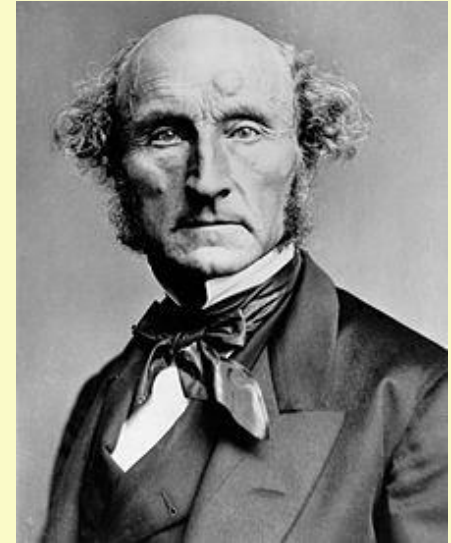
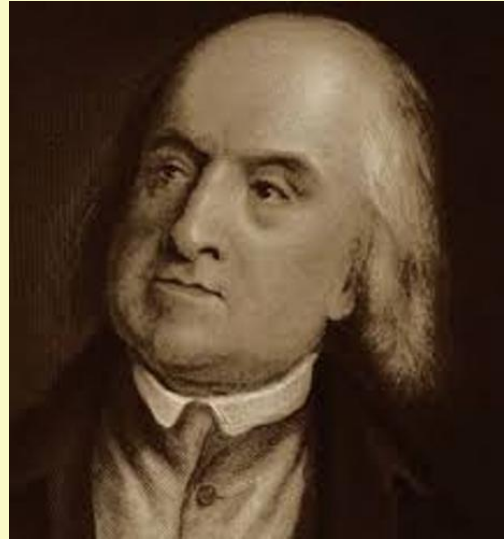
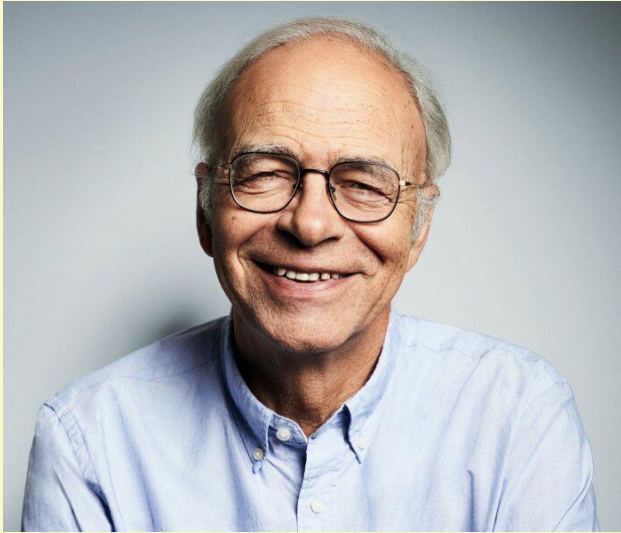


**07 November 2024**

# **Utilitarianism**



# Utilitarianism

## Utilitarianism

- The question of what is meant by 'utility' and 'maximising utility', including:
  - Jeremy Bentham's quantitative hedonistic utilitarianism (his utility calculus)
  - John Stuart Mill's qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism (higher and lower pleasures) and his 'proof' of the greatest happiness principle
  - non-hedonistic utilitarianism (including preference utilitarianism)
- act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism.

Issues, including:

- whether pleasure is the only good (Nozick's experience machine)
- fairness and individual liberty/rights (including the risk of the 'tyranny of the majority')
- problems with calculation (including which beings to include)
- issues around partiality
- whether utilitarianism ignores both the moral integrity and the intentions of the individual.

murder

torture

abuse

stealing

grievous  
bodily harm

cruelty

What else can you  
think of that is  
normally  
considered morally  
wrong?

What **makes** them  
morally wrong?

generosity

freedom

charity

What else can you think of that is normally considered morally right?

What **makes** them morally right?

