

# Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W  
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Class #26 - Consequentialism

# Three Meta-Ethical Positions

Either there is:

- A. No morality (nihilism);
- B. Exactly one morality (realism); or
- C. More than one morality (relativism).

- Nihilism is tempting because it portrays us as ultimately free.
- Relativism is tempting because it seems to capture our desire to respect others.

# Two Types of Relativism

conventionalism and subjectivism

- Conventionalism: morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other group.
- Subjectivism: morality depends on the individual.

# Two Sorts of Subjectivism

- Hobbes
  - ▶ People call what they like 'good' and what they dislike 'bad'.
  - ▶ The social ramifications are devastating.
  - ▶ Life, in a state of nature is, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."
  - ▶ Thus, we enter into a social contract in which we give up all of our autonomy to a sovereign, or government.
- Existentialism
  - ▶ Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists claim that morality is created through action.
  - ▶ Each individual creates his or her own morality.
- One concern about the plausibility of either kind of subjectivism is that our moral beliefs tend to reflect those of others around us.
  - ▶ Only small, individual variations
  - ▶ Social conformity to central principles of morality should be no surprise.
  - ▶ We learn how to make our moral judgments from our communities.
  - ▶ Some philosophers take these facts to support cultural relativism, or conventionalism.

# Conventionalism

## cultural relativism

- On conventionalism, right and wrong are determined by a society, subculture, family, or other group.
- Herodotus and King Darius.
  - ▶ The Callatians ate their dead.
  - ▶ The Greeks cremated their dead.
  - ▶ Each thought the others' practice was immoral.

# Darius's Puzzle

- What should we think when we discover conflicting social norms, specifically ones which are perceived as moral norms?
- Naively, we can defend our own views.
- We might take them to transcend our culture.
- Universality of customs can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.
- But, we can find significant departures from modern ethical norms.
- Since the normal varies, some people think, the moral also varies.

# Are There Conflicting Moral Principles?

- Some norms are mere expressions of preference.
- Some people elevate such preferences to the level of morality.
  - ▶ There's no moral question about the preference of strawberry over vanilla ice cream.
  - ▶ Some people believe that there is a moral question about homosexuality.
  - ▶ There are moral questions about sexuality.
  - ▶ But the fact that some people believe that sexuality is a matter for ethics does not make sexual preference a moral issue.
- There are different practices in different societies.
- A person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral.
- But, none of that shows that morality itself is relative.
  - ▶ Sex on Tuesdays
  - ▶ Head-covering and worship

# Nihilism

Either there is:

- A. No morality;
- B. Exactly one morality; or
- C. More than one morality.

- The relativist believes in morality, determined either by one's self or one's culture.
- The nihilist says that there is no morality.
  - ▶ What we think of as morality is just an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.
- Nihilism is similar to subjectivism.
  - ▶ Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.
  - ▶ The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.
- The nihilist believes can never make moral errors, while the subjectivist believes that we can.



# Thrasymachus's Rant

The just is always a loser in comparison with the unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less. Secondly, in their dealings with the State: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is anything to be received the one gains nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses, and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends and acquaintances for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways.

But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking, as before, of injustice on a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable, that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little by little but wholesale; comprehending in one, things sacred as well as profane, private and public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he would be punished and incur great disgrace - they who do such wrong in particular cases are called robbers of temples, and man-stealers and burglars and swindlers and thieves. But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them, then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but by all who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they shrink from committing it. And thus, as I have shown, Socrates, injustice, when on a sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice; and, as I said at first, justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and interest.

# Socrates and Thrasymachus

- Rulers do not rule for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their subjects.
- The true ruler earns no personal benefit from ruling.
  - Rulers must be paid.



