

Philosophy 1100: Ethics

Topic 5: Utilitarianism:

1. More moral principles
2. Uncontroversially wrong actions
3. The suffering principle
4. J.S. Mill and Utilitarianism
5. The “Lack of Time” Argument
6. Presenting, Explaining, and Evaluating Arguments
7. Evaluating the “Lack of Time” Argument
8. The Organ Harvest Argument

clicker question

We have considered important arguments against both divine-based ethics (DCT) and society-based ethics (CR). What are you inclined to think so far?

- A.** that, despite the objections, right and wrong must still be based somehow in God's commands.
- B.** that, despite the objections, right and wrong is still based somehow in societal conventions.
- C.** that some other approach to morality must be true.
- D.** that we should forget about it and go back to sleep.

more examples of moral principles

Moral judgment:

“Active euthanasia is wrong because it is playing God.”

Moral principle used:

An act is wrong if it is an act of playing God.

(In other words: an act is right only if it is not an act of playing God.)

more examples of moral principles

Moral judgment:

“We should not have invaded Iraq because it was simply none of our business.”

Moral principle used:

An act is wrong if it involves doing what is none of one's business.

more examples of moral principles

Moral judgment:

“I oppose same-sex marriage because it will ruin society.”

Moral principle used:



(not really a
moral judgment!)

An act is wrong if it will ruin society.

what are some *uncontroversially* wrong actions?

Two cases we've already considered:

- the teenagers and the cat
- Ted Bundy and Joni Lenz

What are some other examples?

Now let's ask: *what do these actions have in common?*

One answer: they all cause suffering.

the suffering principle

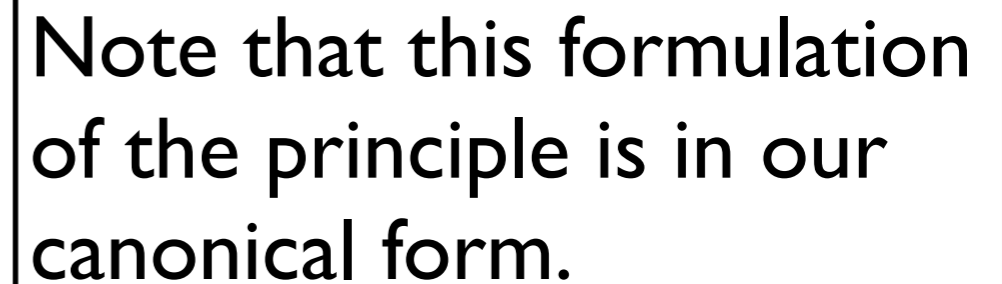
SP: An act is morally wrong if and only if it causes suffering.

(In other words:

an act is morally right if and only if it does not cause suffering.)

Some counterexamples to SP:

- the birthday party
- painlessly killing every living thing in the universe.



Note that this formulation of the principle is in our canonical form.

The lesson: happiness matters too!