**A principle is a**

---

---

Ethics could be said to  
concern first principles



**What was the  
core ethical  
principle of  
divine command  
theory?**



Principle of utility

Greatest happiness principle

Greatest happiness for  
the greatest number



That action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest number

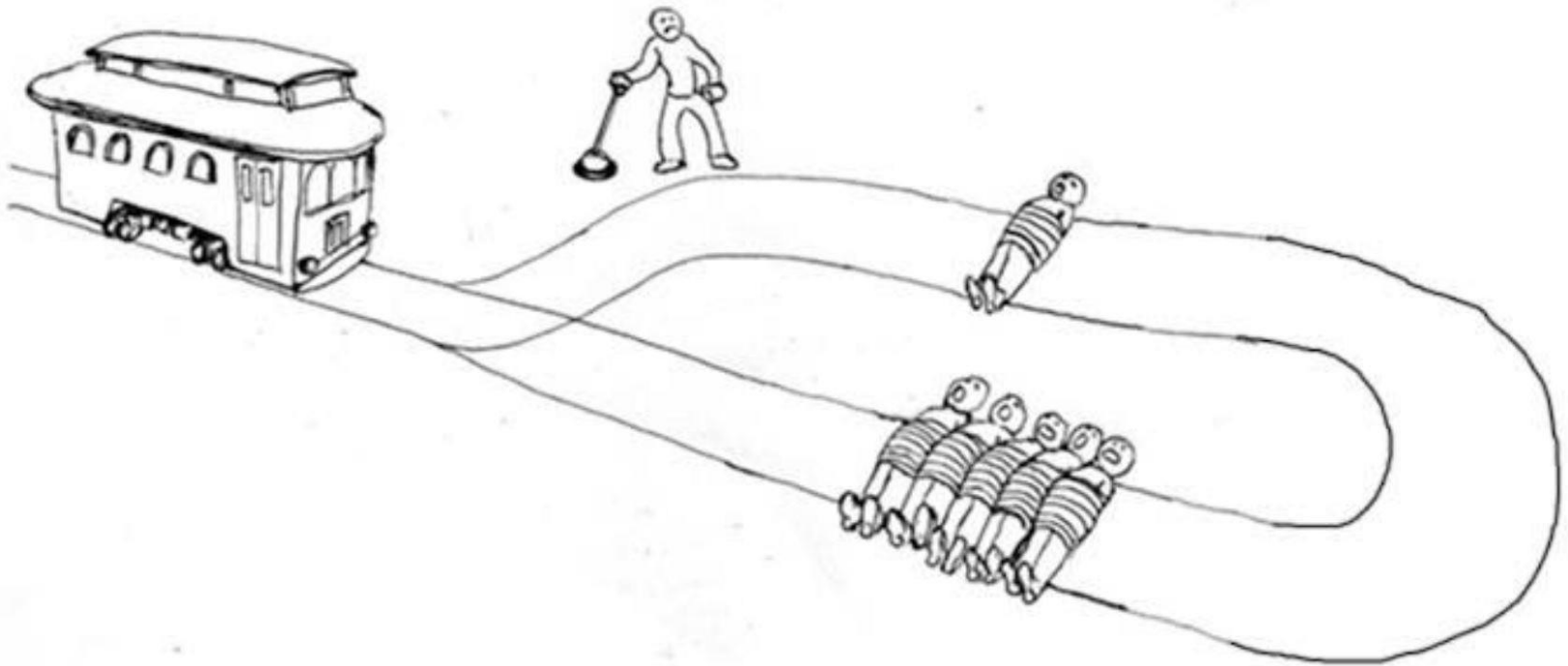
Francis  
Hutcheson



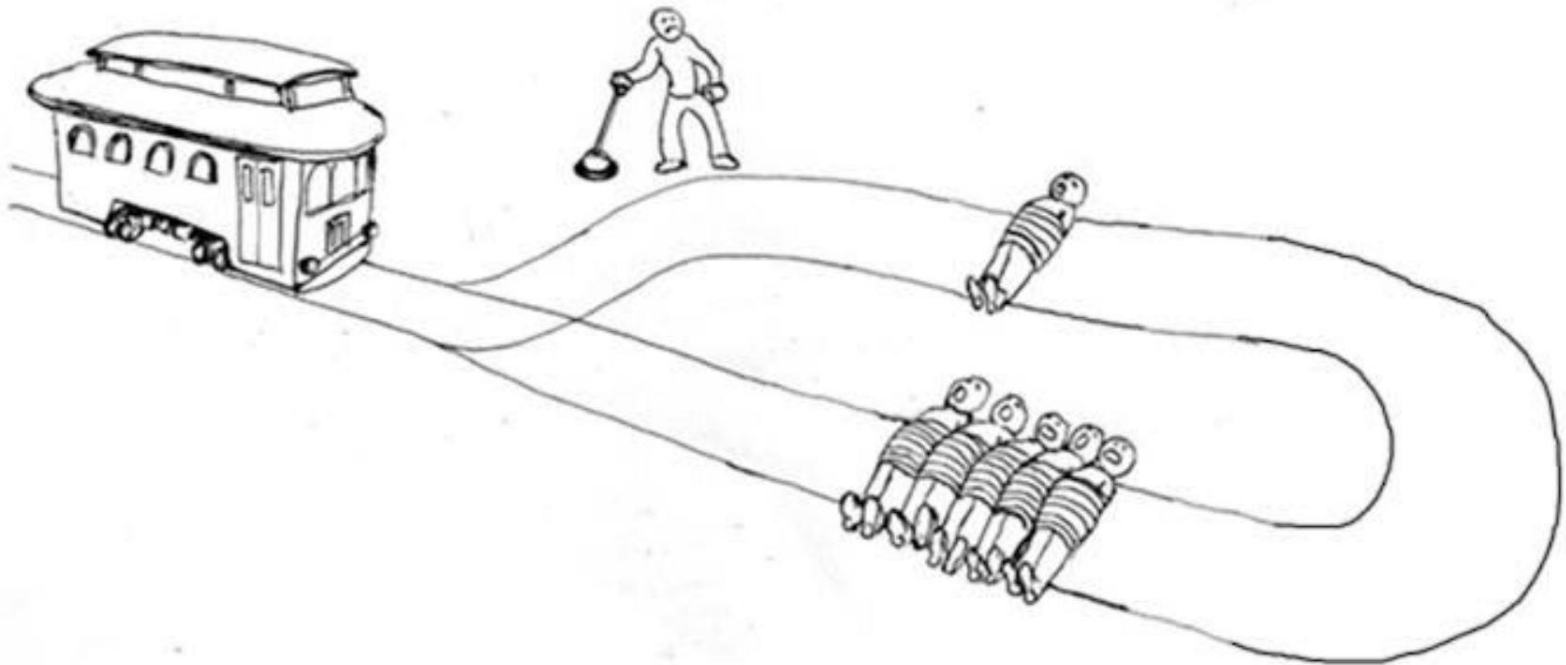
Kirkwood's  
example

**Don't use it  
yourself!**

If you'd save the five, at the  
expense of the one...



# Five violent criminals v. one trainee surgeon



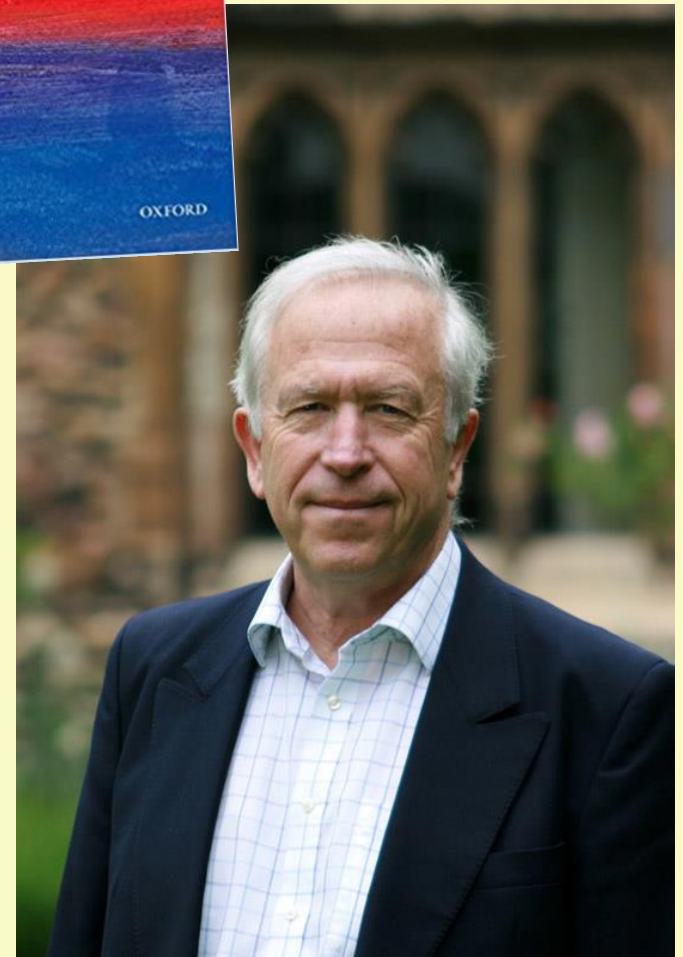
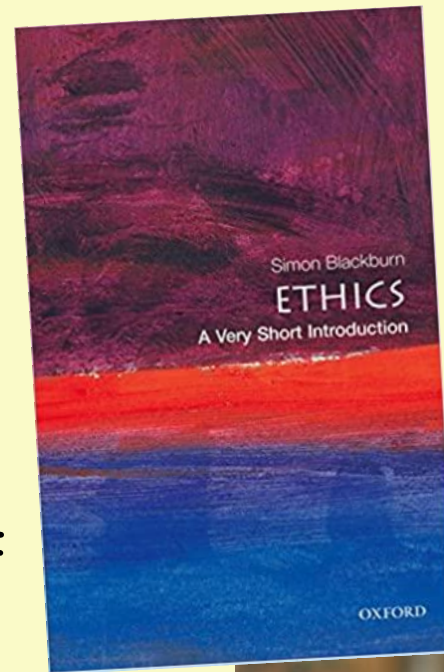
What is your first  
reaction to the **greatest**  
**happiness principle?**

# consequentialist

Consider the  
\_\_\_\_\_ of an  
action to morally  
assess that action

# consequentialism

- 'Forward-looking'
- Considers the **outcomes** of actions in order to morally assess them (**Blackburn**) --> independent reading