# Thrasymachus's Response

- You fancy that the shepherd or neatherd fattens of tends the sheep or oxen with a view to their own good and not to the good of himself or his master; and you further imagine that the rulers of states, if they are true rulers, never think of their subjects as sheep, and that they are not studying their own advantage day and night. Oh, no; and so entirely astray are you in your ideas about the just and unjust as not even to know that justice and the just are in reality another's good; that is to say, the interest of the ruler and stronger, and the loss of the subject and servant; and injustice the opposite; for the unjust is lord over the truly simple and just: he is the stronger, and his subjects do what is for his interest, and minister to his happiness, which is very far from being their own

# Nihilism Today

- Nihilism seems inconsistent with our uses of moral language.
- If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our use of these terms as motivations is puzzling.
- The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.
- Contrast ethics with food preferences.
  - There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.
  - I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.
- When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.
- It has a force for others.

# Relativism and Nihilism

- Both anti-absolutist positions entail that we can neither truly praise nor criticize other cultures.
- Words of praise (“That’s good”)
  - ▶ Nihilism: they are empty
  - ▶ Subjectivism: they refer only to my own preferences
  - ▶ Conventionalism: they refer to adherence to my cultural standards





## Rwanda 1995

- Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region. Following the militia's example, Hutus young and old rose to the task. Neighbors hacked neighbors to death in their homes, and colleagues hacked colleagues to death in their workplaces. Priests killed their parishioners, and elementary-school teachers killed their students. Many of the largest massacres occurred in churches and stadiums where Tutsis had sought refuge - often at the invitation of local authorities, who then oversaw their execution. In mid-April, at least five thousand Tutsis were packed in the Gatwaro Stadium, in the western city of Kibuye; as the massacre there began, gunmen in the bleachers shot zigzag waves of bullets and tossed grenades to make the victims stampede back and forth before militiamen waded in to finish the job with machetes.
- Throughout Rwanda, mass rape and looting accompanied the slaughter. Militia bands, fortified with potent banana beer and assorted drugs, were bused from massacre to massacre. Hutu prisoners were organized in work details to clear cadavers. Radio announcers reminded listeners to take special care to disembowel pregnant victims. As an added incentive to the killers, Tutsis' belongings were parceled out in advance - the radio, the couch, the goat, the opportunity to rape a young girl. A councilwoman in one Kigali neighborhood was reported to have offered fifty Rwandese francs apiece (about 30 cents at the time) for severed heads, a practice known as "selling cabbages". (*The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995)

# Realism and Reasons

- Neither nihilism nor relativism allows (most of) us to take a moral stance against such atrocities.
- Moral realism allows us to consider objective reasons for morality.
- Appeals to reason-giving seem essential to the establishment of a moral position.
- We can talk about the reasons that an act is right or wrong.
- The reasons can be used as the basis for a universal morality.
- Objectivity means that there are morally correct answers to ethical questions.
- It does not mean that everything that one might think is a moral question is in fact a moral question.
- Realism should also not entail dogmatism.
- There are hard moral questions.



# Morality and Religion

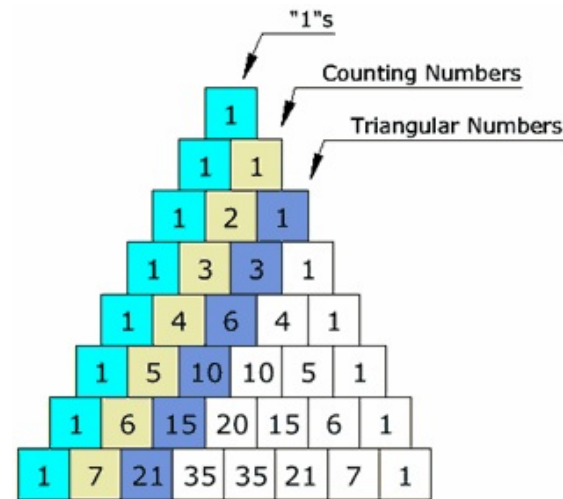
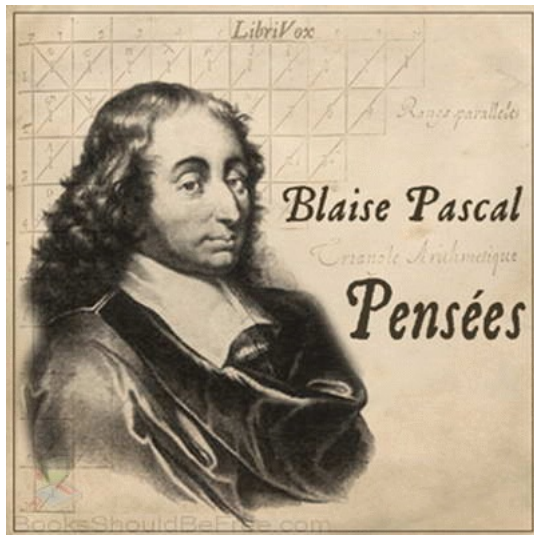
Can we justify objective morality without appeal to religion?

