

# Normative Ethics

# Mill's Utilitarian Theory

# Three Dimensions of the Moral Universe

We speak of the moral worth or value of ...

(1) **A Person's Character** (as virtuous or vicious)

[> Aristotle's virtue ethics]

(2) **The Way the World Is** (as good or bad)

[> Mill's utilitarian ethics]

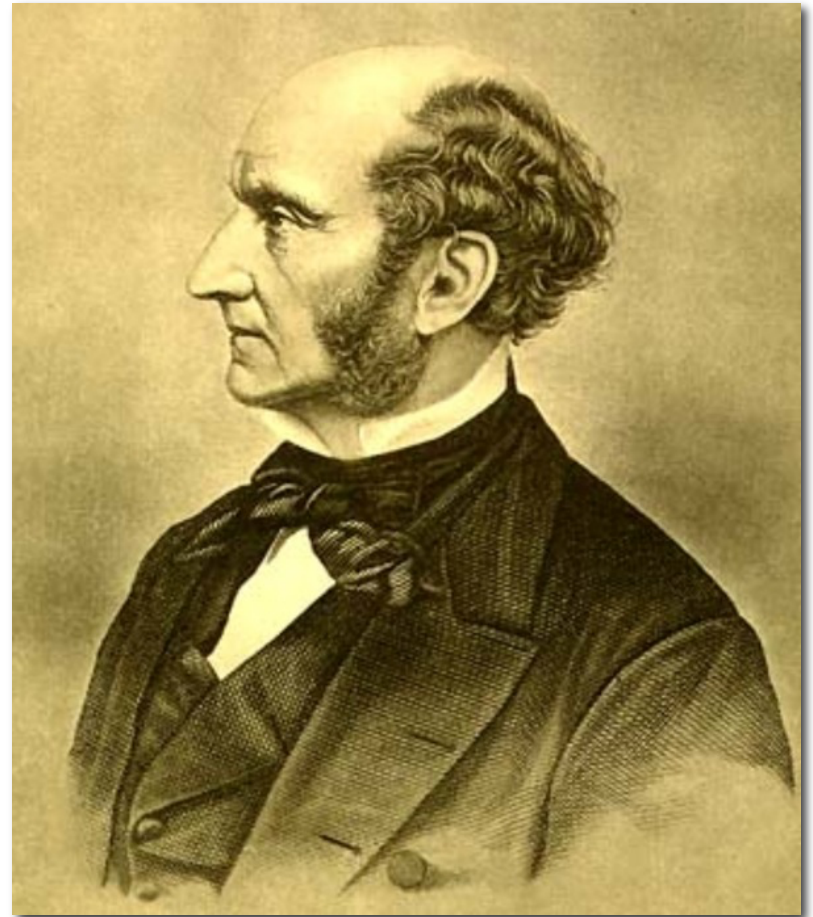
(3) **An Action** (as right or wrong)

[> Kant's deontological ethics]

# John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

“The Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”

*Utilitarianism*, Ch. 2 (1863)

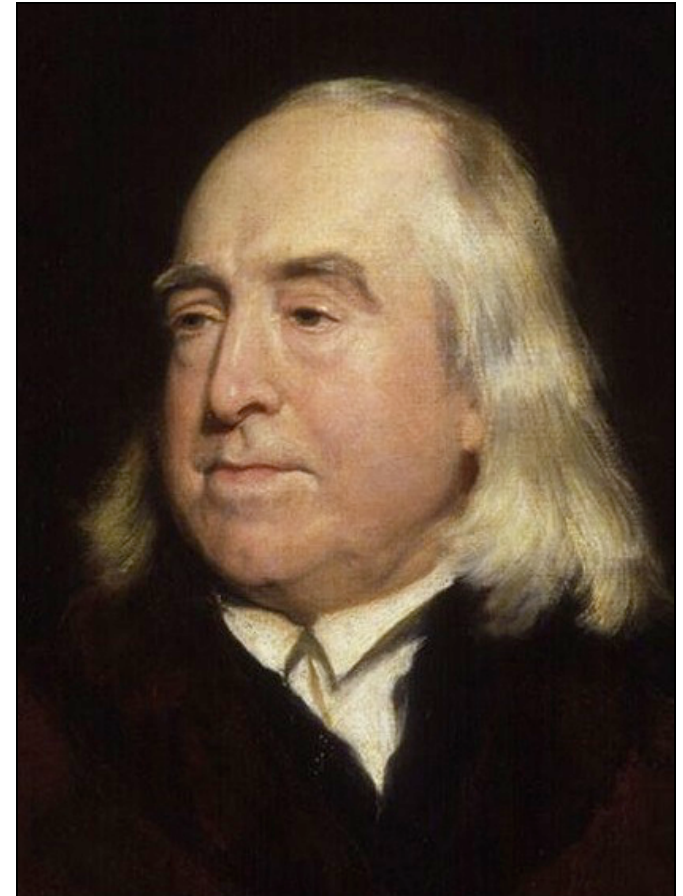


(1806-1873)

# Jeremy Bentham on Utilitarianism

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do.”

