

Moral Theory

What makes things right or wrong?

Consider:

Moral Disagreement

- We have disagreements about “right” and “wrong,” about how people “ought” or “ought not” act.
- When we do, we (sometimes!) *reason* with one another trying to settle these disagreements.
- **Moral Theory** studies/evaluates the kinds of *reasons* we offer.

Example:

- Is lying wrong?
 - *Yes: because blah-blah-blah*
 - *No: because blah-blah-blah*
- We appeal to reasons, or general principles (“*blah-blah-blah*”) to defend/explain our opinions.
- A “*moral theory*” is an explanation of what these general principles are or ought to be.

Utilitarianism



John Stuart Mill

- ◆ 19th c. moral/political philosopher; social activist; early feminist
- ◆ Proponent of “Utilitarianism,” first developed by Jeremy Bentham
- ◆ Author of *On Liberty*, where he defended individual rights such as free speech

The Question:

Mill asks:
What is the
Summum bonum?

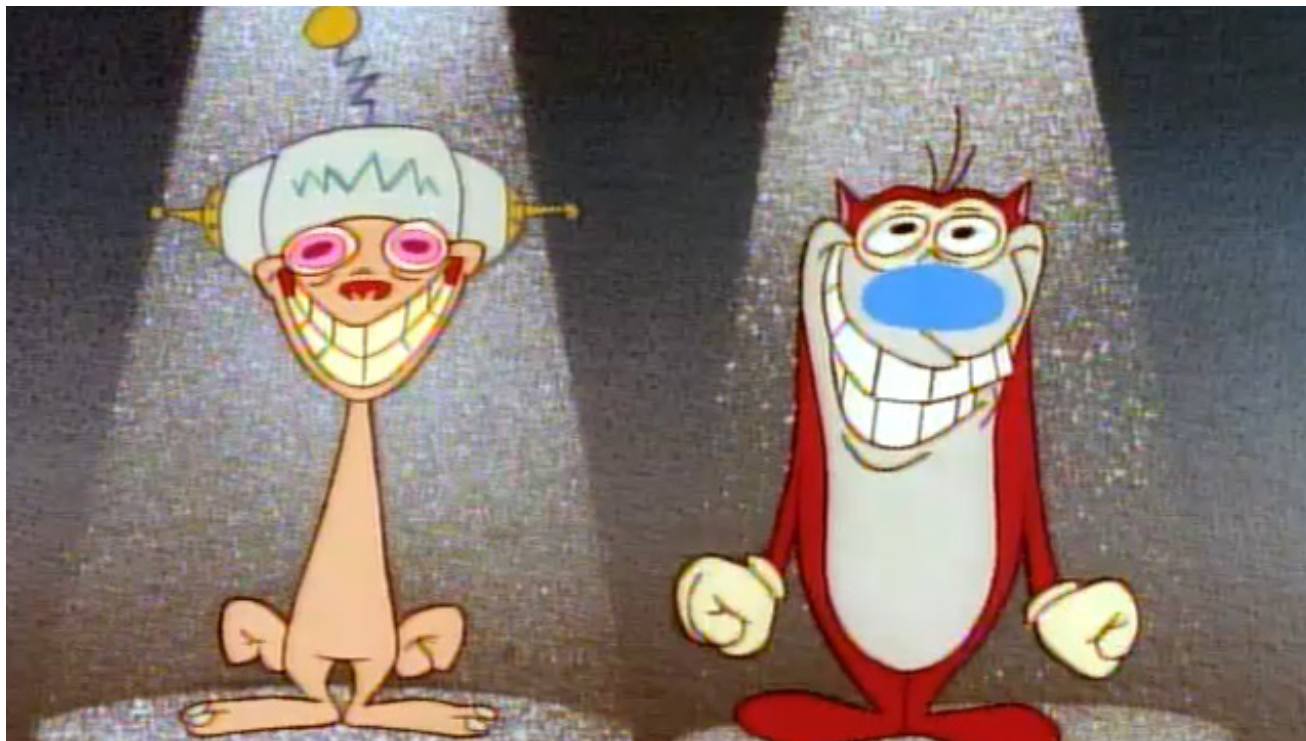
- That is:

– *What is the greatest good?*

– For Mill, the answer to this question provides the fundamental principle of morality.