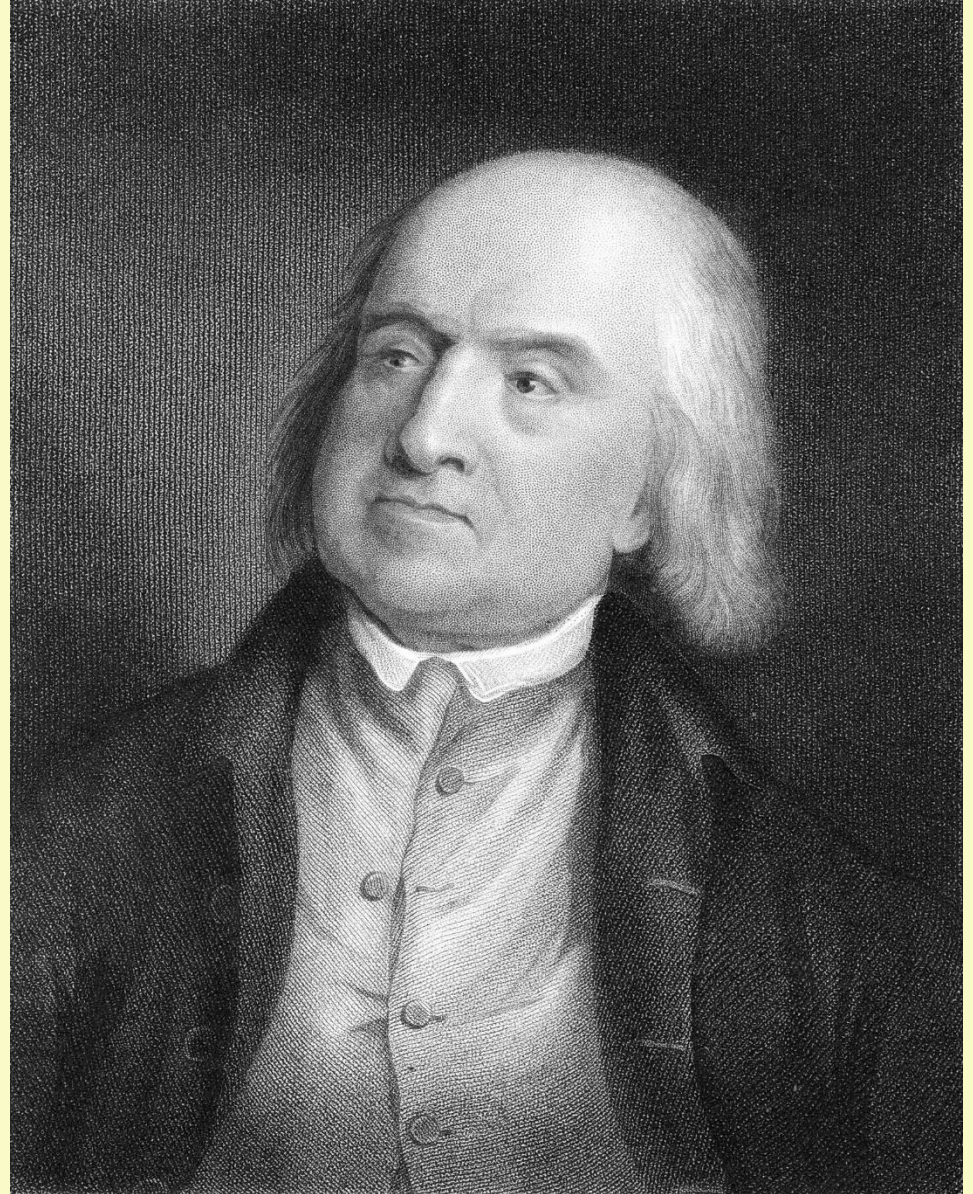
# egalitarian

each person's  
happiness counts

---

# egalitarianism

Each one  
counts as one  
and no more  
than one



# secular

\_\_\_\_\_ in  
nature



# What is meant by utility?

- utilis (Latin): useful
- → results
  
- Do actions that are useful for...
  - (a) producing good results (=pleasure, happiness)
  - (b) minimising bad results (=pain, suffering)

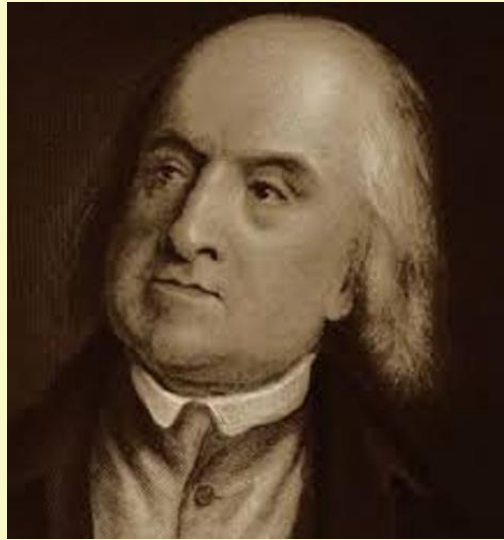
**Explain the  
principle of  
utility (5 marks)**



# Jeremy Bentham

[Jeremy Bentham: Man and Myth \(UCL\) - YouTube](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCwhKCqdINY>



# What are the key features of utilitarianism?

Overview of the basics

(basics  $\neq$  simple)

The logo for PBS Digital Studios. The top part features the letters 'PBS' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'P' is blue, the 'B' is brown, and the 'S' is green. Below this, the words 'DIGITAL' and 'STUDIOS' are written in a large, outlined, hand-drawn style font with diagonal hatching. The 'S' at the end of 'STUDIOS' is partially cut off by the right edge of the frame.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a739VjqdSI>



# Historical context

- British (Anglo)
- 18th century
- Hume, Hutcheson (elements)
- Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick (substantive)
- Popper, Hare (modern)
- Singer (contemporary; U has currency)

# What was British life like in the 18th century?

- Bentham

- Social reformer; legalist

- Mill

- Social reformer; politics;

# Philosophical context

- **Tradition:** Analytical philosophy; empiricism
- **Branch:** Ethics, moral philosophy
- **Sub-branch:** Normative ethics, ethical theory
- **Theory type:** Deontic (vs. aretaic)
- **Deontic type:** Consequentialist (vs. deontological)
- **Consequentialist type:** Egalitarian (vs. altruism, egoism (Hobbes))

# Key features

- **Secular**, but not **atheistic**
- **Naturalistic**, so not **supernaturalistic**, not **rationalist**

What is mean by 'maximising utility'?

# Core principle

- Hutcheson, 'that action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest number'
- <http://www.utilitarianism.com/joseph-priestley.html>
- Principle of Utility



# Core concept

- 'General good'
- **Pleasure**/pain (hedone)
- **Happiness**/(suffering) (felicity)
- (Welfare, well-being)
- Preferences
- Interest

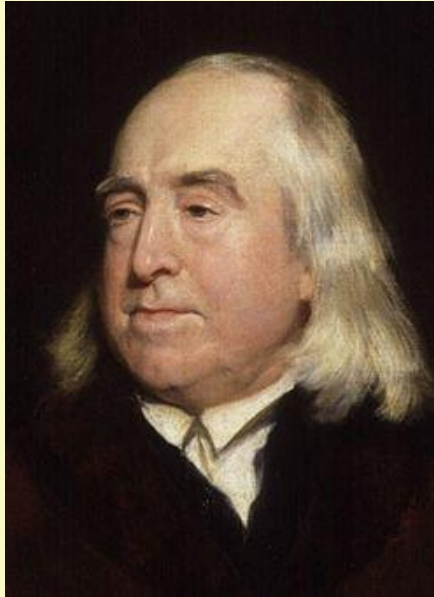
# Core theory e.g.

- **Bentham and Mill**

- For example, they relate principle of utility to principle of equality (**egalitarianism**): "Each one counts as one and no more than one" (Bentham)
- "Could be written underneath principle of utility as an explanatory comment" (Mill)



- Write a one paragraph summary of utilitarianism



**What is psychological hedonism? And what is its relationship to the principle of utility?**

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# Psychological Hedonism

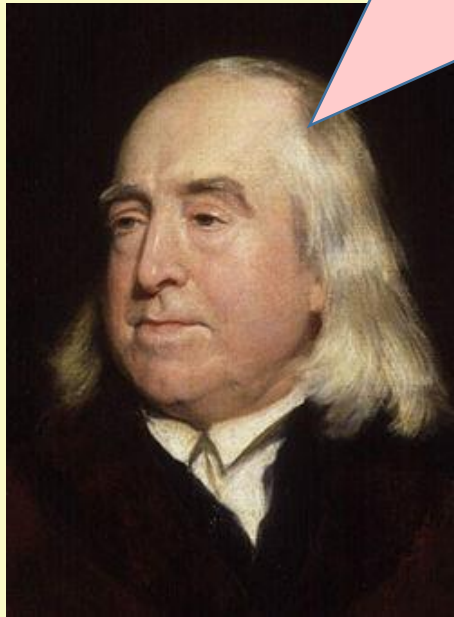
# What is psychological hedonism?

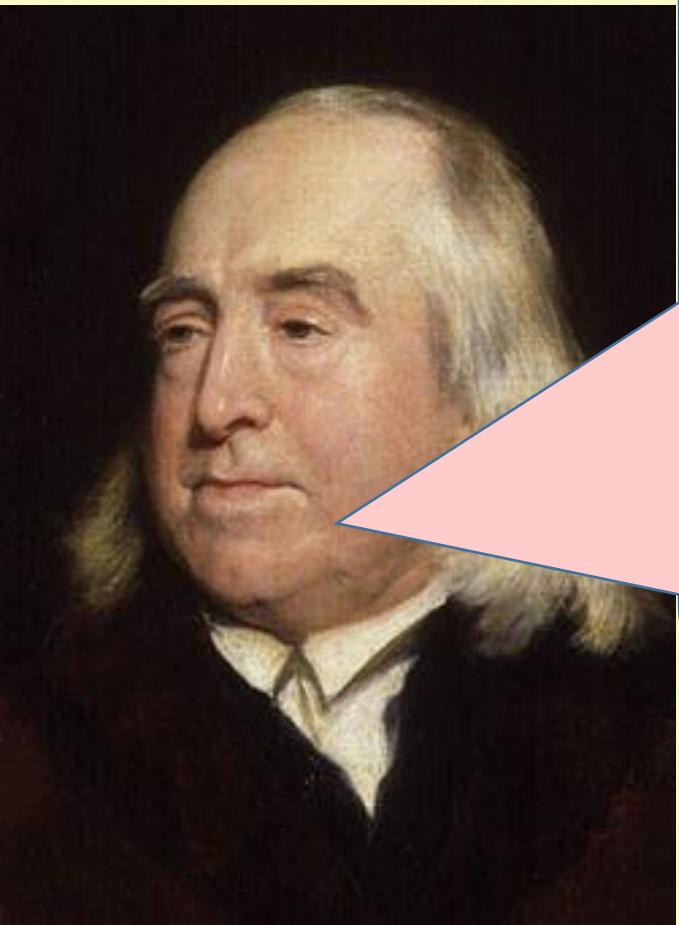
- 'Psyche' means...
- 'Hedonism' means...