- Two kinds of objective moralists
  - The religious moralist
  - The secular moralist
- Some people believe that we must appeal to God to support moral beliefs, to motivate personal sacrifice.
  - By punishing wrongdoers and rewarding those who do good, the idea of God creates moral motivation.
  - Without God, some people argue, life has no meaning and there is no reason to be good.
- The nihilist and the religious moralist worry that secular morality is incoherent.
  - If so, we have to choose between nihilism and religious morality.



# Pascal's Wager

- Some people hesitate to embrace religious morality in the absence of what they deem to be compelling proof of the existence of God.
- The seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal argued that we need not have decisive proof of God's existence in order to adopt a religious morality.
- We should act as if we believe in God, whether or not we do.
- A mathematical argument





# Expected Value

- The expected value of a bet
  - ▶  $EV = (\text{Payoff} \times \text{Odds of winning}) - (\text{Cost of the Bet} \times \text{Odds of losing})$
- Imagine that you bet six dollars, with even odds, that you will roll a one or a two on one roll of a fair die.
  - ▶ If you roll a one or a two, you get six dollars.
  - ▶ If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose six dollars.
  - ▶ Your odds of winning are  $1/3$ ; your odds of losing are  $2/3$ .
  - ▶ So, your expected value is  $(6 \times 1/3) - (6 \times 2/3) = -\$2$ .
  - ▶ This means that on average, you will lose \$2 for each time you make this bet.
  - ▶ If you play this bet a thousand times, you are likely to lose about two thousand dollars.
- Imagine, instead, that you get 2 to 1 odds.
  - ▶ If you roll a one or a two, you get twelve dollars.
  - ▶ If you roll a three, four, five, or six, you lose only six dollars.
  - ▶ Now your expected value would be  $(12 \times 1/3) - (6 \times 2/3) = \$0$ .
  - ▶ The bet is even and you can expect to break even, within predictable ranges of deviation, over any number of chances.

# Four Possibilities

- In Pascal's wager, we are wondering whether or not to act as if God exists.
  - We do not know whether God exists or not.
  - We can act as if God exists, or we can act as if God does not exist.
- Four possibilities

|                              | God exists   | God does not exist      |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Act as if God exists         | Finite Sacrifice +<br>Infinite reward =<br><b>Infinite reward</b>      | <b>Finite sacrifice</b> |
| Act as if God does not exist | Finite Reward +<br>Infinite Punishment =<br><b>Infinite Punishment</b> | <b>Finite reward</b>    |

# Expected Value and God's Existence

- The expected outcome of acting as if God exists:
  - ▶  $EV = (\text{Payoff} \times \text{Odds of winning}) - (\text{Cost of the Bet} \times \text{Odds of losing})$
  - ▶  $EV = P(G) \times \text{infinity} - P(N) \times \text{some finite value}$
  - ▶ The expected value of acting as if God exists will be infinitely large on any finite value of  $P(G)$ .
  - ▶ An infinite number minus a finite number is an infinite number.
  - ▶ So, the expected value of acting as if one believes in God is infinitely positive.
- The expected value of acting as if God does not exist is infinitely negative.
  - ▶  $EV = P(N) \times \text{some finite value} - P(G) \times \text{infinity}$
  - ▶ The expected result of acting as if God does not exist is infinite punishment.
- So, Pascal argues, purely on a rational basis, in the absence of knowing whether God does or does not exist, we should act as if she does.
- Leaves open the debate between natural law and divine command theory

