

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. The Organ Harvest Argument
8. The Trolley Problem

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:

“Same-sex marriage is wrong because it will ruin society.”

Moral principle used:

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

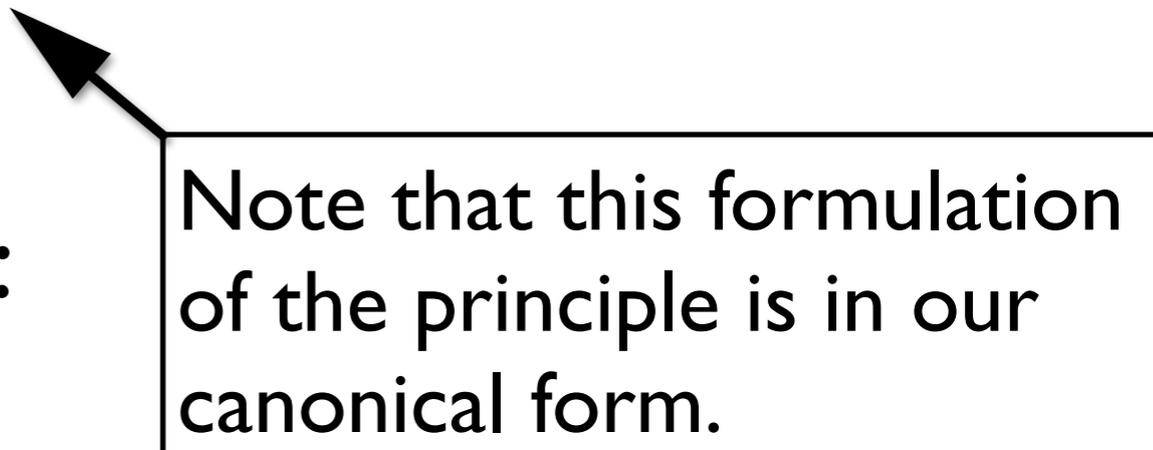
SP: An act is morally wrong if and only if it causes suffering.

(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!

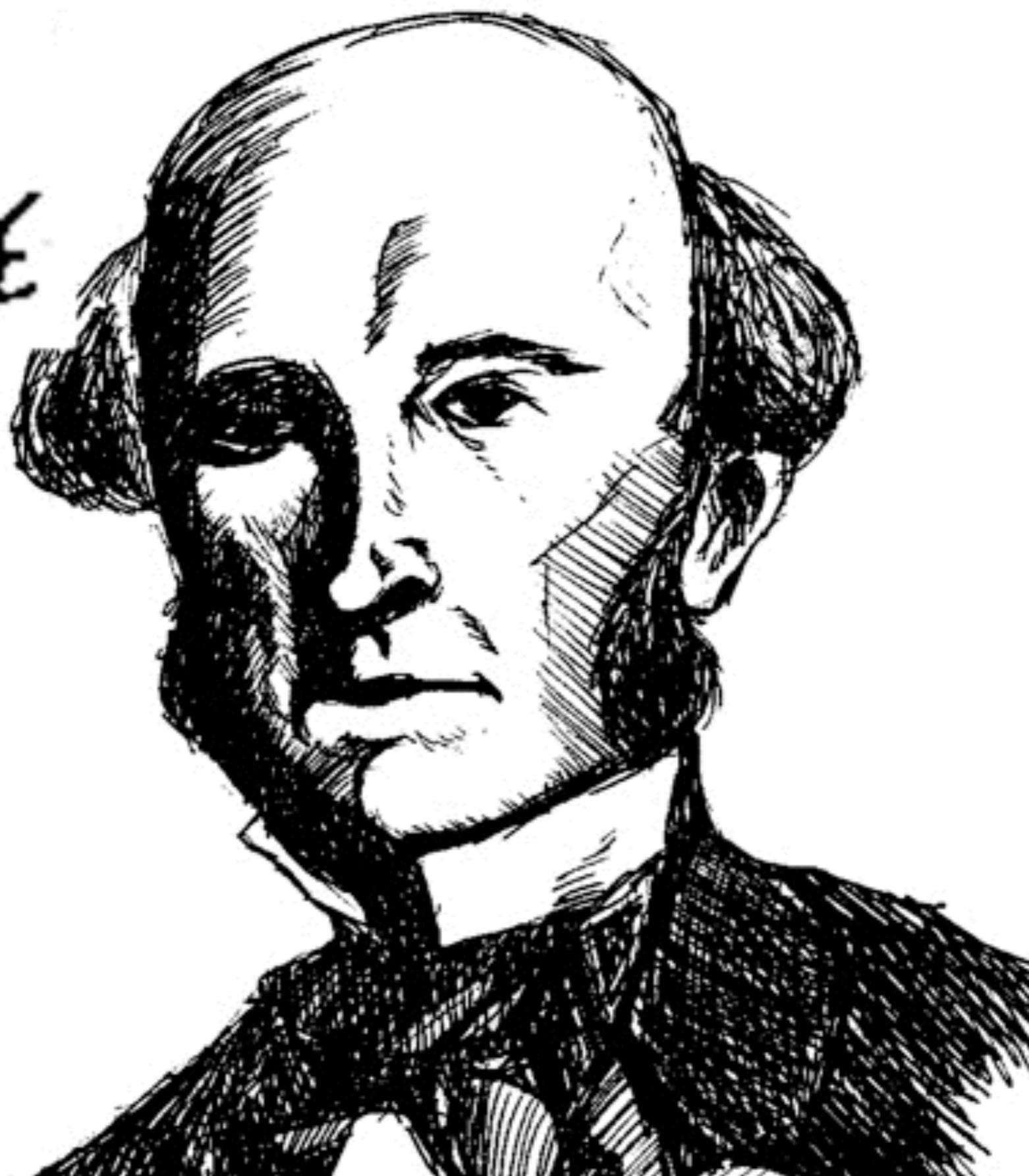
John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