The Answer:

Mill's Answer: *Happiness*



Which leads him to ---

UTILITARIANISM

--a.k.a.--

The Greatest Happiness Principle

“...actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain....”

Distinctions:

Two Kinds of Moral Theories:

Consequentialist

- The moral value of an act is determined by the *consequences* of performing that act.
 - I.e., something *external* to the act—what *happens* as a result of doing it.
 - **Mill's** utilitarianism is a version of consequentialism.

Non-consequentialist

- The consequences of performing an act do not by themselves *determine* its moral value.
 - The moral value of an act arises from something *internal* to the act itself—
 - **Kant**: The value of an act is determined by one's *reasons* for doing it.
 - **Rawls' Theory of Justice** is “Kantian” in spirit.

Consequentialism

- An act is:
 - morally *right* if it has good consequences;
 - morally *wrong* if it has bad consequences.
 - (*Note*: so for consequentialism, moral “rightness” vs. “wrongness” is *defined* in terms of moral “goodness” vs. “badness.” It is just the reverse for non-consequentialism.)
- Question: OK, but what makes certain consequences good or bad?

Instrumental versus Intrinsic “Goodness” (or Value)

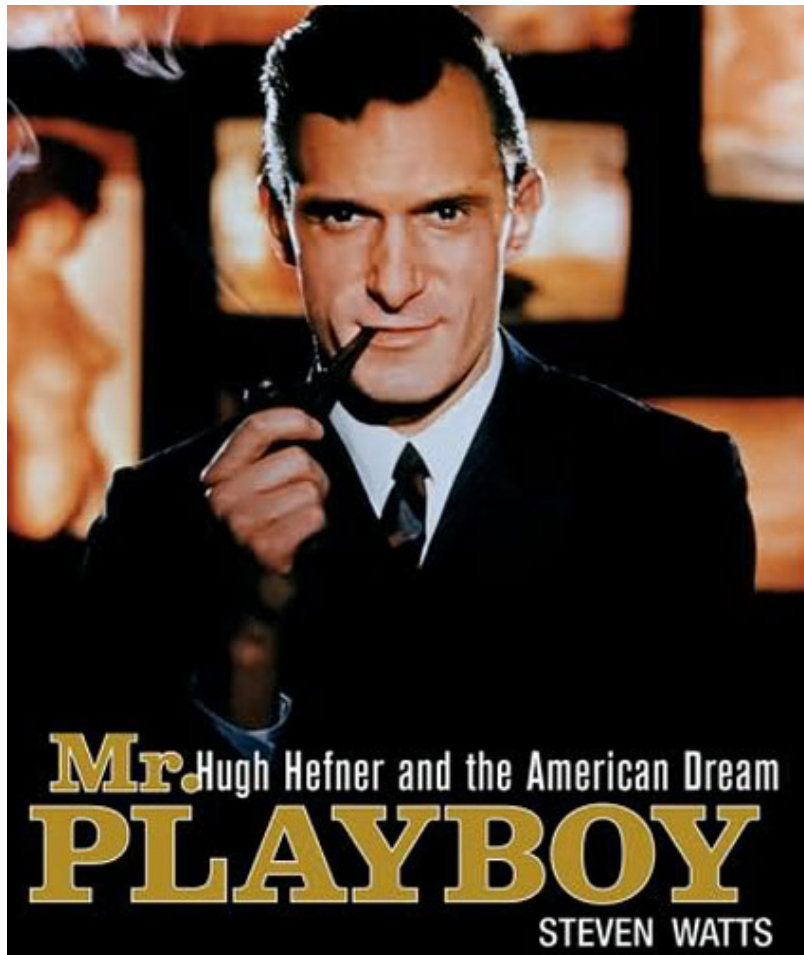
Instrumental Value:

- The value something has if it is useful (i.e., instrumental) in obtaining something else of value.
- The value of *tools*. Tools have value *because* they allow you to do something you (already) value.
 - Dependent upon something *else* having value.

Intrinsic Value:

- The value something in and of itself, apart from its role in obtaining anything else.
- What has *fundamental* value or goodness.
- Mill is concerned with the question of what has intrinsic value.