# The Problem of Egoism

- It seems that the religious moralist, or one who acts ethically for reasons of Pascal's wager, has an easier solution to the problem of egoism than the secular moralist.
- But the fear of God does not seem to work as a moral motivation.
  - Even religious people act immorally.
- More importantly, respecting persons out of fear of God is itself mere egoism, and not morality.
- Further, there are secular answers to the problem of egoism.
- We can find moral motivation in the abilities of humans to suffer and feel happiness, and in our desire to live in a world in which people are moral.
- Socrates argues that we should be moral because it is in our interests.
  - Balance in our souls
  - Against the ring of Gyges
- We proceed to look at two action-guiding moral theories.

# **Moral Theory #1: Consequentialism/ Utilitarianism**

John

# The Three Clauses of Utilitarianism

- “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 141a).
- We can analyze the utilitarian theory into three clauses:
  - U1: *Consequentialism* Acts are judged by their consequences.
  - U2: *Hedonism* Consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.
  - U3: *Egalitarianism* Each person counts as one.



# Consequentialism

- Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition about the moral relevance of consequences.
- By focusing on consequences rather than categorical rules, utilitarianism can be flexible.
- Moral theories which include specific rules like “Don’t lie,”, and “Don’t kill,” or any other absolute proscription may be refuted by simple counterexamples.
  - Danish fishing boats
  - “You must fulfill your promises.”
  - There are times when any such specific prohibition should be violated.

# Consequences and Exceptions

- Utilitarianism is thus a more honest theory than one which provides universal moral rules.
- It builds in the exceptions we ordinarily deem acceptable or even required.
- Utilitarianism tells us how to determine if an act would be an exception to any general rule or guideline.
- Universal prescriptions do not tell us their limits.
- Instead of a lot of detailed rules and confusion about when they apply, utilitarianism gives you one flexible, general always-applicable guideline.

# Hedonism

- Classical utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, or pleasure, is the goal of life.  
“The ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison” (Mill 144a).
- Bentham’s seven ways to measure happiness.
  - B1. Intensity
  - B2. Duration
  - B3. Certainty
  - B4. Propinquity (proximity) or remoteness
  - B5. Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings)
  - B6. Purity (the chance an experience has of not being followed by opposite sensations)
  - B7. Extent
- B1 - B4 measure the pain itself.
- B5 and B6 measure the tendency of an action related to other actions.
- B7 measures the way in which an act affects other people.
- To calculate the total effects of an act, you just add up all the effects on each individual.

# Utils

- To add effects, we can imagine some basic units of happiness which have been called utils.
- We must be careful to distinguish utils from money and other fungible goods.
- Money abides by a law of diminishing returns
  - More money is always more money.
  - More money does not always lead to more happiness.
  - The first cold drink on a hot day is great but the twelfth is not so good.
- Utils do not suffer diminishing returns.
- There may be problems quantifying happiness.
  - interpersonal comparisons of happiness
- Economists make interpersonal comparisons all the time.
  - Though economists often work with preferences, rather than happiness, they do so with the implicit assumption that we are happy when our preferences are fulfilled.

# Mill on Hedonism

- “If human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct...” (Mill 145b).
- Every one wants to be happy, and if we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.



# Egalitarianism

- The egalitarian clause of utilitarianism, U3, is not very controversial.
- It is true that we value some people more than others: the President of the United States, Alex Rodriguez, Lady Gaga.
- The utilitarian can account for valuing some people over others without abandoning egalitarianism.
- There is a good question about how widely to extend the egalitarianism.
  - Should replicants be counted?
  - Aliens?
  - Dolphins or chimps?
- The answers to the questions we studied earlier in the course about personal identity and consciousness are essential to determining the range of our moral theory.

# Adjusting Classical Utilitarianism

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| U1: <i>Consequentialism</i> | Acts are judged by their consequences.                                  |
| U2: <i>Hedonism</i>         | Consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring. |
| U3: <i>Egalitarianism</i>   | Each person counts as one.  |

- Many abandon U2, exchanging it for other ways to evaluate consequences.
- Others abandon U3, though giving up egalitarianism is not a standard move.
- Any version of utilitarianism will be consequentialist.

