

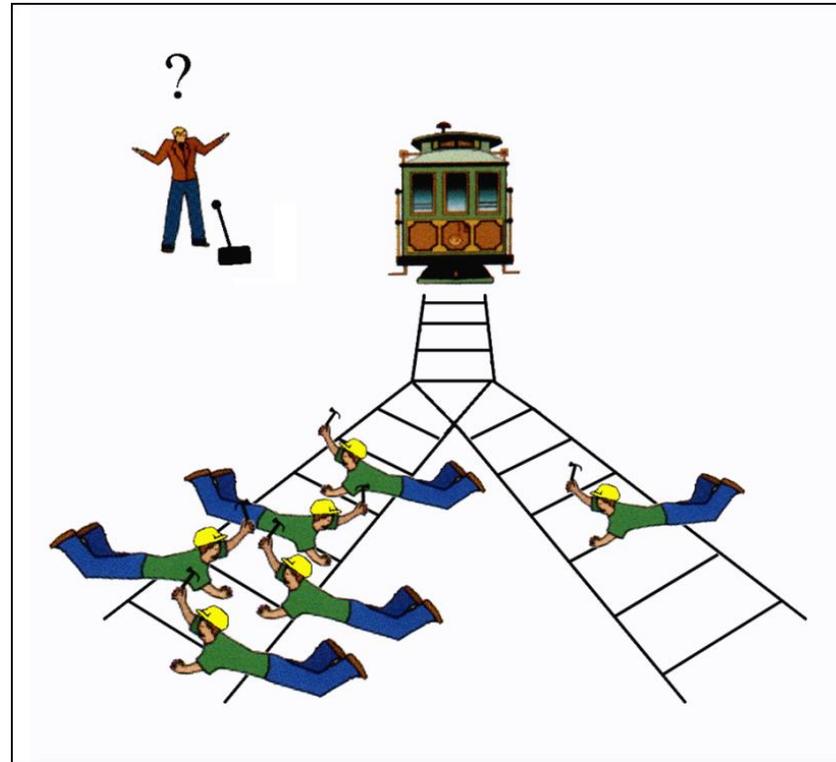
# Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham

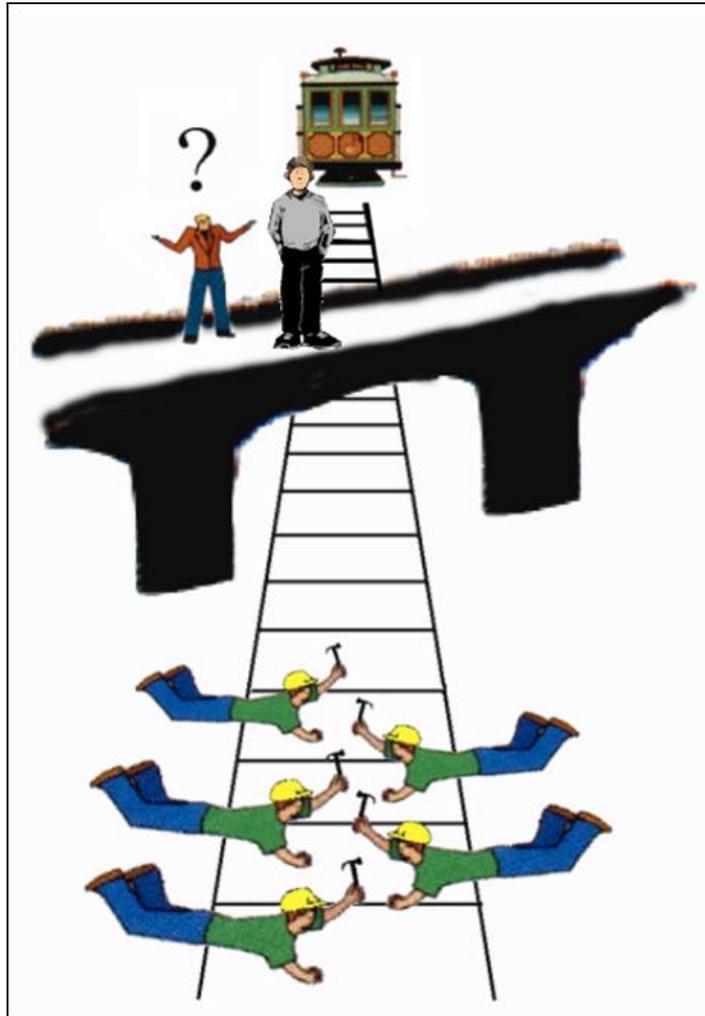
# Review and Aims for This Week

- **Religion and Morality:** what is right is what the Gods love or command
- **Cultural relativism:** an action is right for a culture C iff it is approved by people of culture C
  - **Objection:** on this view, mass murder when approved by culture is morally right, but this cannot be (mass murder is wrong *no matter what the members of the culture believe*); so, the definition need to be revised.
- **Objectivist Theories**
  - i) what is right/wrong is so no matter what people believe it is
  - ii) there are moral facts like scientific facts
  - iii) what we think is morally right/wrong can be incorrect if it doesn't match moral facts
- **Aim for this week:** examine objectivist moral theories: utilitarianism (today)

# The Trolley Problem



Source: Nichols, S.