# Psychological Hedonism

- Define with examples

Nature has placed mankind...





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, as well as to determine what we shall do.

# Two similar theories

Hedonism

'ought'...

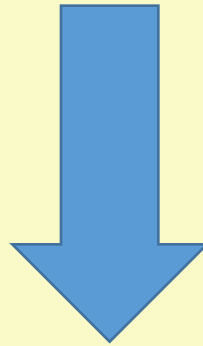
Classical  
utilitarianism

'ought'...



# Implicit Argument

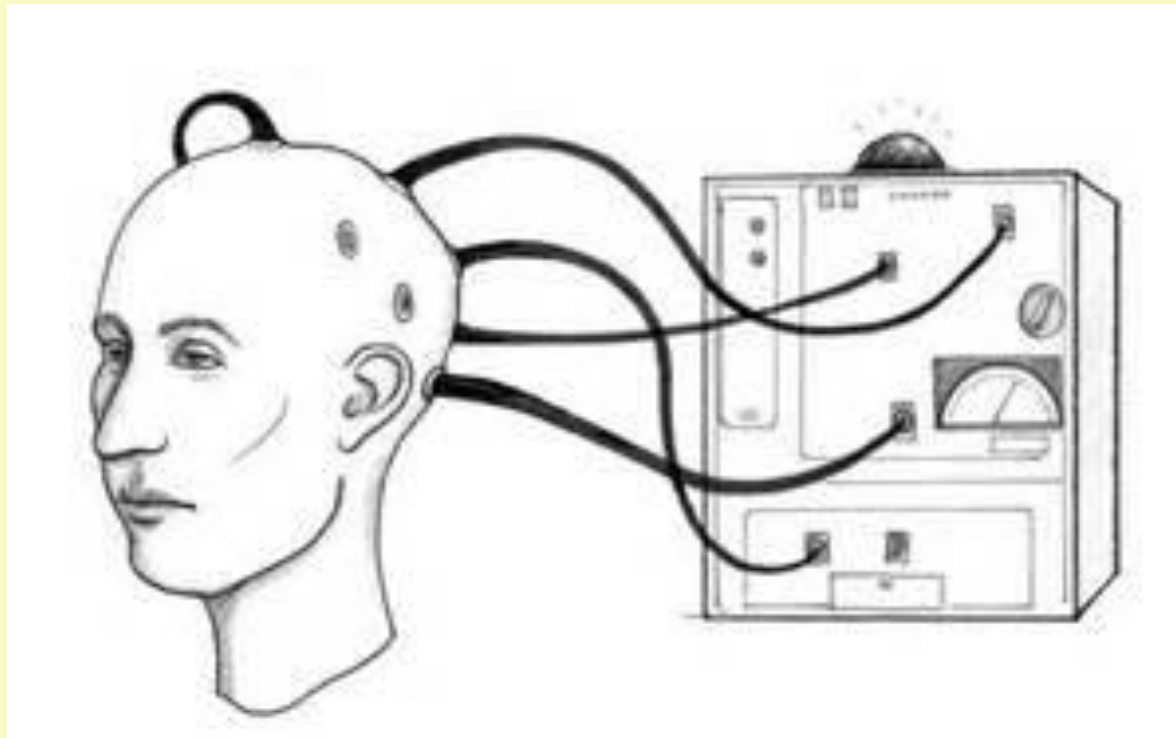
- (1) Psychological Hedonism: It is the case that...



- (C) Principle of Utility: **Therefore**, humans ought to...

**Explain how Bentham  
seeks to prove the  
principle of utility (5  
marks)**

# Robert Nozick: *Pleasure Machine*



# Alasdair MacIntyre (1981)

- Psychological hedonism is obviously not true
- Essay writing; Guinness



# What do you make of psychological hedonism?

- Discuss then write down a paragraph to explain your views



What do you remember about the principle of utility?

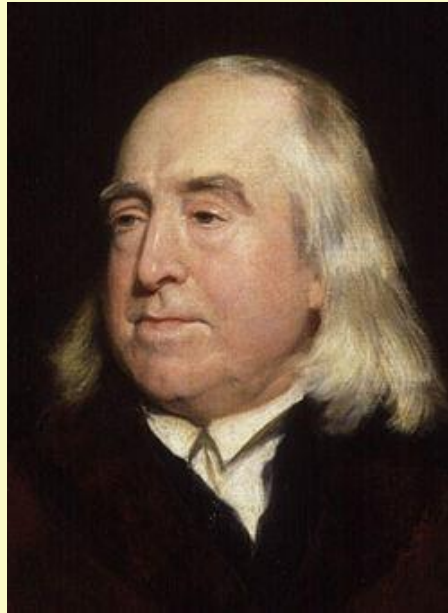


**What do you  
remember  
about Jeremy  
Bentham?**

# Utilitarianism (homework)

- (a) What did you learn from the YouTube clip?
- (b) Explain the significance of psychological hedonism in Bentham's utilitarianism
- (c) Give an account of Mill's proof of utilitarianism.





# What is Bentham's felicific calculus?

A quantitative moral decision-making procedure

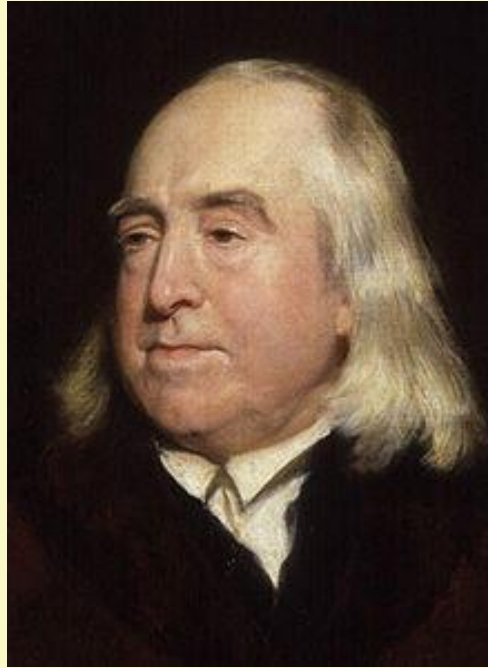
**Any recollections  
about the felicific  
calculus?**

**"Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, [or one that] ought not to be done."**

▶ ▶▶ 🔊 1:50 / 3:39

⏸ ⏪ ⏩ ⏹ ⏶ ⏷

[Jeremy Bentham and the Felicific Calculus - YouTube](#)



**What are the key features of  
Bentham's quantitative  
hedonistic utilitarianism?**

His **utility calculus**

- Is **moral philosophy** a science?
- Could it be one?