*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)



**Jeremy Bentham**  
(England, 1748-1832)

# Utilitarianism: Basics (1/2)

**Consequentialism:** any moral theory in which the rightness of an action depends upon its consequences.

**Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP):** the right action among the alternatives open to us is that action that will result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

[Mill's Theory of the Right]

**Hedonism:** the good is pleasure. [Mill's Theory of the Good]

**Social Hedonism:** pleasure has the same value wherever it occurs. [Impartiality principle]

**Long Term:** we are to maximize pleasures over the long run (roughly: as far out as we can reasonably predict).

# Utilitarianism: Basics (2/2)

**Act Utilitarianism:** the action is the unit of moral evaluation.

Contemplated action: A breaking a promise to B, in order to help C.

The GHP says: Break the promise.

	Pleasure	Pain
A	0	0
B	0	-15
C	+20	0
Total	+20	-15

**Rule Utilitarianism:** the rule is the unit of moral evaluation.

Contemplated rule: Drive however fast you think will fit the GHP.

The GHP says: Establish a speed limit.

	Pleasure	Pain
Case 1	+10	-5
Case 2	+2	-15
Case 3	+5	-20
Total	+17	-40

# Turn to a Neighbor

Would utilitarianism favor  
the legalization of selling human organs  
(e.g., a kidney or a lobe of a lung)?  
Why or why not?



# Problems with Utilitarianism

# Two Kinds of Problems

**Practical:** the theory might be correct, but it can't be applied.

[Ex: measuring pleasure; calculating consequences]

**Theoretical:** the theory is not correct.

[Ex: violating duties, violating intuitions about omitting/committing, permitting/intending, respect for persons, hedonism]

# Utilitarianism: Problems (1/5)

This is a morality for swine!



## Mill's Response:

There are **higher** and **lower pleasures**, and the GHP is satisfied only when those pleasures appropriate for each individual are maximized. These higher pleasures are defensible in two ways: “circumstantial” (cost, permanence, side-effects) and “intrinsic” (simply better).

**Mill:** “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”

# Utilitarianism: Problems (2/5)

No one can live up to such a high standard!



Mill's Response:

Utilitarianism does not require that our actions be **motivated** by the GHP so long as they **conform** with it.

**Mill:** “They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confound **the rule of action** with the  **motive** of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them.”

# Utilitarianism: Problems (3/5)

There's no time to calculate the consequences!

## Mill's Response:

When in doubt, we can make use of “Rules of Thumb” — non-binding guidelines of moral wisdom accumulated over the centuries. The act utilitarian can follow these guidelines whenever the consequences of an action are unclear.

**Mill:** “Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanac. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong.”

# Utilitarianism: Problems (4/5)

Utilitarianism sometimes requires immoral actions!

The GHP seems to require the occasional neglect of duties to others (or the violation of their rights).

- (1) The Peeping Tom
- (2) The Organ Donor
- (3) The Dying Billionaire.

# Utilitarianism: Problems (4/5)

Utilitarianism sometimes requires immoral actions!

The GHP seems to require the occasional neglect of duties to others (or the violation of their rights).

- (1) The Peeping Tom
- (2) The Organ Donor
- (3) The Dying Billionaire

Response:

In the real world, these actions would likely not satisfy the GHP; or, if they do, they will typically conform with our basic moral intuitions.

# Utilitarianism: Problems (5/5)

Hedonism is the wrong theory of the good.

Pleasure (or pain) are mere side-effects of the good being actualized in the world (or not). What we desire is the good itself, not the pleasure.

Ex.: A pianist losing the use of her hands is bad in itself, and the pain it brings about is caused by this badness — it isn't what makes it bad.



Robert Nozick  
(1938-2002)

**Example: Nozick's Experience Machine.**



# Motives, Actions, Consequences

