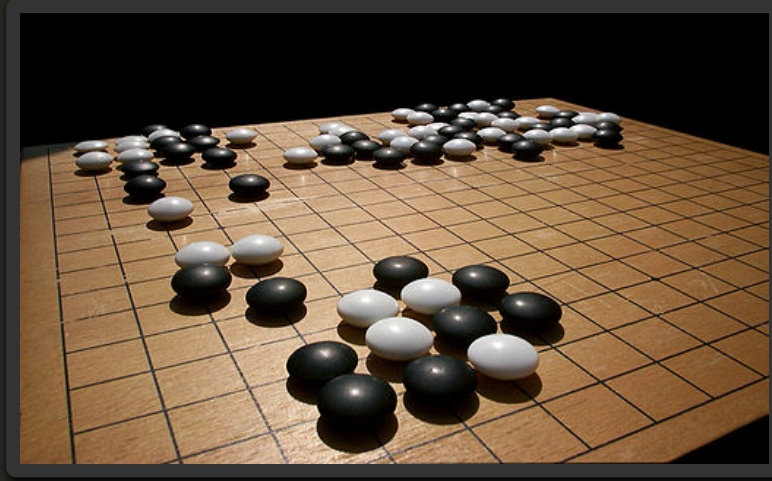
- Who you are matters, and some matter more than others for the sake of distribution of benefits, burdens and roles.
- **Assumption:** *the good of all* requires that we play the roles we are all assigned by nature and inherited social status.

# *Modern society*

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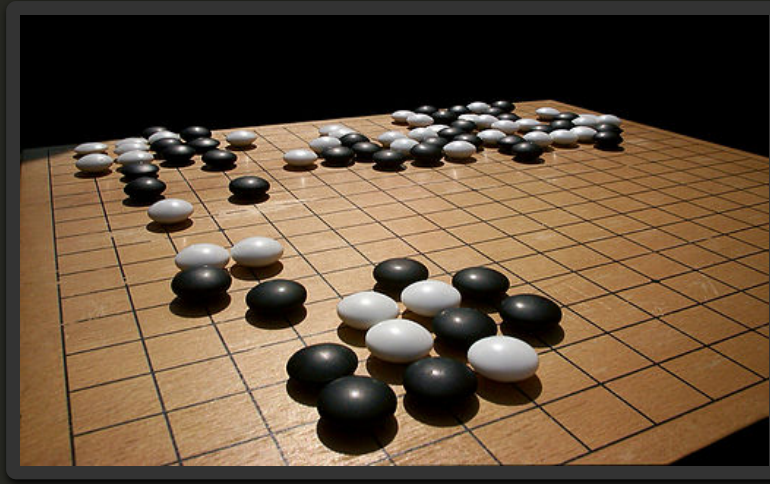
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- **Assumption:** *the good of all* is best served by allowing individuals to pursue their own conceptions of what is good for them.

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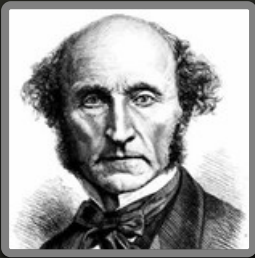
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- He attempted to quantify pleasures and pains and developed a method of moral calculation based on this.

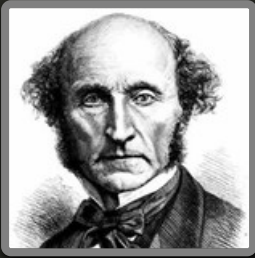
# *Mill's preference utilitarianism*



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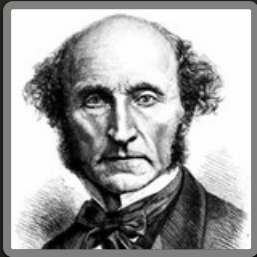
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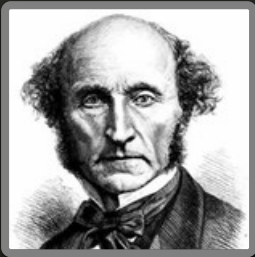


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- He tried to show how all moral rules could be explained as the attempt to help as many individuals satisfy as many of their preferences as possible.

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How might this work?

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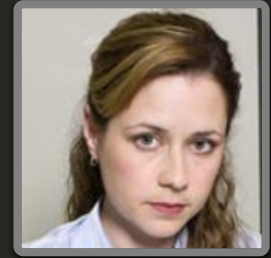
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*How might we convince someone with Dwight's attitude to adopt Pam's view?*

# *From self-interest to morality*

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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.

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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?

# *How to make a moral decision*

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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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**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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## *If Utilitarianism is true...*

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- Morality would have an objective and rational basis.
- The more we all act ethically the happier we all will be.
- The *good* that we do determines the *rightness* of our actions.

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





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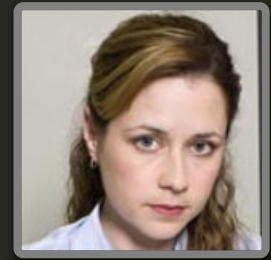


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*How can we accurately measure and compare the amount of pleasure, benefit or utility different people get as a result of our actions?*

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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?*

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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!"

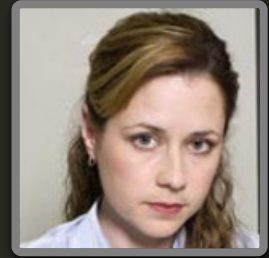


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*Do the ends really justify the means? Doesn't this reduce the value of human life to numbers on a spreadsheet?*

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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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# *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.



Credits

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[Rstudio](#)

[xarignan](#) html presentation framework

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