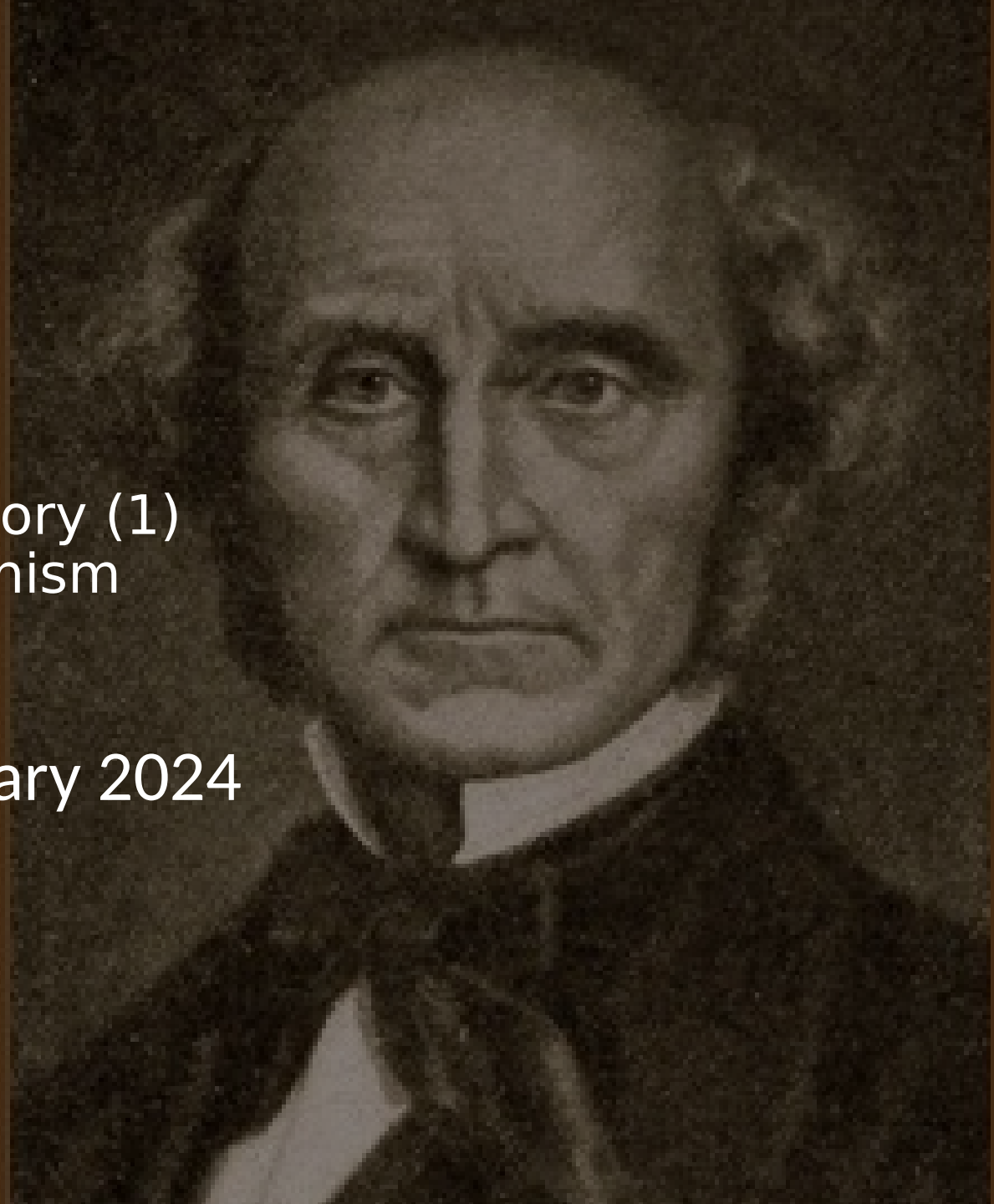


Ethical Theory (1)
Utilitarianism

29/31 January 2024



Aggie Experience!

- It is now Week 4 of semester!
- You need to start seriously thinking about an Aggie Experience!
- I have a fairly sizeable list now available in the Aggie Experience google doc - there's something there for everyone :-)
- NB: There's a play in Bryan about euthanasia that may be especially interesting for the class
- But also many on-campus events, exhibitions etc.