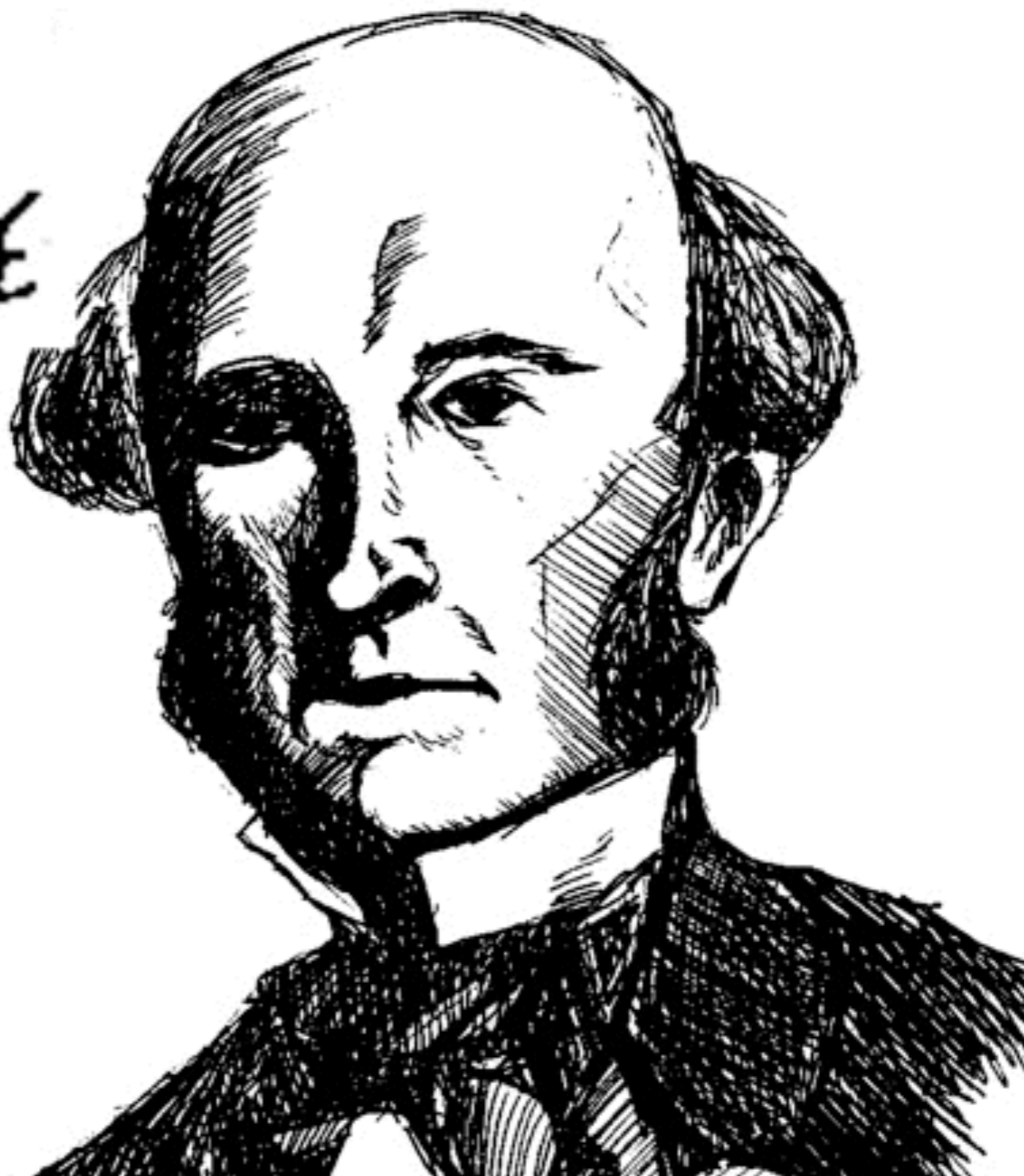
John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

- English philosopher and economist
- did philosophy only in his spare time (was employed as an administrator for the East India Trading Co.)
- wrote books on ethics, logic, and political philosophy
- most famous doctrine: Utilitarianism
- began Greek at the age of three, and Latin (as well as six of the dialogues of Plato!) at the age of eight
- was considered radical in his day for supporting public ownership of natural resources, equality for women, compulsory education, and birth control.

J.S. Mill

1806-1873

HAS
A
Posse



Alex Nichols
(remixed by Richard Urban)

a very famous line

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or 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.”

- Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863)

How best to state Mill's idea?

Like this?: an act is morally right if and only if ...

... it causes pleasure and the absence of pain (?)

NO

Why?

Because no act has ever caused “the absence of pain.”

How best to state Mill's idea?

Like this?: an act is morally right if and only if ...

... it causes pleasure and does not cause pain (??)

NO

Why?

Because it's sometimes ok to cause pain.

(for example: my appendectomy)

How best to state Mill's idea?

Like this?: an act is morally right if and only if ...

... it causes more pleasure than pain (???)

NO

Why?

Because causing more pleasure than pain is sometimes wrong:

for example, if we could have avoided more pain by doing something else

(for example: an appendectomy with no anesthesia).

