

Lecture 6

Utilitarianism

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x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam)

Traditional, ancestral, unceded lands...



Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh)



Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish)

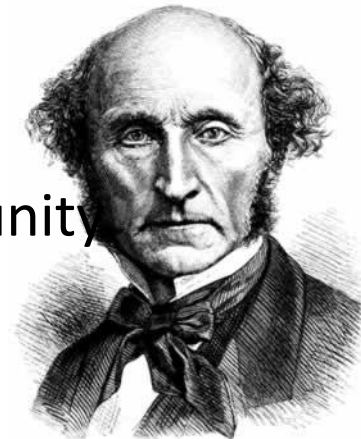
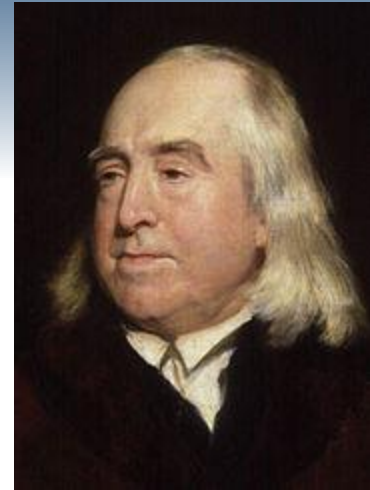
Where's Kevin? [Participation Quiz]





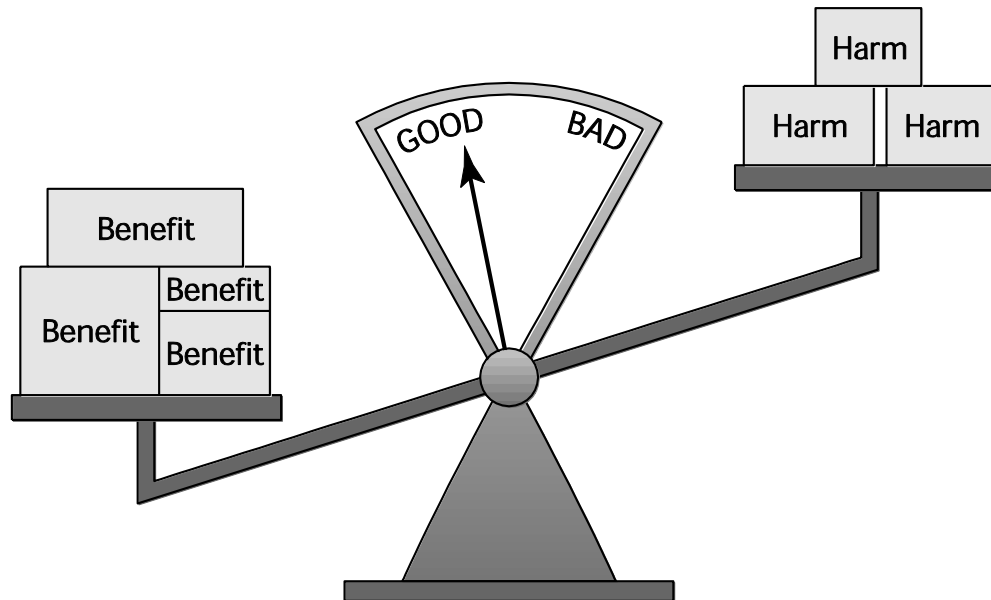
Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if it benefits someone
- An action is bad if it harms someone
- Utility:
 - tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Unhappiness = cost = evil = pain
- Happiness = benefit = good = pleasure



Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.



Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
 - Morality of an **action** has nothing to do with intent
 - Focuses on the consequences
 - A “consequentialist” theory
- Act utilitarianism
 - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
 - Sum > 0 , action is good
 - Sum < 0 , action is bad

How useful is act utilitarianism?

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO

- Discuss for ~11 mins in pairs. Do you like this theory? Do you find it useful? For what? Why/why not?

FUNKY BREAKOUT



Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness, which is intuitive
- Down-to-earth (practical)
 - Straightforward to apply
 - Can therefore be helpful in resolving disputes
- Comprehensive
 - Allows an agent to trade off different aspects of a situation
 - Contrast with Kantianism where we needed to find one rule



“THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH
GOOD INTENTIONS”

Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include in calculations
 - Utilitarians might say you should never exclude anyone...
- Too much work
 - BUT it's OK to follow a "rule of thumb" most of the time.
- Ignores our innate sense of duty
 - Suppose I make a promise, but can get \$1 for violating it.
 - Seems to miss the sense that I care about my word.
- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck
 - Whether an action is moral depends on outcome, which can depend on circumstances beyond your control

Rule Utilitarianism

- We ought to adopt **moral rules** which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness
 - Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual **actions**
 - Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral **rules**

Case for Rule Utilitarianism

- Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus.
 - You only have to work out the morality of rules.
- Moral rules survive exceptional situations
 - A rule utilitarian can reason (a bit like a Kantian) that it's better for everyone to keep their promises than to lie, and so reject lying for a \$1 gain
- Avoids the problem of moral luck
 - We look at the overall usefulness of the rule, not the outcome.

Case Against RU & Act Utilitarianism

- RU: need to identify a single rule to describe situation
- All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
 - All units must be the same in order to do the sum
 - In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
 - We have to figure out what our utility is!
 - BUT: good arguments from utility theory
- Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of **good** consequences.
 - Utilitarianism (as defined here) doesn't mean "the greatest good for the greatest number"
 - That requires a principle of justice
 - We can try to combine these ideas. However, what happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and our principle of justice?

What do you think? [About peeing in the pool]



Ethical and non-ethical issues...

- In groups of 3-4, identify two ethical issues at the intersection of computers and society:
 - One that is ethical from at least one Utilitarian perspective
 - One that is not ethical from either Utilitarian perspective
- Be prepared to explain your reasoning—I will ask for 2-3 groups to present at the end and we'll tell you if we agree!

Vote

- A) I'm totally convinced
- B) I'm somewhat convinced
- C) I'm not really convinced
- D) Totally unconvincing