

Philosophical Foundations for Ethics



Computing ethics in the news

Tech and the SF housing crisis

- <http://techcrunch.com/2014/04/14/sf-housing/>
- <http://techcrunch.com/2015/01/10/east-of-palo-altos-edén/>
 - Gentrification and the "Great Inversion"
 - Displacement of the poor and lower middle class communities
 - While this topic is focused on SF/SV, there are obvious global implications as well – if this can happen here, it can happen anywhere

What your computer knows about you

- <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/19/know-feel>
- <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2015/01/07/1418680112.full.pdf+html>
- <http://www.computerworld.com/article/2868013/computers-may-soon-know-you-better-than-your-spouse.html>
 - "By analyzing someone's likes on Facebook, statistical modeling software could characterize a person's basic personality with an accuracy rivaling that of a spouse or close family member"

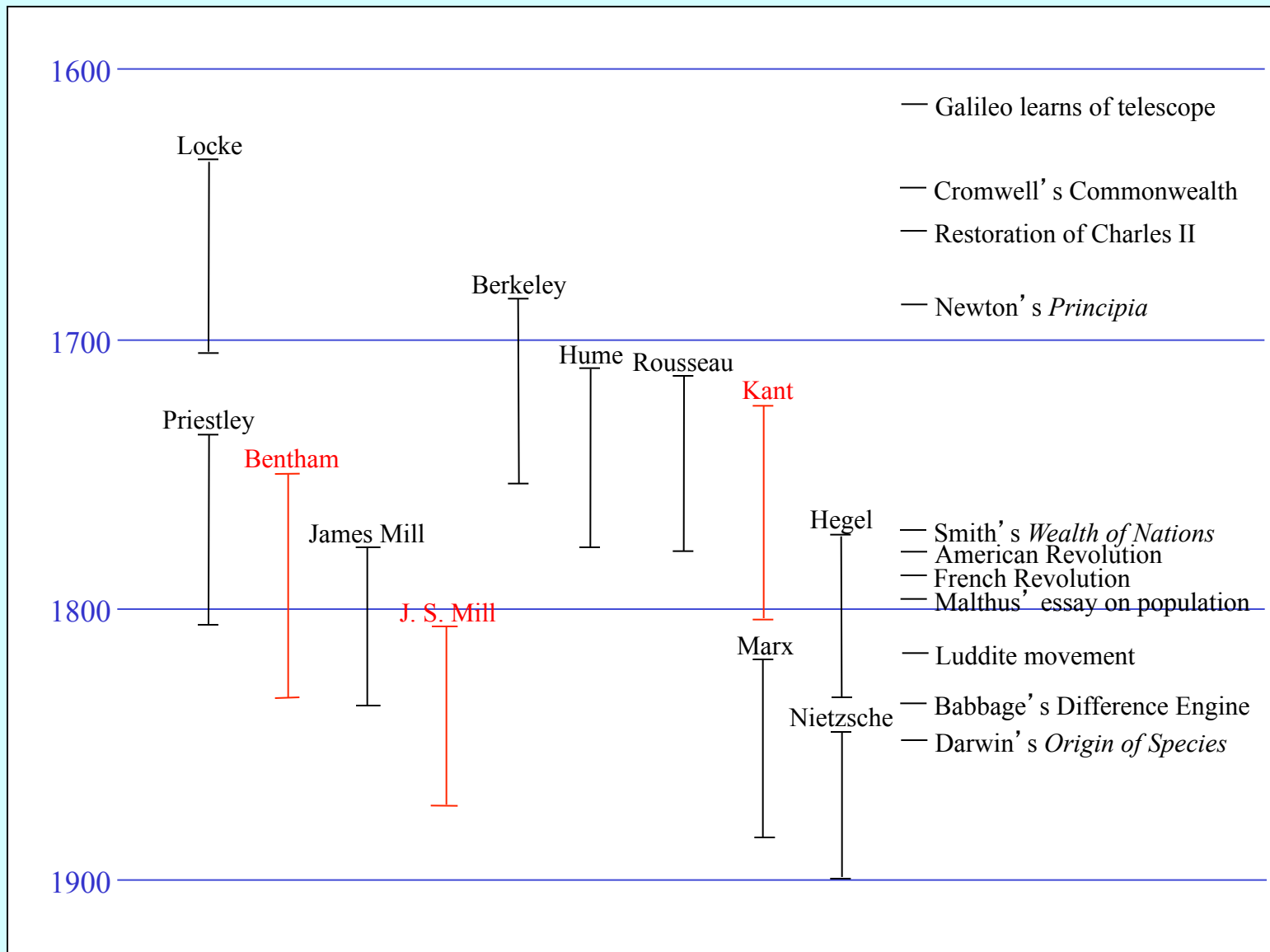
Outline

- Philosophical timeline
- Classical ethics (Aristotle)
- Deontological theories (Kant)
 - The “categorical imperative”
- Consequentialist theories (Bentham and Mill)
 - Utilitarianism and the “greatest happiness” principle
- Ethical relativism and its problems
- Ethical analysis from a scientific perspective

Why talk about ethical theories?

- Getting at the underlying rationale for a moral argument
- Classifying/understanding arguments
- Defending a conclusion about what is right/wrong

Philosophical Timeline

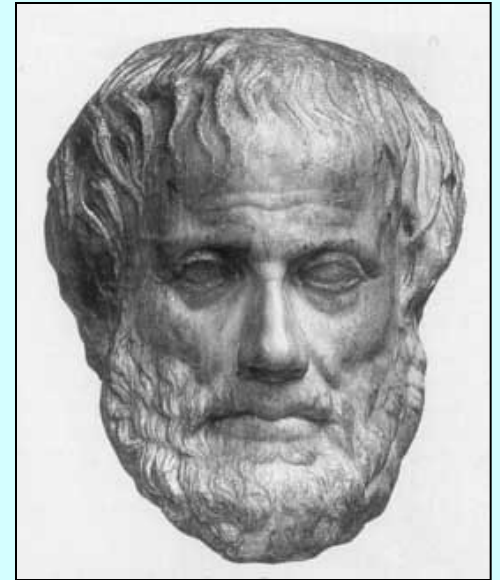


Classical Foundations

Although most of our discussion will center on philosophy from the 18th and 19th centuries, it is important to recognize that ethical philosophy has much deeper historical roots.