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# Analysis of Trolley Problem

- Scenario A: Most people think that one should pull the lever in the first scenario.
  - Reason: the consequences of pulling the lever are better: 5 people live, one dies vs. 5 die and one lives.
- Scenario B: Most people think that one shouldn't push the large man over the bridge, even though 5 people will die.
  - Reason for B: there is something wrong in taking one's life in your hands; it is always wrong to kill someone no matter what the circumstances are
- Questions: Since the two scenarios are identical in terms of the consequences, why is now wrong to push the man over the bridge? What of the principle of maximizing as many lives as possible.
- How can that be? What reason can we give for the second scenario? In class, a few reasons were offered including we are not permitted to control someone else without their permission, the large man should be able to decide on his own whether to jump or not and we just don't have a "right" to decide for him.
- But, now the reason given for the first scenario is not consistent with the reason given for the second – in fact, the two are inconsistent. The reason given for the first scenario had to do with the consequences of actions (e.g. pulling the lever), but the second reason has something to do with the nature of moral actions independently of what the consequences are.
- Note: that there was a minority of individuals who said that the lever should not be pulled in the first scenario – and they also thought that the large man should not be pushed. This group was consistent – and they had the same objection to both scenarios – it is not for us to decide who to save – the five or the one

# Contemporary Moral Philosophy

- **Consequentialism:** morality is determined on the basis of the consequences of actions; the better the consequences, the more moral the action
- **Deontology:** morality has to do with the nature of the act itself independently of the consequences of that act

# Utilitarianism

- Founders of Utilitarianism
- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)
- John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)



# Morally Relevant Features

- Pain and pleasure: pain is bad, pleasure is good
- Everyone's happiness matters equally
- Improving the world with each act taken
- Utilitarianism is a consequentialist moral theory
- 'Utility' does not mean doing whatever is one's own interest

# Definition of Utilitarianism

- **Happiness** = the quantity of pleasure and the absence of pain
- An action  $x$  is **right**  $=_{df}$   $x$  brings about the most happiness for everyone affected compared to other alternatives
- An action  $x$  is **wrong**  $=_{df}$   $x$  brings about the least happiness for everyone affected compared to other alternatives

# Calculating Happiness

- Happiness = the quantity of pleasure and absence of pain
- Calculate to determine what you should do
  - add up the pleasure of all those involved
  - subtract the pain of all those involved
  - compare this with all other alternative action
- Factors by which to measure pleasure
  - Intensity, Duration, Tendency to promote further pleasure, And many others

# Murder

- The reason why murder is wrong is not that it is commandment by God, it is because the pleasure that the victim would have experienced over the course of their life is lost when the victim is murdered
- Calculate: kill an innocent or not
  - Killing causes loss of pleasure the victim would have had during his life
  - Killing causes pain to friends and family members of victim
  - Not killing allow for pleasure of person; does not cause pain
  - Result: not killing creates much more happiness for all involved
  - So, it is morally right not to kill

# Adultery

- Should one engage in infidelity while married?
- Calculation: Cheat
- Calculation: Don't Cheat
- Suppose someone cheats on their spouse:
  - They will derive some pleasure from this, and if the spouse does not find out, then there is no pain involved
  - So, is this, on utilitarian grounds, the morally right thing to do?
- Answer: It's more complicated.
  - If you do cheat, are you yourself becoming less and less interested in maintaining the marriage. You may be getting a little pleasure by cheating, but losing interest in a marriage, which many want to have in the long run, is of greater importance.
  - Also, if most marriages involved adultery, then the institution itself would be in jeopardy and consequently, we lose the benefits of marriage i.e. secure long-term companionship, means for raising children, etc.
- When we consider all of these factors, it seems adultery is morally wrong

# Comparison to Religious Ethics

- Murder is not wrong because God commands it
- To figure out what to do, we do not have to bother with Biblical interpretation i.e. without deciphering what God's commandments are. One has to look at the impact of our action on humans i.e. on pleasure and pain
- It becomes easier to determine ethical truths compared to religious ethics
- For example, it is difficult to say what God commands for contemporary moral issues such as stem cell research, other issues of genetic engineering

# Objectivism

- Utilitarianism is a philosophy

# Mill

- Mill: “the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested benevolent spectator.”  
(100)
- Bentham and Mill are both utilitarians
- Mill thinks there are different qualities of pleasure, whereas Bentham does not



# Mill's Refinement

- Pleasures differ in quantity **AND** quality
- “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”
- Quantity of pleasure is how much pleasure is had
- Quality of pleasure hierarchy
  - Sensual Pleasure
  - Social Pleasures
  - Intellectual Pleasures

# Which Pleasures are Higher

- What makes intellectual pleasures higher than social, and social pleasures higher than sensual pleasures?
- Mill's answer: it is what the competent judge prefers
  - Who is a competent judge?
  - Those who experience all pleasures i.e. intellectual, social, sensual
- Mill think if you experience sufficiently sensual, social and intellectual pleasures, then you will always prefer them in that order
  - “And if the fool or the pig think otherwise, that is because they know only their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”

# Bentham vs. Mill

- But Bentham thinks you are the most competent judge of quality for you:
- Is it better for you to spend your weekends at the library (in pursuit of intellectual pleasures) or drinking (in pursuit of sensual pleasures)?
- Bentham: depends on the person (whatever is more pleasant for them)
- For Homer Simpson, drinking is probably much more pleasant than reading Descartes
- Mill: does not depend on the person – the life pursuing intellectual pleasures is just better, just as a life with good friends is better than the life of the bottle without good friends.

# Objection to Utilitarianism

- Objection against Bentham and Mill
  - it is difficult to know what the long term consequences are going to be, and so it is difficult to make a decision on utilitarian grounds. Utilitarianism does not help guide our lives.
- Reply (Bentham/Mill):
  - Evidence to make decisions including evidence and personal experiences from our own life, and evidence from the past.
  - Analogous historical cases count as evidence. Example: Should we engage in a war in Iraq? Look at past evidence – track record of US military engagements, track record of other countries involved in military action in Iraq, history of religious strife, etc.
- We don't need absolute certainty, but evidence that suggests at least what is probably going to happen. Bentham and Mill think past evidence is good enough to make a reasonable decision