

Science Fiction and Ethics

Utilitarianism

The readings for this unit include two short selections by Jeremy Bentham and a short selection by John Stuart Mill.

1. “The Principle of Utility” (from the Introduction of *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789)

2. “Push-Pin and Poetry” (a selection from “The Rationale of Reward,” 1825)

Source: Rauhut, Nils Ch. *Readings on the Ultimate Questions*. Penguin Academics, 2007.

This slide presentation is about
“consequentialism.” Utilitarianism is a type
of consequentialism.

Algorithm: A finite set of unambiguous instructions that, given some set of initial conditions, can be performed in a prescribed sequence to achieve a certain goal and that has a recognizable set of end conditions. (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Note that the words “computer” and “software” are not mentioned in the definition.

This unit presents utilitarianism—an ethical approach that relies mathematics—as a form of “algorithmic thinking.” That is, it requires that human beings use algorithms to determine whether an action is ethically justifiable.

From Geirsson and Holmgren:

“In standard modern approaches to ethical theory, the right and the good are taken to be the two central moral concepts. [Consequentialist](#) theories hold that the good is the more fundamental of these two moral concepts. Whether or not an act is right is determined by whether the consequences of that act are good. Consequentialist theories first identify the characteristic or set of characteristics by virtue of which a state of affairs can be ranked from best to worst, as judged from an impartial perspective. They then hold that acts are right if they promote the best overall state of affairs and wrong if they do otherwise.” (85)

Consequentialism is the view that the *right* action is the one that ensures the more desirable consequences. Consequentialism is sometimes summarized as the view that the “end justifies the means.”

Consequentialism is very teleological. Teleological simply means end or goal-oriented. Utilitarianism is teleological because advocates action that is oriented toward achieving a specific goal, such as “happiness” in the case of Bentham and Mill.

Utilitarianism:

“The Classical Utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, identified the good with pleasure, so, like Epicurus, were hedonists about value. They also held that we ought to maximize the good, that is, bring about ‘the greatest amount of good for the greatest number’. Utilitarianism is also distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality. Everyone's happiness counts the same. When one maximizes the good, it is the good *impartially* considered. My good counts for no more than anyone else's good. Further, the reason I have to promote the overall good is the same reason anyone else has to so promote the good. It is not peculiar to me.”

Source: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/#JerBen>

As discussed in the reading by Mill, it is important that we consider the “quality” of pleasure. The “ends” don’t necessarily “justify the means” if a course of action is likely to promote “lower,” crude pleasures. In this respect, Mill’s version utilitarianism contrasts with Bentham’s.

Act consequentialism is the claim that an act [a specific action or deed] is morally right if and only if that act maximizes the good, that is, if and only if the total amount of good for all minus the total amount of bad for all is greater than this net amount for any incompatible act available to the agent on that occasion.
(plato.stanford.edu)

Simplified: The “act” or “deed” (what you do), is more important than following a specific set of rules or moral guidelines.

Rule consequentialists hold that we are required to adopt and comply with the set of rules which, if consistently followed, will produce the best overall state of affairs as judged from an impartial perspective.
(Geirsson and Holmgren 86)

To think about:

Which is more important, “acts” or “rules”?

How would you characterize Bentham and Mill? Rule or act consequentialists?

Our Utilitarians:

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). British. Philosopher, jurist, reformer.

- abolition of slavery
- abolition of the death penalty
- animal rights
- equality of the sexes
- liberalization of laws directed against homosexuality
- individual legal rights
- teacher of John Stuart Mill (our other utilitarian)

and perhaps most importantly, the designer of the panopticon, a type of prison...

For Bentham, something ought to be done if it conforms with the principle of utility and promotes happiness (or at the least, minimizes pain). It ought not be done if it does not. What is right or wrong is merely a function of whether or not it serves to distribute the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest amount of people.

Utilitarianism is portrayed in many **utopic** and **dystopic** texts, that is, in **utopias** and **dystopias**.

It usually gets a “bad rap” in science fiction as it is portrayed as the cause of dystopic and totalitarian societies. However, utilitarianism can indeed generate happiness without creating a dystopia. Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher, for example, has advocated on behalf of animal rights, improving medical care for the aged, and ending famine. Bentham and Mill supported many progressive causes as well.