# Utilitarianism and Egoism

- It is tempting to misinterpret utilitarianism as egoism, so it will be worthwhile to distinguish the two theories.
- Utilitarianism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
- Ethical egoism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for me.
  - ▶ Consider an ethical egoist named Al.
  - ▶ Al believes that every one else should act to serve Al.
  - ▶ The utilitarian, in contrast, says that we should all act for the benefit of everyone.
- Egoism and Prudence
  - ▶ Distinguish ethical egoism from the more plausible claim that every one should act to serve him or her self.
  - ▶ The latter claim is just self-interest, or prudence, and is really a form of subjectivism.
  - ▶ The egoist says that everyone should serve me.
  - ▶ The person who urges selfishness or prudence for everyone says that we should all act to serve ourselves.



# Psychological Egoism

- One might be inclined to follow only one's self-interest because of psychological egoism.
  - No one ever does anything that he or she does not want to do.
- Faced with someone who sacrifices for others, a Mother Teresa, say, the psychological egoist says that sacrifice must be rewarding to that person.
- Psychological egoism may well be right.
- But it is irrelevant to ethics.
- It leaves us with no way to distinguish among good, not so good, and truly bad people or actions.
- It is philosophically vacuous, even if psychologically compelling.
- Utilitarianism is thus not the claim that we should act only in our own interests, nor that everyone should act in one's own interest.
- It is the claim that we should all act in ways that best further every one's interests.

# Utilitarianism in Practice I

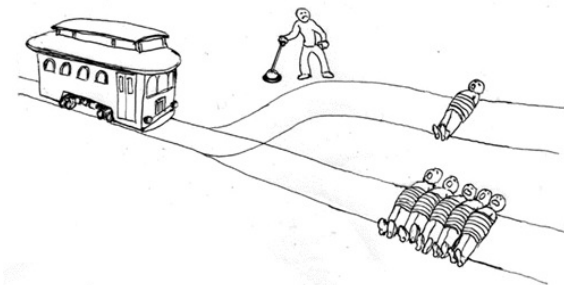
- Imagine a world in which there are two people, John and Harriet, and each has ten units of happiness.
- Harriet wonders whether she should gather some flowers.
  - Having some flowers would increase her happiness by, say, two units.
  - The new totals would be: John = 10, Harriet = 12.
  - Since the new total would be 22, which is greater than 20, she should gather the flowers.
- We have a moral duty to increase our own happiness.

# Utilitarianism in Practice II

- Another day, John = 10, Harriet = 10
- John wonders if he should gather flowers for Harriet.
  - ▶ John does not like flowers, but Harriet does.
  - ▶ John would prefer to go swimming.
  - ▶ The new values would be John = 9, Harriet = 12.
  - ▶ The total would increase from 20 to 21.
  - ▶ So John should forego swimming to get the flowers for Harriet.
- We have a moral duty to sacrifice ourselves for others, when the rewards are greater than the sacrifice after every one's happiness is measured.

# Utilitarianism in Practice III

- Utilitarianism encourages working hard to get a raise, to provide better for one's family.
- We should go out of our way for a stranger in dire need.
- Sacrifice has its limits, though.
- We should not give more than is gained.
- If John really hates collecting flowers and Harriet only like flowers a little bit, then there is no moral requirement for John to go pick them.
- The requirement of self-sacrifice also prevents utilitarianism from supporting immediate pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.
- We are often required to sacrifice in the short term in the hopes of long term gains, for oneself.
- For example, many of us calculate that we should work hard to get a college degree.
- The question to ask is whether the happiness I will gain later outweighs the happiness I sacrifice now.
- The trolley problem
- The ends justify the means; what else could?