Hedonic Utility

the **hedonic utility** of an action = the *amount of pleasure* the act would cause - (minus) the *amount of pain* the act would cause

- this is pleasure and pain for *anyone anywhere* (not just for the agent of the act)
- this includes *longterm* pleasure and pain (no matter how far in the future)
- pleasure and pain are understood *very broadly*

Maximization, Alternative

an act **maximizes** hedonic utility when no alternative to it has a greater hedonic utility

one final definition:

an action is an **alternative** of another act when it is something else the agent of the act could do instead of that act;

if two actions are alternatives of each other, the agent can do one or the other, but not both.

Act Utilitarianism

AU: an act is morally right if and only if it maximizes hedonic utility.

For the purposes of AU, we can represent situations in which someone must act as follows:

<u>alternatives</u>	<u>total pleasure</u>	<u>total pain</u>	<u>hedonic utility</u>
a1	75	23	52
a2	0	5	- 5
a3	12	0	12
a4	102	176	- 74

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a3	12	0	12
a4	57	5	52

some important features of AU

- No absolute moral rules (other than AU itself)
- A form of “consequentialism”
 - ▶ only consequences matter
 - ▶ we are to make the world as good as we can make it
- Everyone matters equally.

“everyone to count for one, no one to count for more than one.” - Jeremy Bentham
- Morality as *cost-benefit analysis*
(analogy with prudence/self-interest)
- On AU, do “the ends justify the means”?

Act Utilitarianism

AU: an act is morally right if and only if it maximizes hedonic utility.

this one has a
"right answer"

clicker question

How well do you understand Act Utilitarianism?

Which one of the following is **true** on AU?

- A. only the agent's pleasure and pain matters.
- B. only sensory pleasure and pain matter.
- C. the agent's intentions matter.
- D. pain that an act brings about thousands of years later matters.

Act Utilitarianism

AU: an act is morally right if and only if it maximizes hedonic utility.

The “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

“ ... defenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this -- that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness.”

- Mill



**Henry Heathwood
(not lighting a cat on fire)**

The “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

The “Lack of Time” Argument

P1. If AU is true, then it is always right to calculate utilities before acting.

P2. But it is not always right to calculate utilities before acting.

C. Therefore, AU is not true.

To **calculate utilities** is

(i) to figure out what all of one’s alternatives are,

(ii) to calculate the hedonic utility of each of these alternatives, &

(iii) to identify which of these alternatives maximizes hedonic utility.

digression on

**Presenting,
Explaining,
and
Evaluating
Arguments**

Present, Explain, and Evaluate the “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

Rationale for P1: AU says that an act is right just in case it maximizes hedonic utility. So the only way to find out which of your alternatives is right on AU is to figure out which one maximizes hedonic utility.

And the only way to do that is to calculate utilities before acting.

Thus, AU requires that we calculate utilities before acting.

Present, Explain, and Evaluate the “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

Rationale for P2: Suppose my son Henry runs out onto Broadway, distracted by a dragonfly. The SKIP is barreling down towards him. If I calculate utilities before doing anything, Henry will be hit by the bus! Clearly, I should just grab him without calculating. Thus, it is not always right to calculate utilities before acting.

this one has a
“right answer”

clicker question

Evaluate the “Lack of Time” Argument.

A. The “Lack of Time” Argument is sound.

B. The “Lack of Time” Argument is unsound because P1 is false.

C. The “Lack of Time” Argument is unsound because P2 is false.

D. I honestly don't know whether the “Lack of Time” Argument is sound.

The “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

The “Lack of Time” Argument

~~P1.~~ If AU is true, then it is always right to calculate utilities before acting.

P2. Sometimes it is not right to calculate utilities before acting.

C. Therefore, AU is not true.

This argument is **UNSOUND**.

P1 is **FALSE**.

The “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

~~P1~~. If AU is true, then it is always right to calculate utilities before acting.

This can be shown to be false *using exactly the case that proponents of the argument used to support P2!*

<u>Alternatives</u>	<u>hedonic utility</u>	<u>According to AU:</u>
pull Henry from road	+550	right
shout at bus driver	-300	wrong
cover eyes	-295	wrong
call 911	-300	wrong
→ calculate utilities	-305	wrong ←

The “Lack of Time” Objection to AU

How, then, do we figure out which of our alternatives maximizes hedonic utility?