- 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

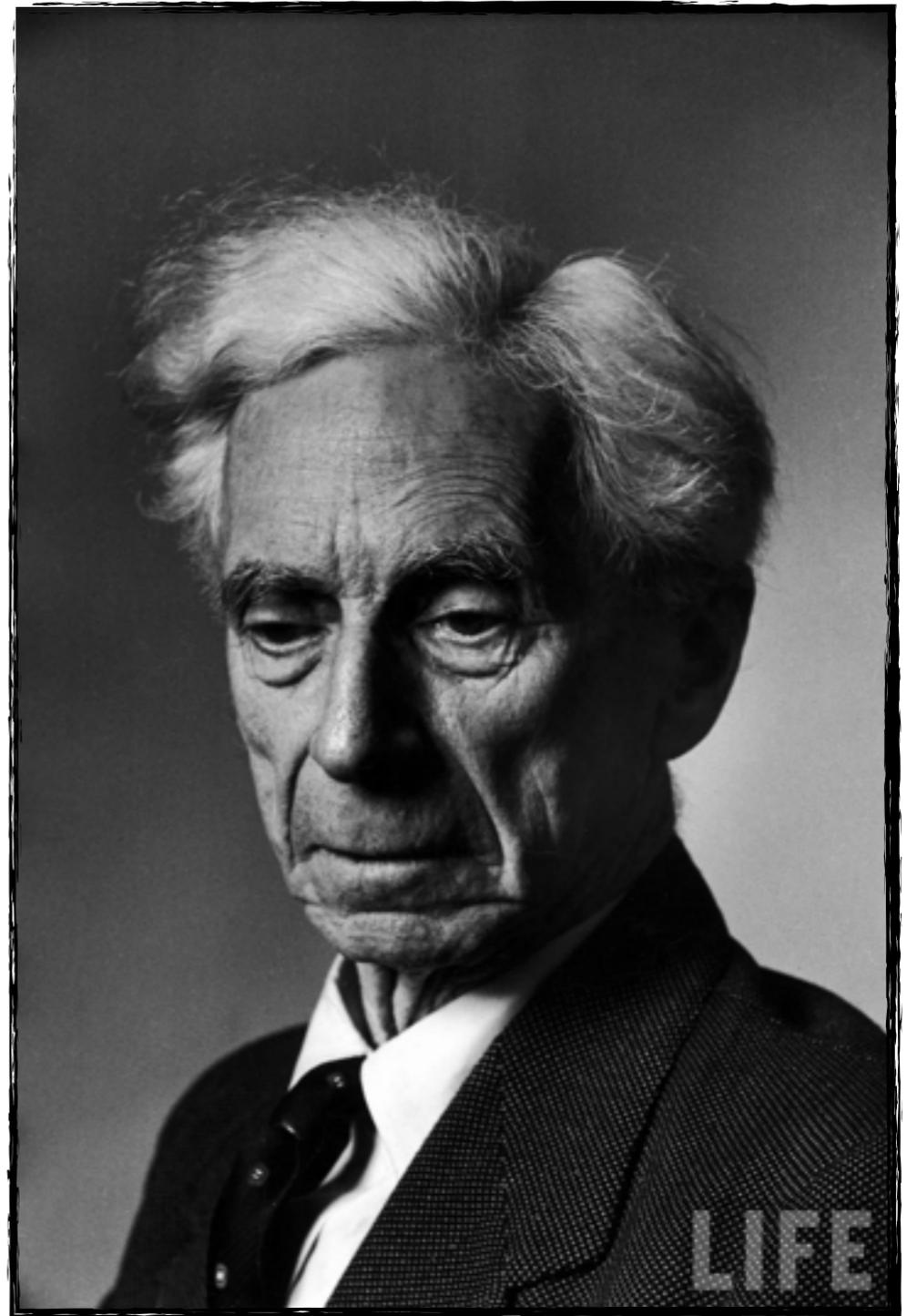
“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