The word [utopia](#) was coined by Sir Thomas More for his 1516 novel Utopia. It is derived from the Greek words for “not” [ou] and “place” [topos]. However, as the “U” in “utopia” is homophonous for the Greek word “good” [eu], the term is regarded as a play on words: “A good place—A place that is not.” It’s ironic. Can such a good place exist? And, would we really want such a place? The word is used retroactively to describe ideal or “perfect” societies in fiction and myth written before 1516, such as the Bible and Plato’s Republic. Many ethical theories, such as utilitarianism, present utopic visions of the future as they seek to maximize well-being and happiness throughout the general population of a given society.

The word [dystopia](#) refers to a “bad place”—the opposite of a utopia. The word was apparently first used by the British politician and philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868, in a parliamentary speech. Science Fiction frequently portrays dystopic societies.

Bentham's "Calculus of Felicity"

$$U = \sum_{i=1}^{P_{total}} \int_{t=0}^{\infty} I_i(t) dt$$

Source of graphic: <https://headbirths.wordpress.com/2014/06/27/ethics-101/> Page contains a good ethical overview of Bentham's utilitarianism.

An example of a chart that applies Bentham's criteria for choosing the "right" decision.

(Source: <https://blogs.it.vt.edu/darkblue/2014/10/22/consulting-the-headless-hedonist>)

	Action 1: Project		Action 2: YouTube	
	Myself	Group Members	Myself	Group Members
Intensity	-1 The suffering will be, I admit, only slightly intense. It would be just barely worse than doing nothing at all.	2 The group would benefit from my contributions, but only to an extent. I'm not doing "8" work over here.	5 This one really depends on the day. Some YouTube sessions are better than others.	-3 My groupmates would be forced to shoulder an increased workload.
Duration	-3 The duration of suffering is set equal to the duration of YouTube-watching. So maybe like 2 hours.	7 Any benefits from my contributions would be long-lasting, especially if others can build on them.	3 The duration of pleasure is set equal to the duration of project work. As stated for Action 1: 2 hours.	-4 They'd get over it.
Certainty	-3 I am fairly confident, but not positive, that I would not have very much fun.	2 It's not for sure that my contributions would be useful.	9 I have never not enjoyed watching YouTube.	-6 But they'd definitely be upset.
Propinquity	-6 The suffering, though mild, would be immediate. This is probably the greatest obstacle: getting started.	4 The benefit would be somewhat near.	5 Enjoyment would begin immediately.	-4 This depends on when they realize that I didn't do anything. Could be days. Weeks.
Fecundity	0 This decision would make me no more likely to work on the project (i.e., incur further suffering) in the future.	0 This decision would make me no more likely to work on the project (i.e., help the group) in the future.	0 This decision would make me no more likely to watch YouTube (i.e., enjoy more videos) in the future.	0 This decision would make me no more likely to watch YouTube (i.e., cause further suffering to the group) in the future.
Purity/Impurity	15 In fact, progress made on schoolwork will cause future benefit. I will derive pleasure from having contributed to the group effort.	0 The group won't be harmed later by my having contributed, unless it's so bad that it was worse than doing nothing.	-15 Neglecting my schoolwork will absolutely cause future suffering.	0 There is literally no chance that positive outcomes will be achieved later as a result of my negligence.
TOTAL PLEASURE (+) / SUFFERING (-)	2	15	7	-17

Activity

1. Create your own “algorithm” to determine the “right” course of action based on Bentham’s “calculus of felicity.” Use the chart on the preceding slide as an example.
2. Have classmates, friend, and colleagues fill it out.
3. Discuss the possible “coded biases” that your algorithm presents. Does the way that you have fine-tuned the variables of the “calculus of utility” (the options and criteria you have built into the table to determine the “right” course of action) and the people you have sampled present biases that benefit or disadvantage certain people? What ethical dilemmas, if any, does your algorithm present?

