

# PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

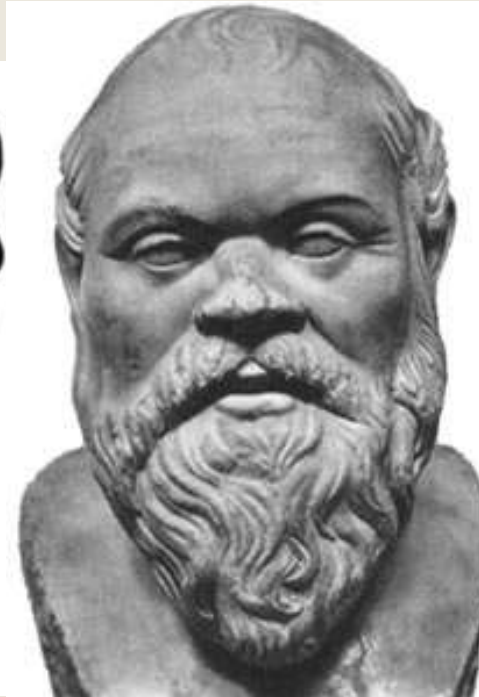
**Week 3. Utilitarianism**  
**30<sup>th</sup> January 2019**



# Class recap

**Those are my  
principles, and  
if you don't like  
them ... well, I  
have others.**

**~ Groucho Marx**



Auto-icon, Jeremy Bentham, London



# Class recap

- Discuss reasons why people *should* be moral
- Begin to identify the features for a general moral theory, as well as criteria for evaluating different moral theories
- Evaluate how best we can help others with finite resources, and what moral dilemmas this entails, using the free cash example
- Introduce virtue ethics, deontology and utilitarianism

# Class aims

- Understand what utilitarianism is as a consequentialist moral theory
- Evaluate arguments for:
  - *the greatest good of the greatest number*
  - *Bentham's hedonic calculus,*
  - *Mill's 'higher' and 'lower pleasures'*
- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism as a moral theory, using everyday examples

# Consequentialism vs deontology

Consequentialism	Deontology

# Consequentialism vs deontology

<i>Consequentialism</i>	<i>Deontology</i>
Judging an action to be morally right or wrong depending on whether the action brings about a state of affairs that best fits in with a pre-specified idea of what is 'good.'	There are universal moral rules which decide whether actions are right or wrong. This is the belief that it is not outcomes which are right or wrong, it is actions themselves.

# Consequentialism vs deontology

- Two main categories of moral theories
- They are *normative*, referring to an ideal standard or principle of right action prescribed by a particular moral theory
- *Consequentialists* judge an action in terms of whether it will result in a state of affairs closest to what is considered 'the good' (usually social)
- *Deontologists* consider some actions universally right or wrong, regardless of the consequence
- This often relies on a pre-existing moral code used to judge whether actions are right or wrong

Obama admits CIA 'tortured some folks'

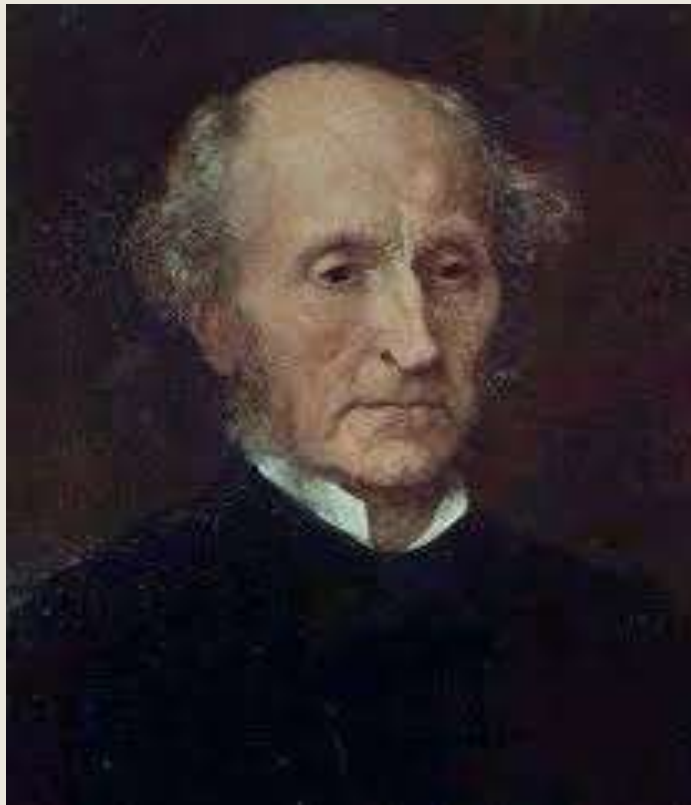


Vivisection: Scientists use 6% more animals for research



Briefly in groups of 2-3, reflect and discuss what a consequentialist would say about one of your moral issues, and what a deontologist would argue.

# Utilitarianism



# Utilitarianism



Auto-icon, Jeremy Bentham, London

- The greatest good to the greatest number
- Consequentialist
- An objective moral science
- Applies equally to all
- The centrality of happiness...
- Any initial problems or thoughts?

# Utilitarianism

- Together, we're going to read and discuss how Jeremy Bentham presents his view
- We'll do this in two stages:
  1. Reading the first paragraph, how does Bentham define utilitarianism?
  2. Focusing on one particular chapter summary, what is Bentham's argument? Are you convinced?

# Maximise pleasure?

- What one ought to do the is maximise pleasure and minimise pain.
- This can be done objectively, using a calculus

“Nature has placed mankind under the Governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure ... They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In other words, a man may pretend to abjure their empire, but in reality he will be subject to it all the while.”