“By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.”

- Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863)

“At the age of fourteen I became convinced that the fundamental principle of ethics should be the promotion of human happiness, and at first this appeared to me so self-evident that I supposed it must be the universal opinion.

— Bertrand Russell
“My Religious Reminiscences”

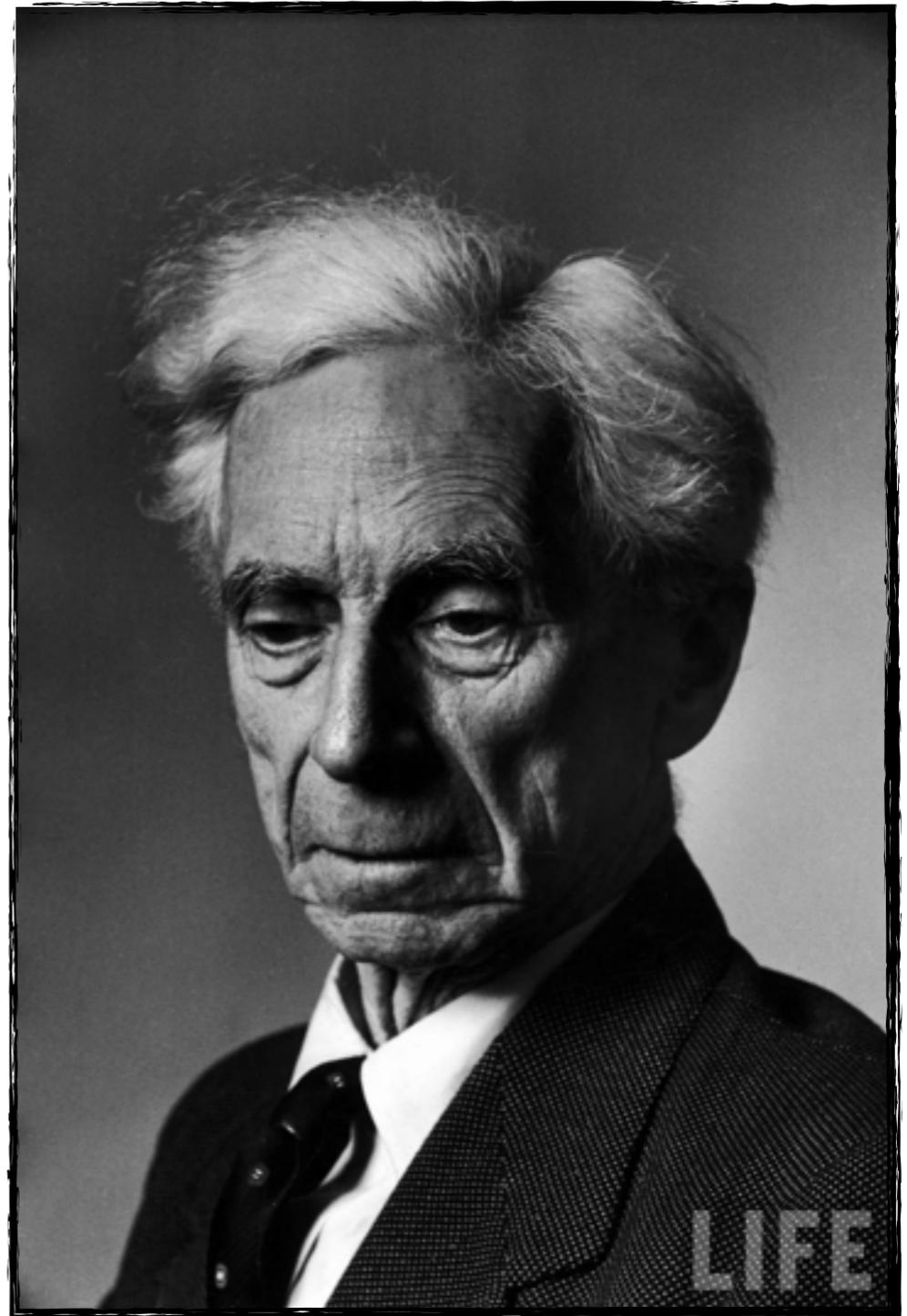


Bertrand Russell

(perhaps the leading philosopher of the 20th century in the English-speaking world)

Then I discovered, to my surprise, that it was a view regarded as unorthodox, and called Utilitarianism. I announced, no doubt with a certain pleasure in the long word, that I was a Utilitarian; but the announcement was received with derision.”

— Bertrand Russell
“My Religious Reminiscences”



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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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some important features of AU

- No absolute moral rules (other than AU itself)
 - ▶ contrast the Ten Commandments
- 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



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- 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**

Presenting, Explaining, and Evaluating an Argument

- To **present** an argument is simply to write it down (in line-by-line format).
- To **explain** an argument is much more substantial. You need to do two things for each premise:
 - (i) define all terms that need defining, and
 - (ii) give the *rationale* for each premise – i.e., the reason that it is supposed to be true. Even if you don't think it's true, you can still give the rationale: the reason that a proponent of the argument would give for thinking that the premise is true.
- To **evaluate** an argument is to say what you think of it. Is it valid? More importantly, is it sound? If you think it's not sound, you need to say which premise is false, and why.

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 PKIP is barreling down towards him. If I calculate utilities before doing anything, Henry will be hit by the bus! Obviously that would be terrible, so 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 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

(Most Deontologists believe in a special constraint against *doing* harm to people as opposed to merely *allowing* harm to come to people.
We'll study Deontology next!)

2. Say that 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 doctor's act would be wrong is mistaken.

The Trolley Problem



clicker question