The most important figures in the early development of ethical thought is Aristotle, who introduced, primarily in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, three ideas that had profound influence on later philosophers:

- The distinction between *intrinsic good* and *instrumental good*
- The use of happiness as the measure of intrinsic good
- The importance of *virtue* as distinct from pleasure



Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

3 Different philosophical approaches

- Virtue
 - E.g. Aristotle, Confucius
- Deontological
 - E.g. Kant, many religions
- Consequentialist
 - E.g. Utilitarianism

Deontological versus Teleological theories

- Deontological
 - Actions are intrinsically right or wrong (and do not depend on the consequences)
- Teleological
 - Telos: Goal or end
 - The rightness or wrongness of an action depends on whether it brings about an end in question (e.g. happiness)

Deontological Theories

The notion that there is an abstract sense of the good that transcends the objective and measurable concept of pleasure gives rise to a set of philosophical theories called *deontological* theories after the Greek word *δεον*, or *duty*. Under these frameworks, human beings—given their capacity for rational thought—have an obligation to behave in a morally defensible way.

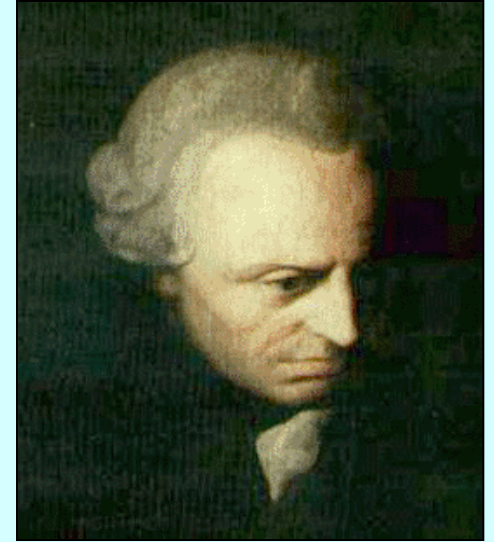
While most deontological writing has a religious foundation, the challenge for philosophers writing during the Enlightenment was to argue for ethical norms from secular principles.

Immanuel Kant

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant is the leading exponent of the deontological school and wrote extensively on ethical philosophy, most notably in his *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, originally published in 1785.

Kant's ethical theory assumes, following Aristotle, that there are intrinsic qualities that are “good without qualification.” For Kant, this good is the “rational will.”