– Jeremy Bentham

# Bentham's Hedonic Calculus

- Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
- Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
- Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
- Remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
- Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
- Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
- Extent: How many people will be affected

How does  
that work in  
practice?



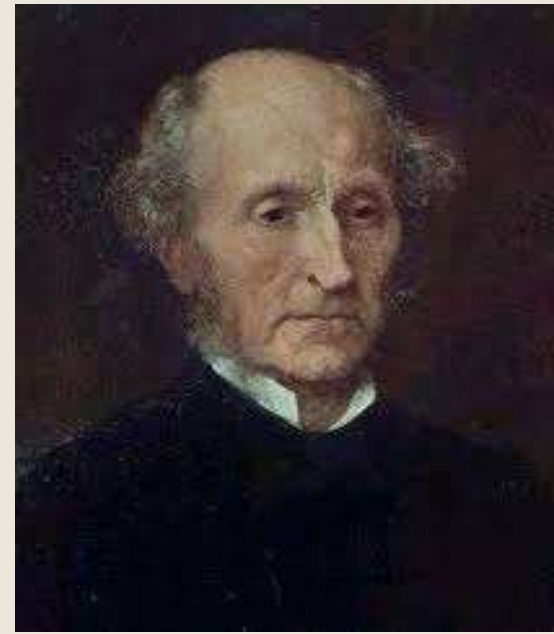
# Initial criticisms

- We can never be sure of the consequences of an action.
- Utilitarianism only gives us a weak, provisional basis to assess moral claims limited to what we know now.
- Happiness is very hard to define, and people's ideas about it vary. Simply pursuing mental bliss will not get us to any reliable personal or social goods
- The theory favours maximising outcomes for the majority – but what about the consequences for the minority?
- Utilitarianism could allow for harming an innocent person if it would make others happy.

# Assessing Utilitarianism

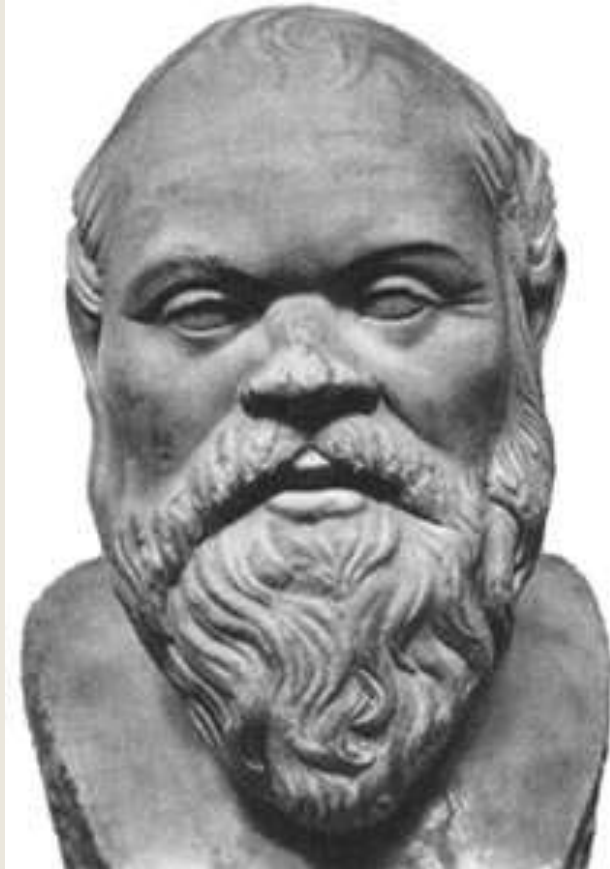
- Some big questions:
- Utilitarianism is a *consequentialist* theory – do the ends justify the means?
- Is morality an end in itself or just a means to making the world a better place?
- Is pleasure, or even happiness, the right sort of thing to make central to a moral theory?

# John Stuart Mill



- Mill Points to what he regards as Bentham's failings:
- Firstly, in calculating the relative amounts of pain and pleasure in his "Utility Calculus" Bentham had weighted each unit of good or harm equally.
- Mill argued that that pleasure and pain cannot be reduced to a mere quantitative analysis. Qualitative aspects also need to be taken into account.
  - *E.g. the pain of losing a pet is unlikely to match the pain of losing a relative.*

# Higher and lower pleasures



# Higher and lower pleasures

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

- Mill attempts to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures
- Take a look at the extract and discuss in pairs: what view of utilitarianism does Mill present?

‘pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, which have a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation’

‘of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are ... equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties’

# Bernard Williams' critique of utilitarianism



# Act and Rule Utilitarians

- Bentham was an *Act* Utilitarian:
- For each action we consider, we should consider the possible consequences. Each action is potentially distinct in terms in terms of consequences, so each should be treated differently
- Has been criticised for leading to counter-intuitive conclusions – e.g. Our problem examples

# Rule Utilitarians

- Instead of looking at each act, we should formulate some general principles with reference to the greatest happiness principle, but then use these principles as rules to guide our conduct
- For example: Because punishing innocent people would generally reduce happiness and increase unhappiness, 'rule utilitarians' would have us follow the rule 'Never punish innocent people'
- Often called 'indirect utilitarianism'

# Rule Utilitarians

- (i) '**strong rule utilitarianism**' says that it is *never* right to break a rule if that rule benefits society as a whole (so we should follow the rule regardless of whether it might sometimes reduce happiness and increase unhappiness).
- (ii) '**weak rule utilitarianism**' says it might be OK to break a general rule in special circumstances, although the overall consequences for society must be considered.

# Class recap

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# Homework

- Please do some research into Deontology and Kantian ethics, which we will be discussing next week
- We'll also discuss animal testing and vegetarianism, so have some thoughts ready about this
- If you like, have a go at the homework questions too