“there has been ample time ... for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness ... namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time, mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions; on which experience all ... the morality of life, are dependent. People talk as if the commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness.”

- Mill

Act Utilitarianism

AU: an act is morally right if and only if it maximizes hedonic utility.

The Organ Harvest Objection to AU

Let me describe the case in detail ...

clicker question

What's your opinion? Is it morally acceptable for the doctor to kill the one patient so that the other five can live (in this case just as described)?

A. No, of course it's wrong for the doctor to do this.

B. Yes, in fact the doctor should do this.

The Organ Harvest Objection to AU

The Organ Harvest Argument

P1. If AU is true, then it is morally right for the doctor to kill the one patient in order to save the five others.

P2. But it is not right for the doctor to do this.

C. Therefore, AU is not true.

Rationale for P1?

Rationale for P2?

What do you think? Does this argument refute AU?

Possible Act Utilitarian Replies to the Organ Harvest Argument

1. Give up the theory

a. become Rule Utilitarians instead (see Rachels, pp. 112-115)

b. become Deontologists instead

(we'll study Deontology next!)

2. Say the case doesn't count because it's too weird

(see Rachels, pp. 111-112)

3. Present considerations that suggest that our intuition that the act would be wrong is mistaken.

That's what we're going to do now ...

A Reply to the Organ Harvest Argument

Case I:

You learn that one of two outcomes might happen:

A: there is a car accident and five people die.

B: there is an accident in a hospital involving anesthesia, and one person dies.

First question: *Which outcome is better?* (B, right?)

Second question: *Which outcome should you prefer, or should you hope occurs (given that one of them has to occur)?* (also B, right?)

A Reply to the Organ Harvest Argument

Case 2: Like Case 1, only this time ...

... a genie appears.

She heard your wish. She says she will grant it. She utters her magic words, and outcome B rather than A occurs.



Third question: *Was it right for the genie to grant that wish?*

(It seems that it would be hard to say No, given that we agreed that it was right to *have* the wish in the first place.)

A Reply to the Organ Harvest Argument

Case 3:

Like Case 2, except the genie now gives you the power to grant your wish directly:

She presents you with a button. If you press it, outcome B will occur instead of outcome A.

Fourth question: *Is it ok for you to press the button, so as to bring about the preferred outcome?*

(How could it be ok for the genie to bring it about, but not you?)

A Reply to the Organ Harvest Argument

Case 4:

Like Case 3, only now we learn how the button works: it magically puts extra anesthesia into the doctor's needle without the doctor knowing it, causing her patient to get too much. This patient's organs are a match for five others who would otherwise die from a car accident. The organs are used to save them.

Fifth question: *Is it still ok for you to press the button?*

(How could simply learning how the mechanism works change anything?)

A Reply to the Organ Harvest Argument

Case 5:

Like Case 4, only now ...

... *you* are the doctor in the hospital. You see that if you just inject a little extra anesthesia, your patient will die, and his organs will save five others who would otherwise die.

Fifth question: *Is it ok for you to inject the extra anesthesia, thereby causing your patient to die, so that five others can live?*

(If it's ok to press the button in Case 4, how can the act in Case 5 be wrong?)

we can put this reply into the form of an argument ...

P1. Outcome B is better than outcome A.

P2. If outcome B is better than outcome A, then you should hope that B rather than A occurs.

P3. If you should hope that B rather than A occurs, then it's ok for the genie to grant this wish.

P4. If it's ok for the genie to grant the wish, then it's ok for you to grant it yourself by pushing the genie's button.

P5. If it's ok for you to grant it yourself by pushing the genie's button, then it's ok for the doctor to inject extra anesthesia into her patient.

P6. If it's ok for the doctor to inject extra anesthesia into her patient, then the Organ Harvest Argument is unsound.

C. Therefore, the Organ Harvest Argument is unsound.

clicker question

What do you think of this reply to the Organ Harvest Argument?

A. It does nothing to lower my confidence that's it's wrong for the doctor to kill her healthy patient to save the five.

B. Although I still think it's probably wrong for the doctor to do that, this reply makes me less sure.

C. This reply convinces me that it's ok for the doctor to do this, and that the Organ Harvest Argument is unsound.