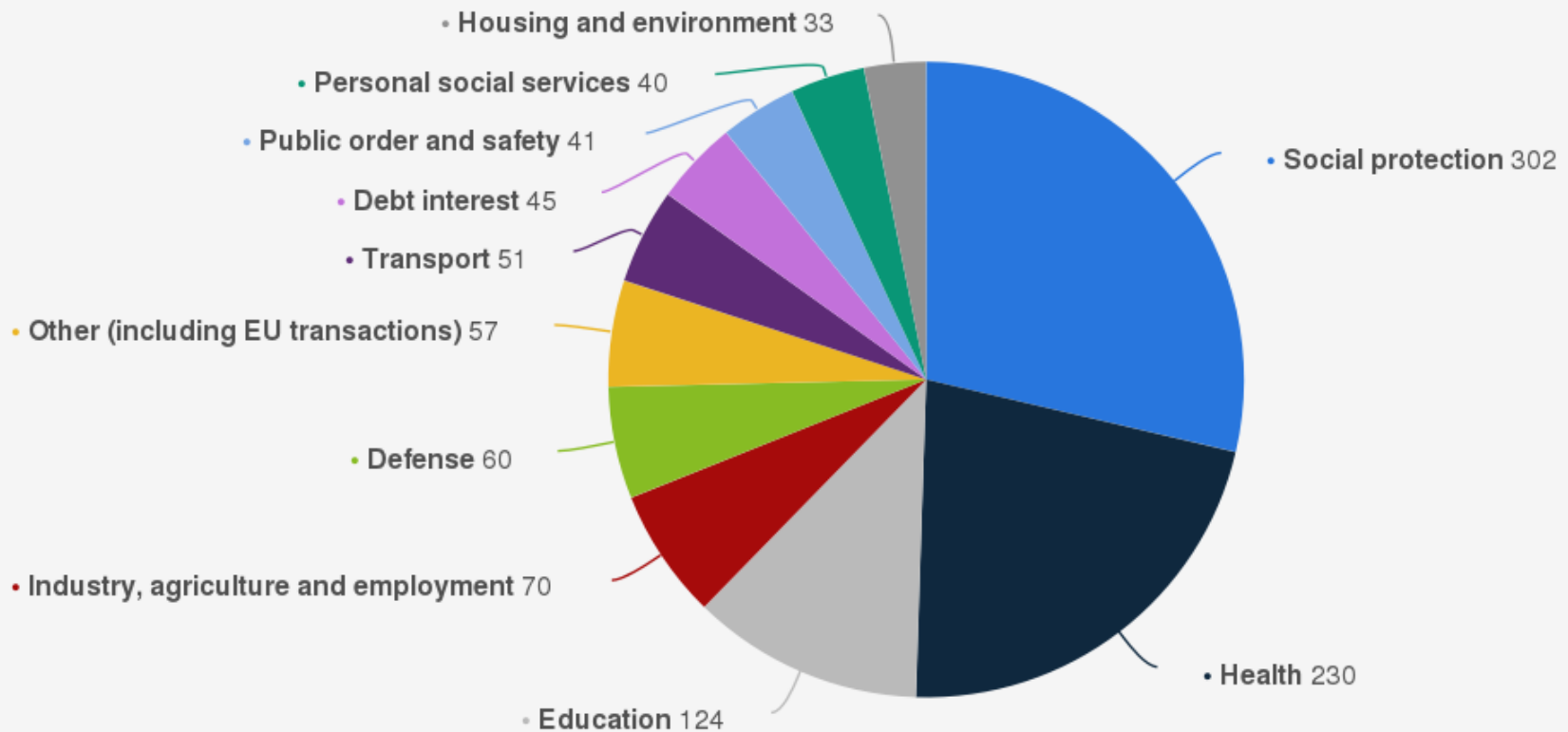
# Bentham's ambition

- Scientific exactitude (in traditionally uncertain)
- **Rational approach** to moral decision-making
- Individual action
- Policy-making ("**every measure of government**")

# Hamilton's example (adapted)

- You're Chancellor of the Exchequer. You've got, say, £1,000 billion to spend:
- What % do you spend on welfare, health, education, defence, policing, and transport?

## Budgeted public sector expenditure on services in the United Kingdom in 2021/22, by function (in billion GBP)



Source  
HM Treasury  
© Statista 2022

Additional Information:  
United Kingdom; HM Treasury; 2020 to 2021



# Comparing pleasure

- What makes a pleasure,  $x$ , more pleasurable than  $y$ , everything else being equal (*ceteris paribus*)?

# Seven factors

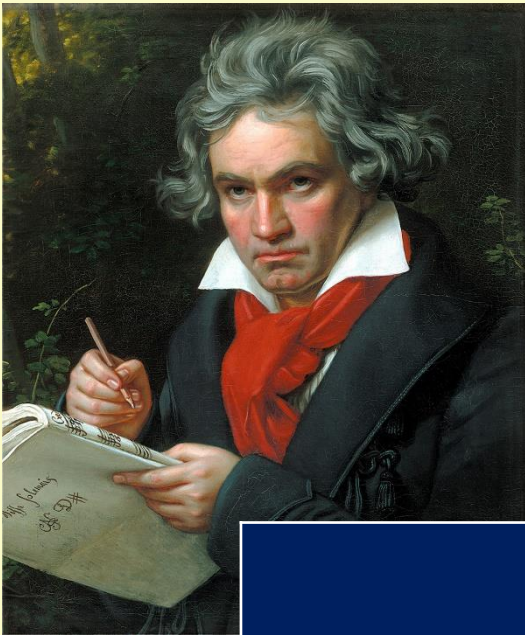
- **I** (intensity)
- **D** (duration)
- **C** (certainty)
- **P** (propinquity) (proximity)
- **F** (fecundity) (fertility)
- **P** (purity)
- **E** (extent)

# Arithmetical procedure

- **Seven factors**
- **Four** → intrinsic:  
pleasure & pain
- **Two** → extrinsic:  
effects of pleasure &  
pain
- **One** → social → ethical

# Heroin versus Beethoven

- Which is better, according to the calculus: misusing heroin, or listening to **Beethoven**?
- Do the maths...



	Listening to Beethoven	Using heroin
Intensity		
Duration		
Certainty		
Propinquity (proximity)		
Fecundity (fertility)		
Purity		
Extent		

"The quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry."

# Commensurability of the pleasures

- All pleasures are **comparable** - quantitatively.
- And so they are the same type of thing.
- Some pleasures are more pleasurable than others



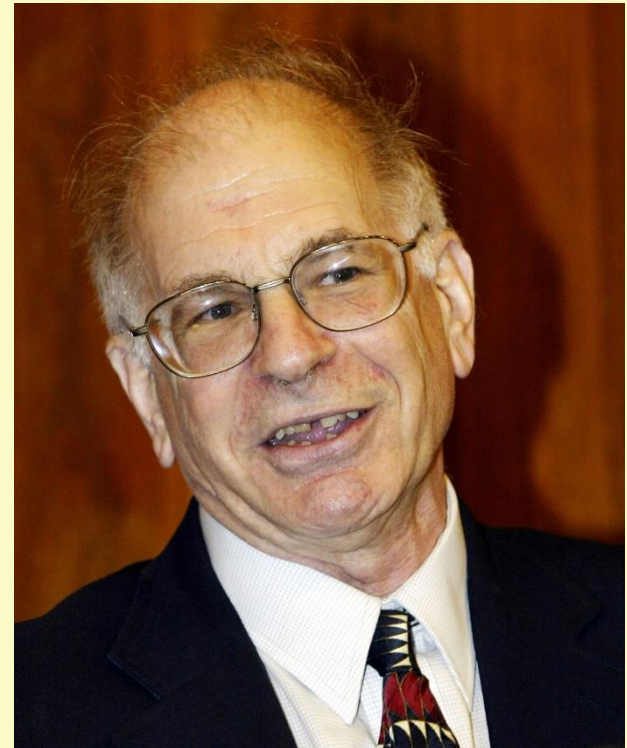
**What are the two main advantages of the felicific calculus?**

- Rational approach
- Works in Economics

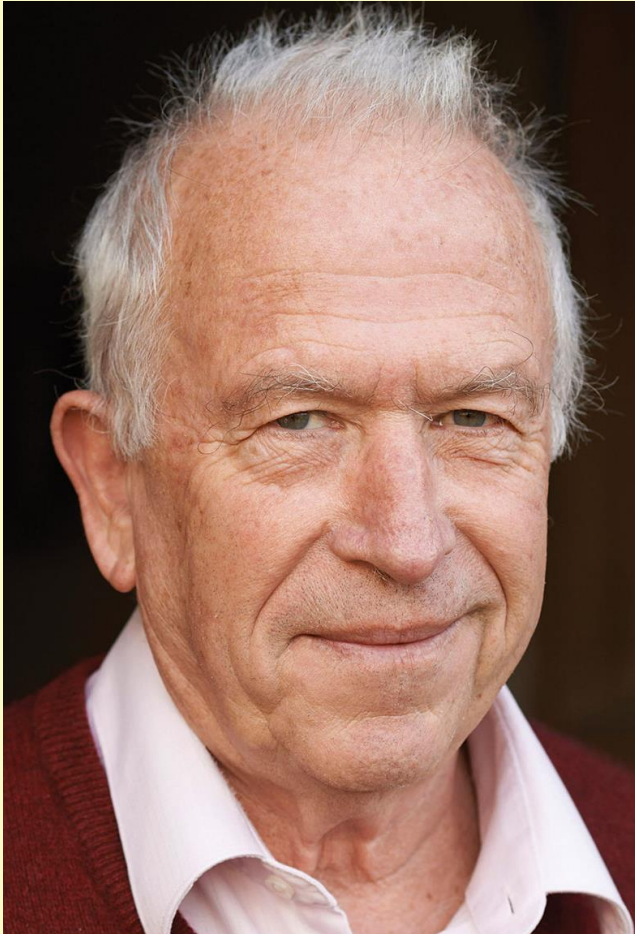


## + Rational (not arbitrary)

- Offers a more rational approach to decision-making
- Rational decision-making leads to better decisions
- (Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman)



## + Economics



- Successfully inherited in economics
- (Blackburn): **Welfare economics**
- Metrics to measure happiness and well-being

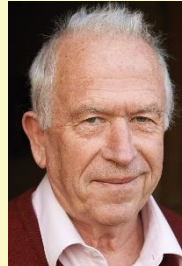


## What are the two main disadvantages of the felicific calculus?

- Measuring pleasure
- Is it always good to cause pleasure?