Ethical Theories Continued

What we looked at

- Ethical theories – savior sibling case
- The idea of *consequentialism*
- Bentham's Utilitarianism
- Mill's Utilitarianism

Today

- Some problems with utilitarian theories
- Variant forms of utilitarianism
- The Survival Lottery
- Basic Deontology - if we have time

Classical Utilitarianism - Summary

Consequentialist

Maximizing

Hedonistic
(about pleasure
and pain)

Impartial

Pleasure and pain
can be interpreted
in more and less
complicated ways

Problems with Classical Utilitarianism

1. Problems concerning Pleasure
Variant 1: Preference Utilitarianism
2. Problems of Justice
3. Problems about Projects and Special Relations
Variant 2: Rule utilitarianism
4. Problems of Over-Demandingness
5. Puzzles about Acts and Omissions

The experience machine

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's desires?...Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?” (Nozick: *Anarchy, State and Utopia* 1974: 43)

The problem: Is pleasure really the ultimate good, and pain really the ultimate bad?

- Is it better to be happy and deceived/mistaken/ pretending? Or miserable and face the facts?
- Are there goods that we care about losing, even if we never *experience* their loss? (Secret affairs, the ridiculing friend [Rachels p.110] Rachels' peeping Tom cases)
- Should 'bad pleasures' count in a moral calculation (eg, the pleasure gained by a torturer?) Would it matter if you chose "bad pleasures" on an experience machine?
- If pleasure and avoiding pain is all that matters, is painless killing, or killing beings that don't feel pain, unproblematic?

Variant 1: Preference/Desire Utilitarianism

- Some utilitarians argue: we need a different idea of what is valuable
- Rachels (p.111) “objective list” accounts, where things like ‘beauty’ are just regarded as good independently of how we feel about them. But these are tough to justify!
- More common: We should take [informed] *preferences* or *desires* as what’s of ultimate valuable
- *We prefer* real, authentic experiences to ones on the machine, *we desire* to go on living, not to be painlessly killed
- This might fix hedonism while retaining consequentialism
- Goal here = *maximizing satisfied desires and minimizing frustrated desires*
- And in many cases hedonism and preference satisfaction would coincide, since we generally do desire what’s pleasurable and don’t desire what’s painful!

2. Questions about Justice

- Utilitarianism: maximizing good *states of affairs*
- The best state of affairs may mean that some individuals do very badly, even though others do very well
- This raises issues about *justice* - probably the most significant worry about utilitarianism
 - No built-in concern about equality of *distribution*, even if everyone is taken equally into account [*distributive justice*]
 - No built-in concern about what's *deserved* (eg in the case of false conviction of an innocent person to avoid riots, p.112) [*retributive justice*]



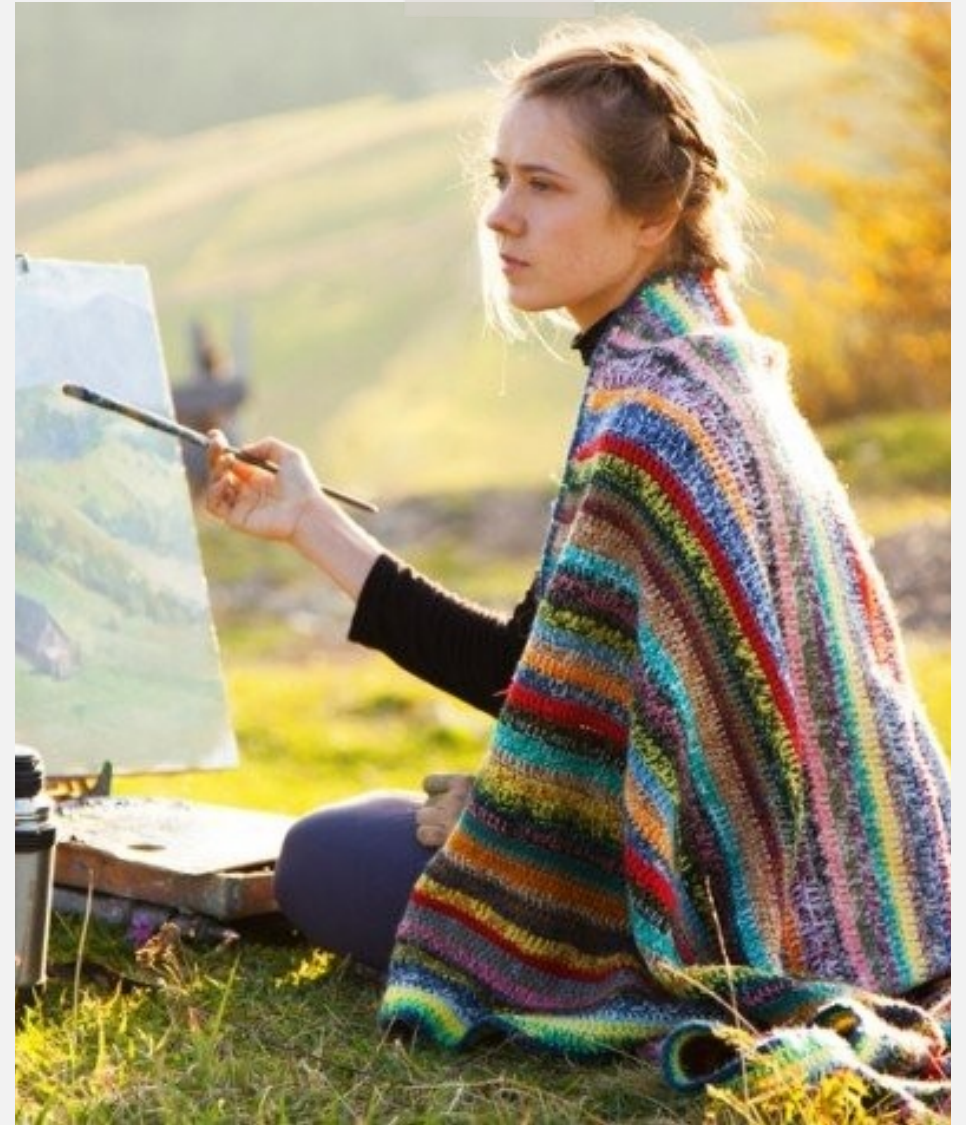
Not ruled out in principle:

