

# Lecture 4: The Debate over Utilitarianism

Stuart Rachels – “The Debate over Utilitarianism”



# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

1. Pleasure
2. Consequences
  - Justice
  - Rights
  - Backward-Looking Reasons
3. Impartiality
  - Overly Demanding
  - Disrupts Personal Relationships

# Defenses of Utilitarianism

1. Contesting the Consequences
2. Rule-Utilitarianism
  - Optimal Moral Code
3. Common Sense is Wrong
  - All Values Have Utilitarian Basis
  - Can't Trust Intuitions
  - Focus on *All* Consequences

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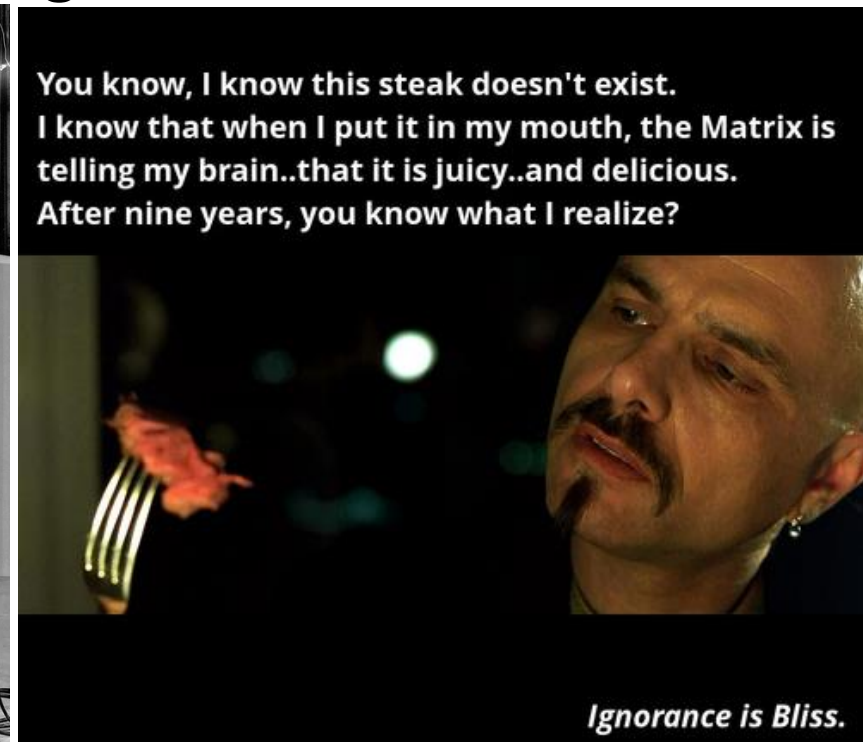
# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 1. Is Pleasure All That Matters?

**Hedonism** – Pleasure is the ultimate good.



Robert Nozick – The Experience Machine



[Cypher from \*The Matrix\*](#)

# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 1. Is Pleasure All That Matters?

### Utilitarian Responses:

1. Right Action = Best Results
2. Pluralists: lists of various intrinsic goods.
3. Maximize *preferences* rather than happiness. Pleasure is subjective; preferences are more objective and linked to actual choices and behavior.

# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 2. Are Consequences All That Matter?

- Justice
- Rights
- Backward-Looking Reasons



# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 2. Are Consequences All That Matters?

- Justice



# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 2. Are Consequences All That Matter?

- Rights





# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 2. Are Consequences All That Matter?

- Backward-Looking Reasons
- Intrinsic Features of Actions



# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 3. Should We Be Equally Concerned for Everyone?

- Utilitarianism is Too Demanding
- **Supererogatory**: going above and beyond what duty requires you to do