## - Measuring the pleasure

- Pleasures 'resist measurement'



- Pleasures are **subjective** -
- **Intra-subjective** - (Stephen Law - example of bread)
- **Inter-subjective**



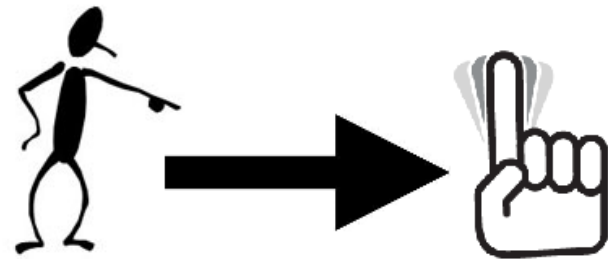
# - Naturalistic fallacy

- David Hume: is-ought problem
- G. E. Moore: naturalistic fallacy



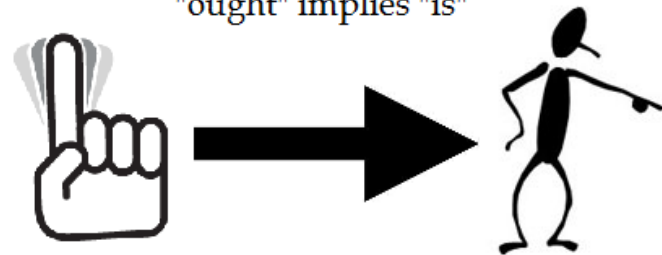
The Naturalistic Fallacy:

"is" implies "ought"

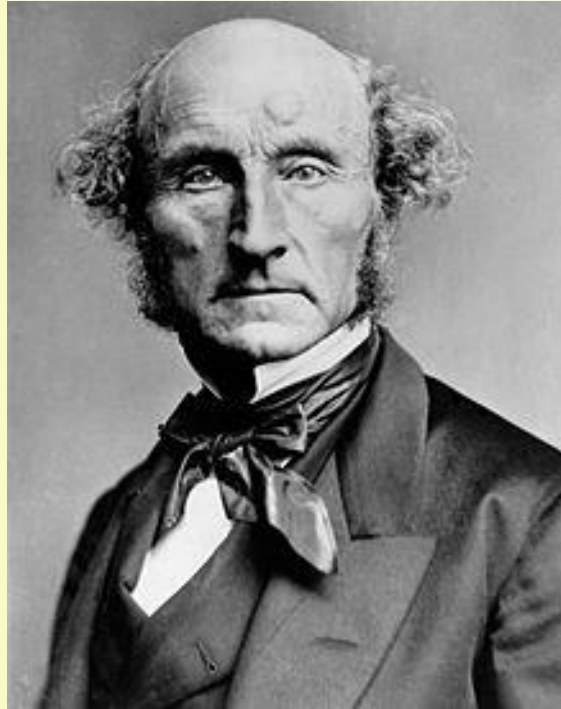


The Moralistic Fallacy:

"ought" implies "is"



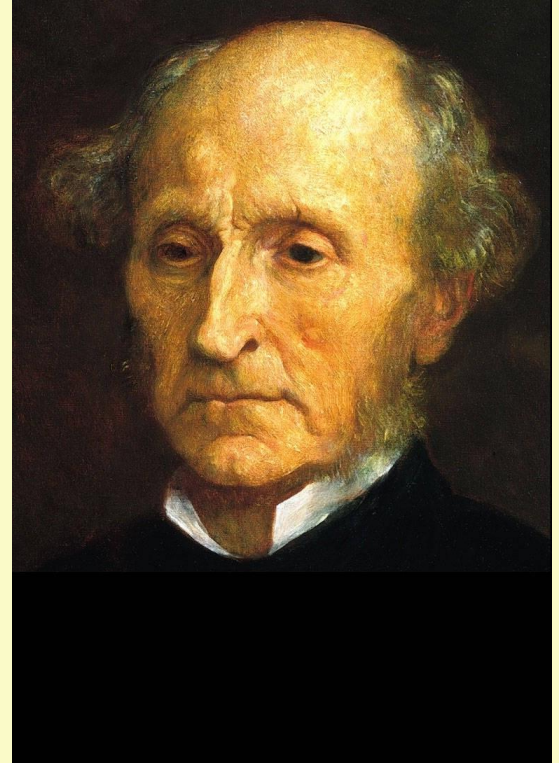
**Examine Bentham's  
felicific calculus and  
explain one objection  
to it. (12 marks)**



**What are the key features of  
Mill's qualitative hedonistic  
utilitarianism?**

Higher and lower pleasures

**Why does Mill  
distinguish between  
higher and lower  
pleasures?**



His reformulation and defence of  
utilitarianism...



# Utilitarianism so far

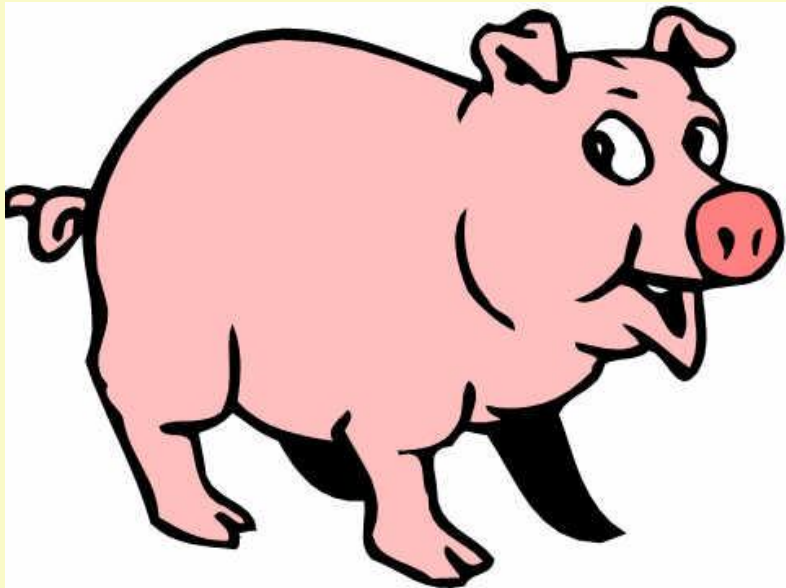
- Philosophical and historical context
- Principle of utility
- Features: consequentialist, egalitarian, secular
- Psychological hedonism,

# Push-Pin

- “The quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.” - Bentham
- **Meaning?** Something is good dependent on how much pleasure it causes

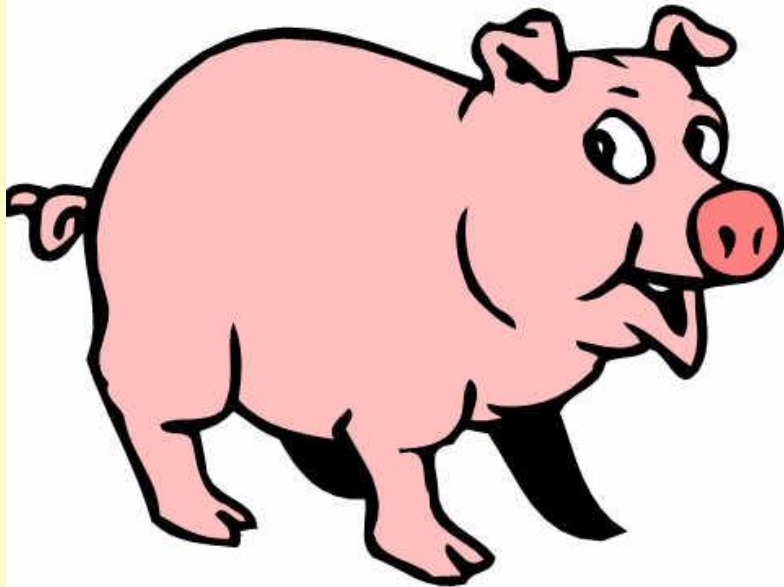
# What would you rather be?