Hedonism:



- ◆ A theory about what has intrinsic value
- ◆ **The only thing that is intrinsically good, that is valued in and of itself, is *happiness*. This is Mill's view.**
- ◆ Mill: “*by happiness is intended pleasure or the absence of pain.*”

Mill's Argument for Hedonism

- Strictly speaking, Mill admits, this cannot be *proven*.
 - “*What proof is possible that pleasure is good?*”
- According to Bentham (an earlier utilitarian), happiness/pleasure is the only thing intrinsically valued by everyone.
 - People may *define* “happiness” differently, but, says Bentham, it is the only thing that everyone values in and of itself.

Utilitarianism = *Consequentialism + Hedonism*

- Consequentialism:
 - Acts are morally right only to the extent that they produce good *consequences*; plus
- Hedonism:
 - Those consequences are *good* only to the extent that they create happiness.
 - Utilitarianism adopts *hedonism* as a value theory.

If it feels good, do it?

Are all pleasures equal?

- Some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable than others, says Mill.
 - (*Different strokes for different folks!*)
 - Mill says that “intellectual pleasures” are more desirable than “physical pleasures.”
 - They are preferred by those who know both.
 - For Mill, “pleasure” isn’t limited to “pleasures of the flesh.” Some pleasures, Mill thinks, are *better* than others.

Mill on Intellectual Pleasures

- “[T]hose who are equally acquainted with ... both ... [prefer an] existence which employs their higher faculties. Few ... would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, ...; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, ... even [if] ... the fool ... is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. **It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.** And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.” [J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*]

Whose Happiness Counts?

- For utilitarians, everyone's happiness counts equally
 - What matters is not *whose* happiness is involved, but *how much* overall happiness.
- **Utilitarianism:**
 - *An act is morally right to the extent that it maximizes overall happiness (i.e., pleasure or the absence of pain), and wrong to the extent it does not.*

Application:

What is the morally right thing to do?

- 1) Determine the knowable consequences for all options.
- 2) Estimate how each option will affect people's happiness.
- 3) Calculate the overall gain or loss of happiness for each option.
- 4) Perform that act which maximizes overall happiness.

Social Policy

- Utilitarian reasoning is often used in setting social policies.
- It advocates employing a kind of “cost-benefit” analysis.
 - So, utilitarian reasoning is often employed in economics.
 - There are sophisticated mathematical models for calculating “expected utility.”

Problems:

Do Ends Justify Means?

- Since utilitarianism is concerned with the *consequences* of acts, then your “intentions” aren’t morally relevant.
- If hurting some people brings about greatest overall happiness, then it is wrong not to do so. (If you *enjoy* this, that’s even better!)
 - If the “ends” bring more happiness than the unhappiness caused by the “means,” then the “ends” *do* justify the “means.”

Thought Experiment

- Suppose I am healthy, and live in a community of 9 people, where:
 - 2 people need cornea transplants;
 - 2 people need lung transplants;
 - 2 people need new kidneys;
 - 1 person needs a new heart, and another needs a new liver.
- Wouldn't we maximize happiness by sacrificing my healthy body parts to help these 8 other people?

Fairness, Justice, and Rights

- What if the “greatest good” for the *majority* requires substantial unjust “costs” for a *minority*?
- What if what we need to do to maximize happiness is *unfair*?
 - If maximizing overall happiness is the “ultimate” moral principle, then following it could *never* be “morally wrong” (in fact, *not* following it would *always* be morally wrong).
 - Couldn’t we devise a system of slavery that benefitted more than it harmed? If so, would it still be morally wrong?
- Utilitarianism has no way to account for “fairness” or “individual rights” if they don’t maximize overall happiness.

Mill: *On Liberty*

- In *On Liberty*, Mill defended individual liberties (like free speech) against the so-called “*tyranny of the majority*.”
- But he did so on *utilitarian* grounds.
 - He argued that recognizing individual rights would, in the end, bring about more overall happiness.
 - We’re better off allowing people to say things we don’t like, for example, because this helps us learn how their views are harmful.
 - This implies, for example, that slavery is wrong *only because* it doesn’t maximize happiness.