To guide people toward good behavior, Kant outlines a set of *imperatives*. Some imperatives are *hypothetical* in the sense that they depend on the situation, but at least one is *categorical*, which are “objectively necessary in themselves, without reference to another end.”



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Kant's "Categorical Imperative"

First formulation:

Act in such a way that such actions would be appropriate as a universal law.

Second formulation:

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

Consequentialist Theories

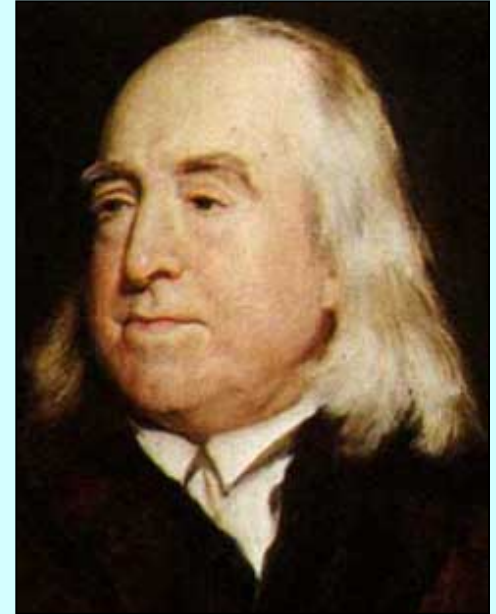
The major competition to the deontological framework of Kant consists of a broad class of theories labeled as *consequentialist* because they focus on the expected consequences of an action rather than on any absolute moral imperative.

The most prominent consequentialist theory is *utilitarianism*, whose principal exponents are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism

The leading early proponent of modern utilitarianism is Jeremy Bentham. Bentham is sometimes difficult to read, but there are many straightforward quotations that give a good sense of his philosophy, including

It is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong.



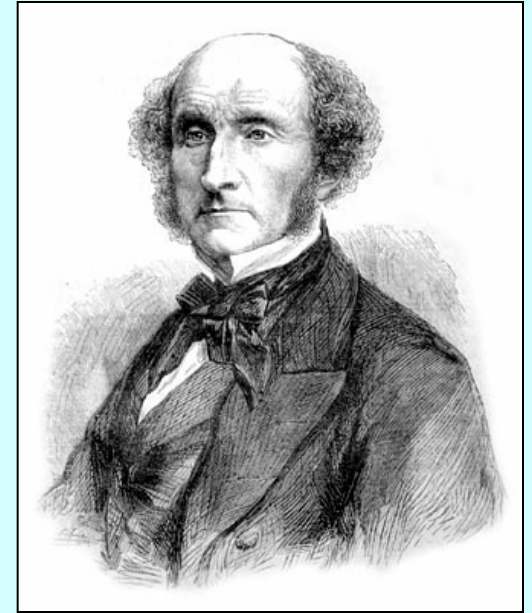
Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Bentham believed that it was possible to define a calculus for measuring utility according to the following formula:

$$utils = hedons - dolors$$

John Stuart Mill

The most accessible defense of utilitarianism comes not from Bentham himself but from John Stuart Mill, who was closely connected with Bentham's philosophy through his father James. Mill abandoned the strict mathematical structure that Bentham had sought to impose on utilitarian calculation and recognized the complexity and nuances involved in using utilitarianism as a decision-making tool.



John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

The Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness.

Act Utilitarianism vs. Rule Utilitarianism

Modern philosophers have sought to mitigate some of the problems of pure utilitarian theory by differentiating two types of utilitarian thought:

- *Act utilitarianism* focuses on the consequences of particular actions and therefore corresponds most closely to the classical utilitarian position.
- *Rule utilitarianism* retains the classic metric of maximizing happiness but uses that metric as the underlying motivation for specific rules that cover behavior. Rule utilitarianism therefore combines elements of the classical deontological and consequentialist perspectives.

Ethical Relativism

In the interest of completeness, it is important to consider the possibility that there can be no absolute ethical standard and that all moral reasoning is determined by cultural norms. This view is generally called *ethical relativism*. Ethical relativism has strong appeal among those inclined toward libertarianism but has relatively little support within the philosophical community.

Ethical relativism is associated with other forms of relativist thought, which have become prominent in academic discourse through the *postmodernist* and *poststructuralist* movements. These frameworks raise the issue of whether objective truth can exist given that all interpretation of experience is mediated through cultural processes. This questioning of objective truth often manifests itself as *epistemological relativism*, in which the foundations of knowledge itself are called into question.