A satisfied pig?



Or a dissatisfied Socrates?

A pig...



If pleasure is the only  
thing that matters...

Friendship

Philosophy

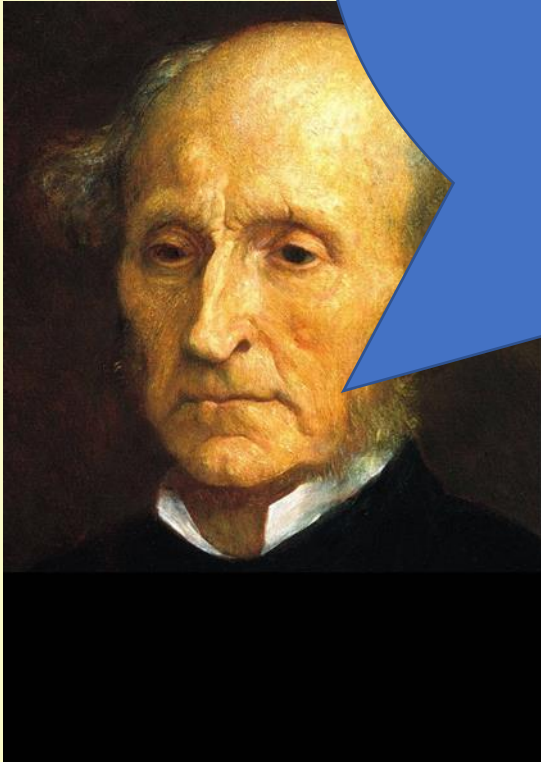
Achievement

Art



But surely it is better to  
be Socrates...

"it is better to be a  
human being  
dissatisfied than a pig  
satisfied; better to be  
Socrates dissatisfied  
than a fool satisfied"



# Sadistic Guards

If the *quantity* of pleasure is the only thing that matters

Pleasure = *subjective physical* sensation

Sadistic Guards → Torturing an innocent

Romans → Feeding Christians to lions

**Some pleasures seem plain**

**trashy**

**Quantity of  
Pleasure**

**Versus**

**Quality of Pleasure**



# Contemporary criticisms of Bentham's utilitarianism

## • 1

- 'monotonous hedonism' (Blackburn)
- a philosophy fit for 'swine'

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

- Mill

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Mill: Higher and Lower Pleasures

# Mill' response

- Emphasises **judgement**, not measurement
- Emphasises **cultivation** and education, not hedonism.
- Better **dissatisfied Socrates**, than satisfied pig

# Higher v lower pleasures

- Distinction
- (Blackburn (2001): what he should say is...)
- Qualitative difference
- Body versus mind

## Activity: Categorise, examples

Higher	Lower

# Criticism 1:

- Assumes dualism
- Inheritance from Plato

## Criticism 2:

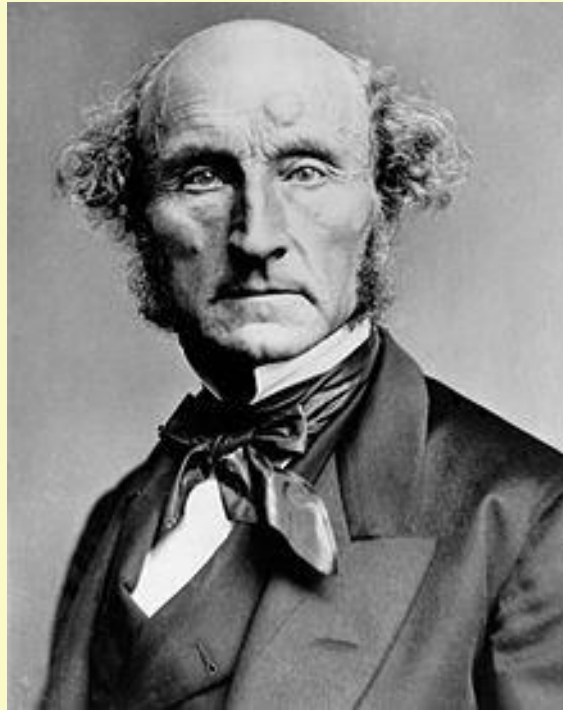
- What **crit**erion does Mill use to assert that some pleasures are better in kind than others?
- Pleasure is not the sole intrinsic good.



## Criticism 3:



- von Wright (1963)
- Conceptual confusion over the key concept of their philosophy
- So, what is pleasure? How does it relate to happiness? What is its opposite? Are there different causes? What are its outcomes? If something causes pleasure, is it thereby good?



**Mill's 'proof' of the greatest  
happiness principle**

**What is the difference between  
act and rule utilitarianism?**

**What is the difference between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism?**

**Distinguishing between the two**

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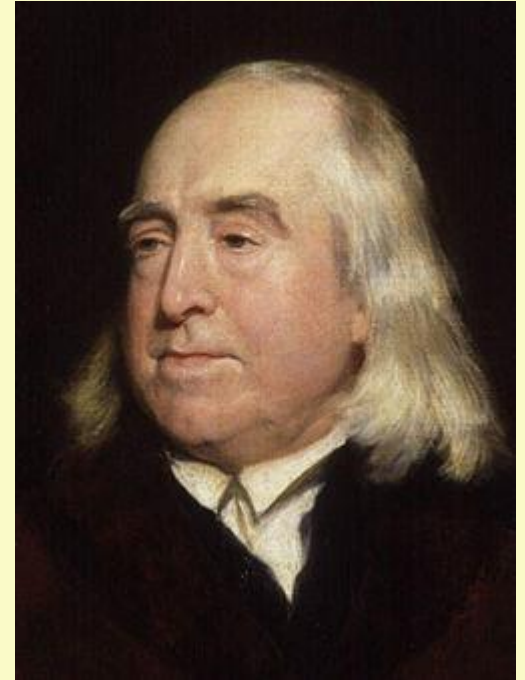
# Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism

**How practical do you think it is to calculate each?**

**Do you think Bentham demands that we do a calculation each time?**

# Bentham

- Legalist
- 'An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and **Legislation**' (1781)



I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

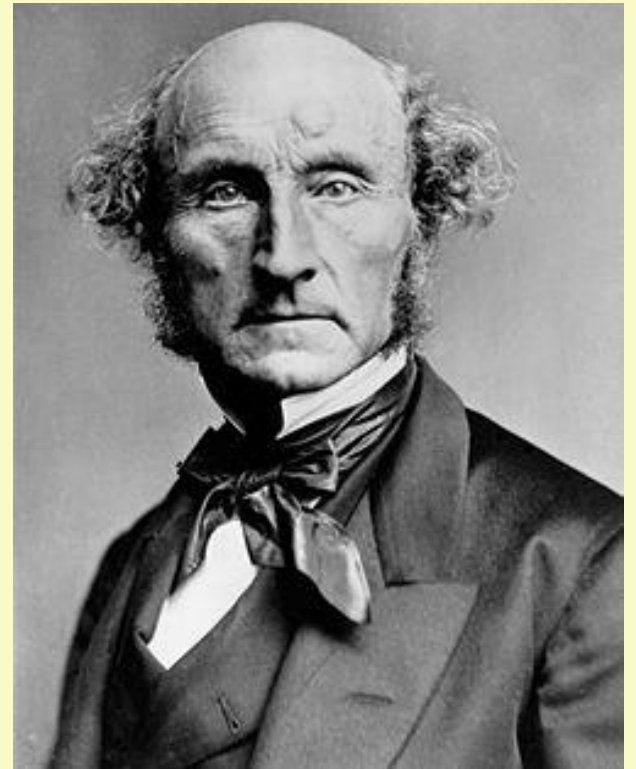
## Bentham: Principle of Utility



# Bentham: associated with act utilitarianism

- (main audience: legalists, legislators)
- But - **principle of utility** applies, or ought to be applied, to **individual actions**

# Mill



# Act U v Rule U

- **Problem 1** with U: **calculation**
- **Problem 2** with U: it justifies certain abhorrent **acts** (sadistic guards).
- **Solution:** apply Principle of Utility, not to **acts**, but to **rules**

Bentham

Mill

**Act U**

**Principle  
of  
Utility**

**Rule U**

applies PoU to  
individual  
acts

applies PoU to  
create  
rules/laws

**What laws would you create...**

# What laws would you create...

- New school rule: Pupils to spend 2 hours per day engaged in physical exercise.
- New school rule 2: All pupils to shave hair and keep it to no longer than 2mm in length.