# Too Much Sacrifice?

- The utilitarian's demands for sacrifice may be extreme.
- The utilitarian must put her own interests aside, and treat herself as one individual affected by her actions.
- It looks like I should give away most of my belongings in order to try to combat humanity's worst conditions: famine and disease and war.
- This impartiality may be impractical.
- Mill agrees that it is difficult, but does not see this difficulty as a problem for the theory.
  - ▶ “Those among [the objectors to utilitarianism] who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character, sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. 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...”(Mill 144a-b).

# Average Happiness or Total Happiness?

- When considering large-scale applications of utilitarianism, interesting questions arise about whether to consider average happiness or total happiness.
- To increase average happiness in a community, we can (quietly) kill all of those whose happiness is below average.
- To increase the total, we can require a population explosion.
- Total utilitarianism seems preferable, since the population explosion will have long-term ill-effects.
- But, I'll put these questions aside, here.

# Utilitarianism and Justice

- “A magistrate or judge is faced with a very real threat from a large and uncontrollable mob of rioters demanding a culprit for a crime. Unless the criminal is produced, promptly tried, and executed, they will take their own bloody revenge on a much smaller and quite vulnerable section of the community (a kind of frenzied pogrom). The judge knows that the real culprit is unknown and that the authorities do not even have a good clue as to who he may be. But he also knows that there is within easy reach a disreputable, thoroughly disliked, and useless man, who, though innocent, could easily be framed so that the mob would be quite convinced that he was guilty and would be pacified if he were promptly executed. Recognizing that he can prevent the occurrence of extensive carnage only by framing some innocent person, the magistrate has him framed, goes through the mockery of a trial, and has him executed” (Kai Neilson).
- Two other cases of utilitarian problems with justice
  - ▶ a brilliant scientist who murders his wife while developing a cure for cancer
  - ▶ the extreme punishment of parking offenders

# Justice and Precedence

- The utilitarian account of justice depends on emphasizing the precedent effect.
- If you break a promise, you encourage others to break their promises.
- Thus, the consequentialist urges us to keep our promises, not because there is something special about making a promise, but because the consequences of breaking that promise are generally worse, in the long run, than the consequences of keeping it.
- The precedent of judicial miscreance, in Nielson's case, may have such an overwhelming negative effect that it would not be worth sacrificing the innocent person.
- We could probably find other good scientists to take up the murderer's work or arrange a situation in which he could continue his work while incarcerated.
- The case of the parking offenders is particularly implausible, on reflection.
- Who is really served by such a well-observed law?
- Do we really think that Singapore's proscriptions against chewing gum are socially useful?





# Utilitarianism and Rights

- The beefy spelunker
  - Again, precedents
  - The utilitarian can argue that she is not ignoring the rights or interests of the fat man, or acting callously.
  - Utilitarians merely point out that we should also weigh the rights and interests of those who will die unless we kill him.
- The peeping tom, who secretly adds his own happiness to the world's total.
- It looks like the utilitarian has to defend the peeper despite the violation of rights.
- Justice and rights and utilitarianism are sometimes incompatible.
- Utilitarianism requires we look forward, justice that we look backward.
- In these cases, either we give up our notions of justice or we give up utilitarianism.
- The borderline cases are difficult, and we should not reject a moral theory on the basis of weird cases.
- The objections concerning justice and rights are reasonable enough that we might not merely dismiss them.



# Utilitarianism Summary

- Astronauts on a moonwalk
  - The utilitarian defends promise-keeping on the basis of precedents and expectations.
  - You should keep your promises because of the expectations of those to whom you promise, and the precedent set for others who see you break your promises.
  - No one else knows about the astronaut's promise, so breaking it will not create any ill precedents.
  - Any guilt is residual evidence of non-utilitarian presuppositions.
- There seems to be something wrong with the assumption that no promise was ever made, even if, in the end, you do break the promise.
- We have been trying to show that utilitarianism fails to account for important intuitions: justice, desert, promise-keeping.
  - These problems are all backwards-looking.
  - When presented with such cases, either we give up the theory or the intuitions.
  - But it is not always clear which to cede.
- Another way to criticize a theory is to present a preferable alternative.
  - In this vein, we shall examine Kant's ethics.