A state where a small number of miserable workers (say, 1% of the population) are paid virtually nothing in order to benefit a much larger, very happy population

The oppression of members of a small religious or cultural tradition that the majority of people strongly dislike – fundamentally, utilitarianism can't have an account of *inviolable* rights (Rachels p.112-3)

3. Projects and Special Claims

- Argument that utilitarianism separates us from our personal projects (eg our hobbies) and also our (non-utilitarian) convictions
- Requires us to pursue best consequences, even if we have to abandon what's important to us
- No obvious place for the special claims of our personal relationships, or for *backward-looking* claims (eg keeping promises made in the past, Rachels p.114)



4.Over-demandingness



- In a utilitarian world - *everything* seems to be a moral decision, and we should always do what's best!
- Implies, for instance that we should sacrifice most of our wealth to aid the distant poor (Rachels p.115)
- Many utilitarians today take this seriously – as we'll see later in the semester
- Normally, we think that there are four possible ways of thinking about some action ethically: It's forbidden! It's required! It's permissible! **It's supererogatory!** (that is, above and beyond what's required)
- Utilitarians have no place for the *supererogatory* (and what's *permissible* and *required* are collapsed into one)
- (Of course, if you're a utilitarian, you don't regard this as a as a problem!)

Revision of Utilitarianism

- So far we have talked about what's called ***act utilitarianism (AU)***
- Calculating best consequences based on *each individual act*
- Classical utilitarianism (Bentham/Mill) usually interpreted this way (though not completely clear in the case of Mill)
- But AU has effects such as:
 - Undermining general confidence in practices such as promise-keeping
 - Permitting or requiring extreme acts eg killing someone when there are only marginal benefits
 - Demanding too much
- This **potentially undermines important elements of personal & social meaning and trust - and may overall have bad consequences??**



The idea of *Rule/Indirect* Utilitarianism (Rachels 118-9)

- We should distinguish between *goals* and *decision-making procedures*
- The best way of achieving utilitarian **goals** (eg maximizing happiness) **may not *directly* involve utilitarian decision-making**
 - Calculating on each occasion may not (actually) bring about the best consequences over time, given time involved, lack of knowledge etc.
 - And act utilitarianism undermines important social practices and structures – eg promise-keeping, family relationships and social trust
- Maybe you can get best outcomes with a different way of making decisions?
- **Rule utilitarianism** – Ultimately, best consequences may be achieved by *rule following*.
- Individual acts should be judged by *whether they follow the rules that will bring about best consequences if generally followed*

Rule Utilitarian Principle

- One should establish and follow sets of rules that, if everyone followed them, would tend to bring about the best consequences (and that are better in this respect than any other possible sets of rules)
- Acts should be judged by whether they follow these rules
- The underlying theory is still utilitarian. The rules are about the *means* - how you get to the best consequences - not the *end*, which is still maximizing pleasure or desire satisfaction





(Fictional!) example

Dr X realizes that she is one step from a cure for a major form of killer heart disease. The last step in the research, however, involves studying healthy human heart tissue as the heart stops beating. This is the only way of extracting the crucial information. To find the information, Dr X would have to kill a healthy person.

Suppose she's an act utilitarian. What is she likely to do?

Suppose she's a rule utilitarian. What is she likely to do?

But - Problem
with rule
utilitarianism?

- Surely if in a particular case the rule doesn't bring about the best consequences, shouldn't rule utilitarians abandon the rule?
- But then, rule utilitarianism becomes act utilitarianism!

“Whatever the general utility of having a certain rule, if one has actually reached the point of seeing that the utility of breaking it on certain occasions is greater than that of following it, then surely it would be pure irrationality not to break it?”

Bernard Williams *Morality*
p.108