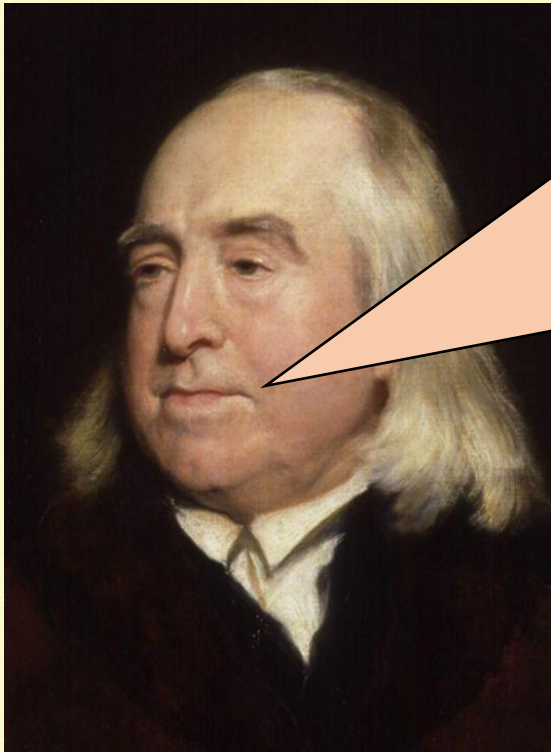
Looks at the  
consequences  
of...

## Act U

each individual act  
calculates utility  
each time the act  
is performed.

## Rule U

having everyone  
follow a rule  
judges the  
overall utility  
of accepting  
the rule.



I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government

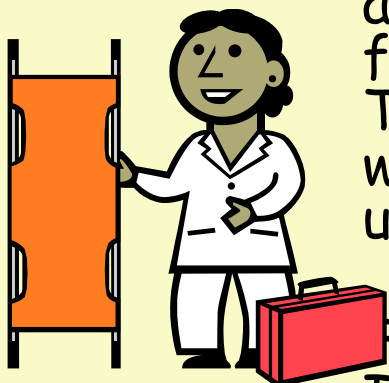
**legalist**



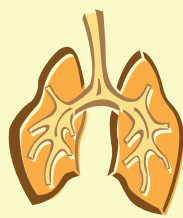
	Act U	Rule U
Who?	Individuals	Legislators
What?	Acts	Rules & laws
When	Each & every <b>act</b>	When creating & reviewing <b>laws</b>
How?	<b>Calculation</b> using felicific calculus	<b>Judgement</b> using experience
Why?	Takes into account situational factors	Practical; following laws

A much-loved leader has been rushed to the hospital, grievously wounded by an assassin's bullet. He needs a heart & lung transplant immediately to survive. No suitable donors are available, but there is a homeless person in the emergency room who is being kept alive on a respirator, who probably has only a few days to live, & who is a perfect donor. Without the transplant, the leader will die; the homeless person will die in a few days anyway. Security at the hospital is very well controlled. The transplant team could hasten the death of the homeless person & carry out the transplant without the public ever knowing that they killed the homeless person for his organs.

- For **rule utilitarians**, this is easy. No one could approve a general rule that lets hospitals kill patients for their organs when they are going to die anyway. The consequences of adopting such a general rule would be highly negative and would certainly undermine public trust in the medical establishment.



For **act utilitarians**, the situation is more complex. If secrecy were guaranteed, the overall consequences might be such that in this particular instance greater utility is produced by hastening the death of the homeless person and using his organs for the transplant.

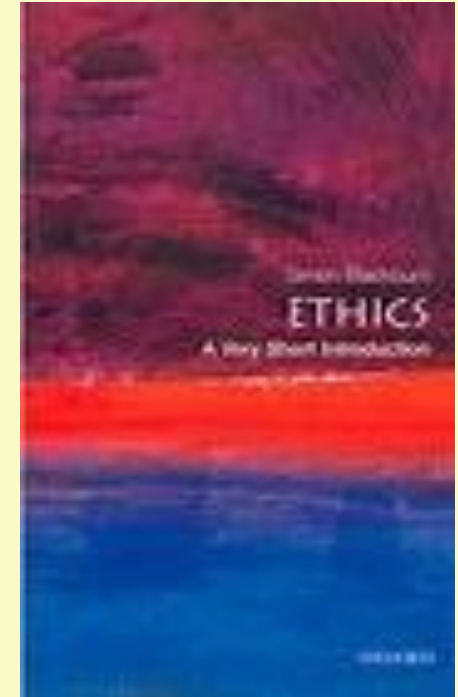
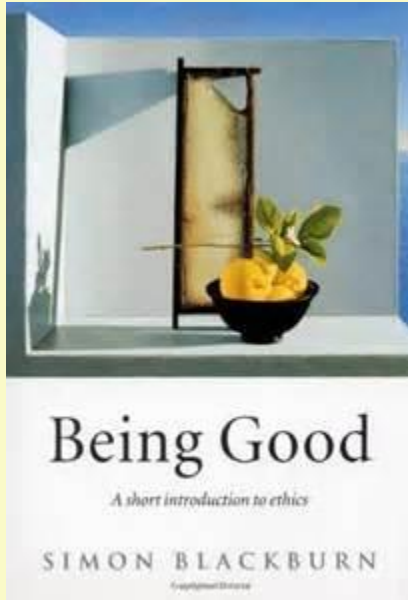


# Strong Rule Utilitarianism versus and Weak Rule Utilitarianism

The **strong** form of the theory maintains that rules established through the application of utilitarian principles should never be broken

The **weak** version tries to account for the possibility that those same utilitarian principles can take precedence in a particular situation over a general rule. However, the rule would still form part of the decision making process.

# Simon Blackburn

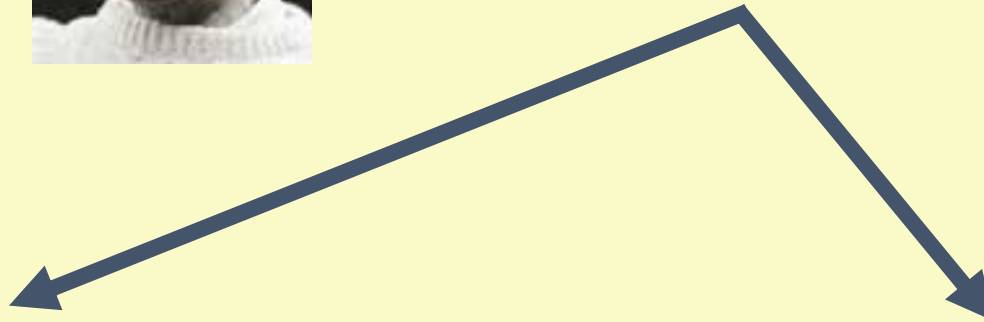


# Strength of Rule Utilitarianism

- Unlike deontology
- Rule U provides a rational way of creating rules
- ...and of reviewing rules
- ...and of resolving conflicts between rules: apply PoU
- ...and of acknowledging that 'extreme situations require extreme measures' (Hume, Barclay)



**Richard Hare**



**Two-tier  
utilitarianism**

**Preference  
utilitarianism**

# Two-tier utilitarianism

- Act utilitarianism - the **criterion** (judge) of an action (the why)
- Rule utilitarianism - principle of **deliberation** (the how)
- **Revert** to act utilitarianism if needed







SOMETIME  
IN THE 18TH  
CENTURY...



UTILITARIANISM

"THE RIGHT ACTION  
IS THE ONE THAT  
PRODUCES THE  
MOST OVERALL  
HAPPINESS."

First we have to define what Bentham and other utilitarian's consider happiness or pleasure.



1:06 / 4:12



[Utilitarianism in 4 Minutes - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL7Pt-NHraU)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL7Pt-NHraU>