# Criticisms of Utilitarianism

## 3. Should We Be Equally Concerned for Everyone?

- Utilitarianism Disrupts Personal Relationships



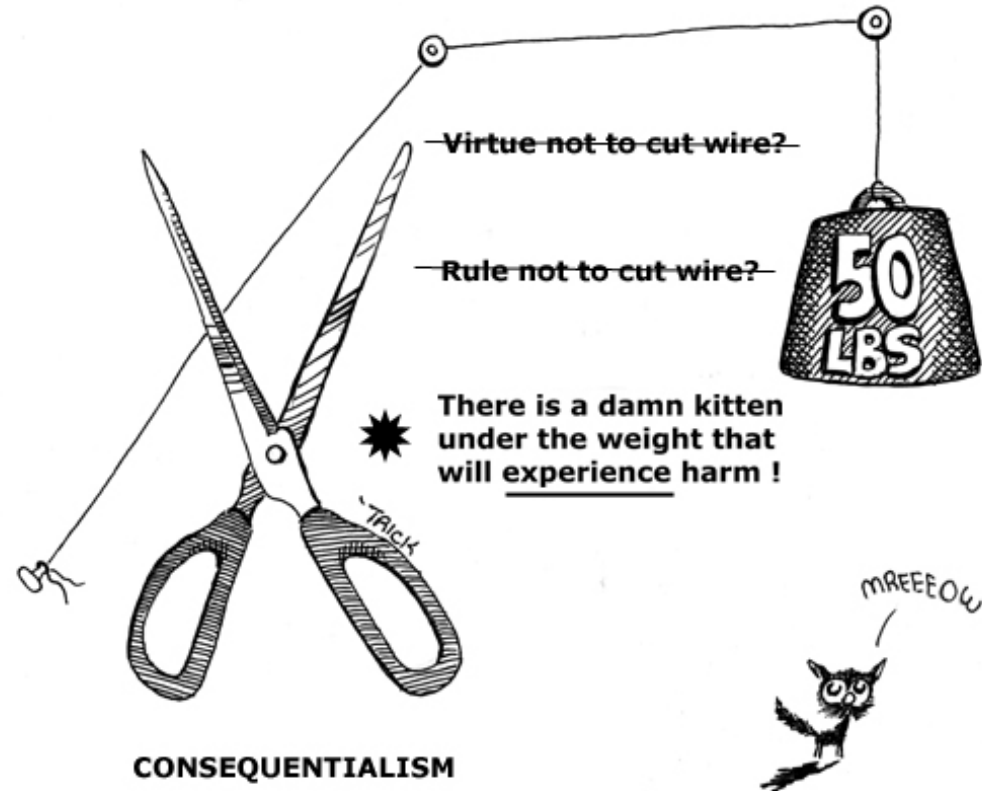
# Defenses of Utilitarianism

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# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 1. Contesting the Consequences



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 2. Rule-Utilitarianism versus Act-Utilitarianism

- Instead of evaluating individual actions, we should evaluate which rules best maximize happiness.
- If we evaluate each individual action alone to see what will maximize utility, we may actually end up with less happiness. Better to stick to rules.
- This allows for rule-utilitarianism to not violate promise, rights, or justice.



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

Suppose you are a sheriff facing an angry mob. What should you do?

- A. Frame someone innocent to stop the riot.
- B. Don't frame anyone innocent.

## Act-Utilitarianism Reasoning:

- Which act maximizes happiness?
- A.
- Therefore, do A.

## Rule-Utilitarianism Reasoning:

- Which rule when generally followed maximizes happiness?
- Rule 1: Frame innocent people.
- Rule 2: Don't frame innocent people.
- Rule 2 maximizes happiness.
- Therefore do B because it follows Rule 2.



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 2. Rule-Utilitarianism

### Objection 1: But rules have exceptions!

The Rule-Utilitarian has three options in response:

1. Violate rules
  - **Objection: Collapses into Act-Utilitarianism**
2. Reformulate rules: “Don’t frame innocent people, unless doing so would achieve some greater good.”
  - **Objection: Collapses into Act-Utilitarianism**
3. Always follow rules
  - **Objection: Irrational “rule-worship”**



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 2. Rule-Utilitarianism

- **Objection 2: There may be rules that maximize happiness but still still violate rights and justice.**
- **For example, a rule such as “Enslave a small portion of the population in order to maximize economic gains” may increase utility but still violate rights and be immoral.**



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 3. Common Sense is Wrong

- All Values Have a Utilitarian Basis
- Our Gut Reactions Can't Be Trusted When Cases Are Exceptional
- We Should Focus on *All* The Consequences



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 3. Common Sense is Wrong

- All Values Have a Utilitarian Basis
  - **Objection: Lying is wrong 'in itself' because it betrays people's trust, not because it leads to bad consequences.**
  - **Response: Lying is wrong precisely because it reduces happiness. When lies are discovered, people who are betrayed feel hurt or angry.**



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 3. Common Sense is Wrong

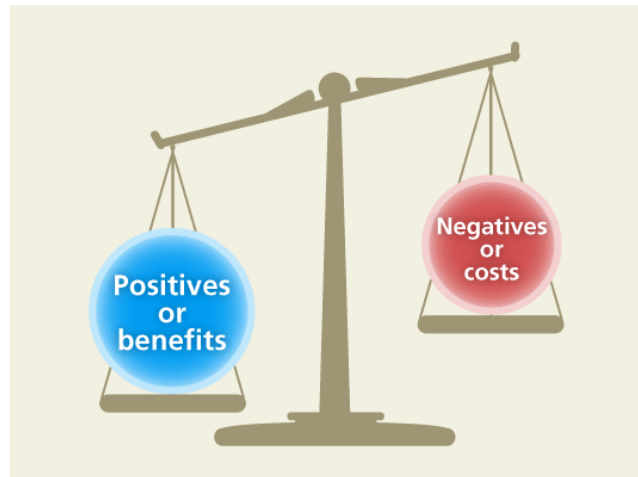
- Our Gut Reactions Can't Be Trusted When Cases Are Exceptional
  - Usually lying leads to bad consequences. Therefore, experience has trained us to intuitively think that lying is always wrong.
  - But in extreme cases, lying may be right and our intuitions lead us astray.



# Defenses of Utilitarianism

## 3. Common Sense is Wrong

- We Should Focus on *All* the Consequences
  - Counter-examples to utilitarianism only focus on the negative consequences, but ignore the positive outcomes that would result if one took the action recommended by utilitarians.



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