Are There Limits to Ethical Relativism?

The problem that most philosophers have with ethical relativism is that adopting it as practice makes it difficult to take action against the following sorts of problems:

- Genocide
- Slavery
- Institutionalized racism, such as in the pre-civil-rights American South or under apartheid in South Africa.
- A recent survey showed that more than 75% of the people in both Egypt and Pakistan support stoning for adulterers and the death penalty for apostasy. Clitoridectomy (female genital mutilation) is common in many African countries. Polls taken in 2005 showed that a majority of Americans supported torture in some cases. Are these justifiable as local cultural norms?

Can We Agree on Basic Principles?



PREAMBLE

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

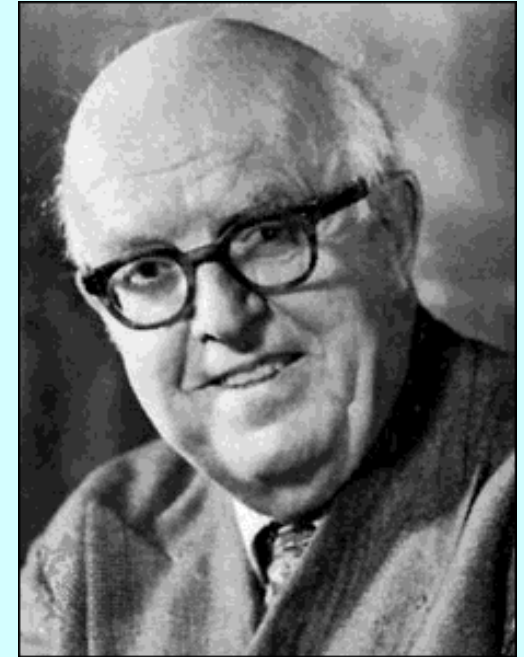
Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948.

C. P. Snow and *The Two Cultures*

In 1959, C. P. Snow—successful as both a physicist and a novelist—delivered the Rede Lectures at Cambridge University. He described what he saw as a growing gap between humanists and scientists:

I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups. . . . Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.



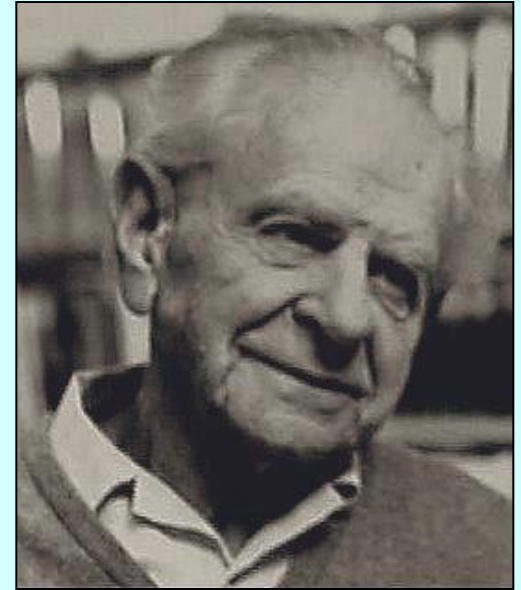
C. P. Snow (1905-1980)

Ethical Analysis from a Scientific Perspective

The gap between the “techie” and “fuzzy” perspectives is interesting for many reasons. In this course, the most important thing is to recognize that the traditional scientific route to knowledge is not always the optimal one.

Students of science and engineering tend to internalize—not always consciously—the following precept developed by philosopher of science Karl Popper: that science proceeds by *falsification*. Given a theory, a scientist tries to find counterexamples that invalidate the theory.

It is easy to find refutations of ethical theories. Those theories nonetheless provide useful tools for analysis as long as one remains mindful of their limitations.



Karl Popper (1902-1994)

- A humorous comic on computers and utilitarianism
 - <http://www.smbc-comics.com/comics/20120403.gif>

A NYT op-ed about the ones who walk away from the Omelas

- <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/13/opinion/david-brooks-the-child-in-the-basement.html>
 - "Companies succeed because they fire people, even if a whole family depends on them. Schools become prestigious because they reject people — even if they put a lifetime of work into their application. Leaders fighting a war on terror accidentally kill innocents. These are children in the basement of our survival and happiness."
 - And, our use of technology produced in 3rd world countries where people are not treated as we would expect they should be.