In *Switch*: What should you do?

A. Pull the switch, so that one dies and five live.

B. Don't pull the switch; five will die, one will live.

The Trolley Problem



clicker question

In *Footbridge*: What should you do?

A. Push the large man over the edge, so that he dies and five live.

B. Don't push the large man over the edge; five will die, he will live.

The Trolley Problem



The Trolley Problem

Paraphrasing Thomson (p. 206), here is

The Trolley Problem:

Why is it that the bystander in *Switch* may turn the trolley to save five, but the onlooker in *Footbridge* may not push the large man to save five?

“a lovely, nasty difficulty”



Judith Thomson

The Trolley Problem

The most common way to try to solve the Trolley Problem is to find a morally relevant difference between *Switch* and *Footbridge* that explains why it's ok to kill one and save five in *Switch* but not ok to do this in *Footbridge*.

Let's try to do this ...

The Trolley Problem

Some possible solutions to the Trolley Problem:

a. Physical pushing

In *Footbridge*, but not in *Switch*, if you save five, you must physically push the large man.

Reply: *Trapdoor*.

The Trolley Problem

Some possible solutions to the Trolley Problem:

b. Treating as a Mere Means



“Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.”

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)

In *Footbridge*, but not in *Switch*, if you save five, you treat the large man merely as a means.

Reply: *Loop*.

The Trolley Problem

Some possible solutions to the Trolley Problem:

c. Involvement

In *Switch*, but not in *Footbridge*, all six people are already involved.

(Variant: all six are already at risk.)

Reply: *Derail*.

The Trolley Problem

Some possible solutions to the Trolley Problem:

d. Reject the question.

(i) deny that it's ok to pull the switch in *Switch*.
(but consider *Driver* and *Passenger*)

- or -

(ii) deny that it's wrong to push the large man
in *Footbridge*.

↳ utilitarianism

A Utilitarian Response to the Organ Harvest Argument

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.

A Utilitarian Response to the Organ Harvest Argument

- P1. We cannot find a morally relevant difference between *Switch* and *Footbridge* that would explain why it's ok to kill one and save five in *Switch* but not ok to do this in *Footbridge*.
- P2. If P1, then it's probably ok to kill one and save five in *Footbridge*.
- P3. If it's probably ok to kill one and save five in *Footbridge*, then it's probably ok to kill one and save five in *Organ Harvest*.
- C. Therefore, it's probably ok to kill one and save five in *Organ Harvest*.