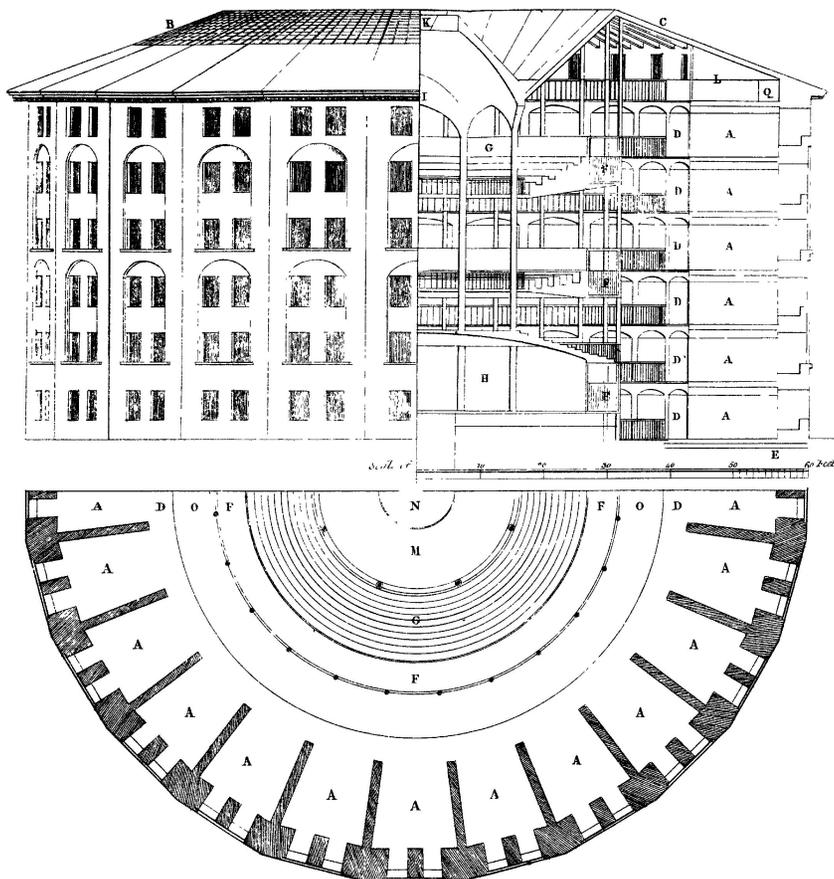
Variation: Code a program in Python that is able to “determine” right/wrong actions according to the “calculus of felicity.”

The [panopticon](#) (a place where all can be observed) is a circular structure with a guard tower in the middle with prison cells arranged around the tower. Bentham believed that prisoners would be easier to manage if they believed that they might be under surveillance at any given time. He believed that such a prison would be less dangerous, promote rehabilitation, and therefore promote more happiness and avoid some pain. Some panoptic prisons were built.

The French historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984) saw the panopticon as a metaphor for power structures in modern society. Some writers, for example, have suggested that we live in a panoptic society, as all of us are potentially under surveillance at any given moment, and much of what we do is recorded. They were influenced by Foucault's ideas (you can read them in his book *Discipline and Punish* [*Surveiller et punir*]).

Panopticism: a social theory developed by the twentieth-century philosopher Foucault. Panopticism refers to a condition in which surveillance is ubiquitous and constant. “pan”=all, optic=“seeing”

*A General Idea of a PENITENTIARY PANOPTICON in an Improved, but as yet, (Jan^y 23^d 1791), Unfinished State.
See Postscript References to Plan, Elevation, & Section (being Plate referred to as N^o 2).*



EXPLANATION.

- A — Cells
- B to C — wall, towards Sky Light
- D — Cell Galleries
- E — Entrance
- F — Inspection Galleries
- G — Chapel Galleries
- H — Inspectors Lodge
- I — Dome of the Chapel
- K — Sky Light to D^o
- L — Stair Rooms wth their Galleries, immediately within the outer wall all round place, for an annual Vision Q
- M — Floor of the Chapel
- N — Circular Opening in d^o (open except at Church times), to light the Inspectors Lodge
- O — Annular Wall, from top to bottom, for light, air and separation.

From a MS. in the Lib.

Panopticon penitentiary, as imaged by Bentham.



Prison Presidio Modelo in Cuba.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). British. Philosopher, political economist, civil servant.

- Developed Bentham’s utilitarianism
- advocated “social liberty” to protect against tyrants and the “tyranny of the majority” (in which the will of the masses—even in a democratic system of government—create a system of tyranny).
- Advocated on behalf of the rights of women.
- Progressive economic theories.
- Population control (for utilitarian reasons).
- Important contributions to scientific thinking and philosophy.
- Much more...

As we discussed in class, Mill suggests that Bentham's "calculus of happiness" is dangerous unless we think about the quality of happiness in addition to the quantity. He believes that policy makers much promote "higher" pleasures and avoid pandering to the crude desires of the masses. As he states on page 525: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Put simply, it's better to sacrifice some happiness and preserve one's dignity and self-respect, than indulge in the crude happiness of pigs and fools. As you might imagine, Mill would not agree with Bentham's arguments in "Push-pin and Poetry."