



ВЫСШАЯ ШКОЛА ЭКОНОМИКИ
НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКИЙ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ
САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ

Moral Philosophy Normative Ethics

Sergei Levin
Сергей Михайлович Левин
slevin@hse.ru

Introduction to Philosophy

* Presentation is for educational purposes only. I do not claim authorship for all texts and pictures in the presentation.

Normative ethics

The field of **ethics** (or moral philosophy) involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. Normative ethics involves arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. In a sense, it is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behavior.



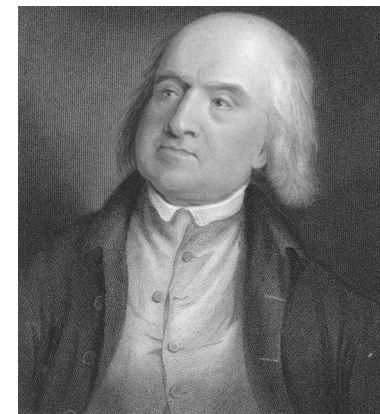
Normative Ethics – Major Theories

1. Utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill)
2. Deontology (Kant)
3. Virtue ethics (Aristotle)

Utilitarianism

Utilitarians believe that the purpose of morality is to make life better by increasing the amount of good things (such as pleasure and happiness) in the world and decreasing the amount of bad things (such as pain and unhappiness). They reject moral codes or systems that consist of commands or taboos that are based on customs, traditions, or orders given by leaders or supernatural beings. Instead, utilitarians think that what makes a morality be true or justifiable is its positive contribution to human (and perhaps non-human) beings.

The most important classical utilitarians are [Jeremy Bentham](#) (1748-1832) and [John Stuart Mill](#) (1806-1873)



The Main Strength of Utilitarian Theory: happiness is a fundamental human value

Like



Many philosophers consider utilitarianism to be superior to other theories because happiness is fundamentally desirable, something thought to be desired by all people. A moral theory focusing on the attainment of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people gives good guidance. If we all seek the greatest happiness, then we should live in a better world and a better society. The utilitarian objects to racial and sexual exploitation, to vengeful punishment, to war, and to pollution. These things deprive us of happiness. A careful analysis of the hostility caused, harm inflicted, in relation to gains, will show that the utilitarian is able to insist upon solid social reform. A utilitarian not only objects, typically, to many of the things we consider wrong, but gives us a reason why they are wrong. When that reason doesn't hold, then the utilitarian, theoretically, is willing to agree that it is not morally wrong. Far from being a vice, the utilitarian believes moral life requires that we carefully consider all actions to determine whether we are doing the right thing.

Act Utilitarianism

The greatest happiness should be the goal of our **actions**

Act utilitarians believe that whenever we are deciding what to do, we should perform the action that will create the greatest net utility. In their view, the principle of utility—do whatever will produce the best overall results—should be applied on a case by case basis. The right action in any situation is the one that yields more utility (i.e. creates more well-being) than other available actions.

Right actions result in ‘good or pleasure,’ wrong actions result in pain or absence of pleasure.

“Calculus of utility” measuring pleasure and pain using what amounts to a formula (for a group, it measures intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.). This calculation allows a utility based decision to be made on virtually any subject.



Criticisms of Act Utilitarianism

- ‘Max pleasure/min suffering morality criticized as “pig-philosophy”
- Don’t always know the consequences of our actions
- Difficulty in measuring pleasure and happiness
- May be counterintuitive – sacrifice one to save many
- Concerned only with ends – only the bottom line matters
- Does not take moral significance of individuals seriously enough, we are mere conduits of utility.
Abuse of Power



John Stuart Mill's Analysis of Pleasure

Mill objects to Bentham's procedure. Some pleasures, Mill thought, are more admirable than others. The pleasure from doing mathematical proofs is a more admirable pleasure, in itself, than the pleasure we may get from eating a good meal. Furthermore, some actions so fundamentally disrupt pleasure, like injustice and censorship, that they are virtually always forbidden. Under his view, injustice is a name we assign to those actions that upset people's lives in basic ways. These are forbidden in a strict way by most theories because they involve such a serious amount of pain and a consistent forfeit of pleasure; typically, no calculation is needed to condemn acts of injustice.



Rule Utilitarianism

According to rule utilitarians:

- a) a specific action is morally justified if it conforms to a justified moral rule;
- b) a moral rule is justified if its inclusion into our moral code would create more utility than other possible rules (or no rule at all).

According to this perspective, we should judge the morality of individual actions by reference to general moral rules, and we should judge particular moral rules by seeing whether their acceptance into our moral code would produce more well-being than other possible rules.



Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism

Both act utilitarians and rule utilitarians agree that our overall aim in evaluating actions should be to create the best results possible, but they differ about how to do that.

The key difference between act and rule utilitarianism is that act utilitarians apply the utilitarian principle directly to the evaluation of individual actions while rule utilitarians apply the utilitarian principle directly to the evaluation of rules and then evaluate individual actions by seeing if they obey or disobey those rules whose acceptance will produce the most utility.

Direct appeal to the principle of utility is made only when “secondary principles” (i.e. rules) conflict with one another. In such cases, the “maximize utility” principle is used to resolve the conflict and determine the right action to take. [Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2]

Act **Vs** Rule Utilitarianism

**Singer says
that Act
Utilitarianism
defeats itself**



Peter Singer illustrates this problem with the example of promise keeping.

Promises are made on the understanding that they will be kept, something the rule utilitarian recognises as promoting happiness.

However, whilst Act utilitarians may make a promise in a particular situation there can be no guarantee that they will always uphold promise keeping; and so one could never trust them– as there is no confidence they will keep their promise!

Utility Monster



Utility Monster explained

- [A Utility Monster](#) is a thought experiment by Robert Nozick, which criticizes utilitarianism. He asks us to imagine a monster which receives more utility (more pleasure basically) from each unit of resources than any humans do. It is therefore logical, and indeed morally required, to give everything to the monster. For example, if we had a piece of cake, the Utility Monster would get 1000 times more joy out of eating it than any human, so the action that would cause the most total pleasure would always be to give the cake to the monster.
- The pun based 'Utility Monster' depicted in the comic gets a great deal of pleasure from destroying pipes. Apparently that pleasure is so great it outweighs the pain it would cause us to have the pipes destroyed. Since that would still result in more net pleasure, it is morally required to destroy the pipes. Peter Singer is a contemporary utilitarian.



There are no duties just consequences...



Deontological ethics



Morality as a system of laws analogous to the laws of physics in terms of their universal applicability.

Immanuel Kant
22 April 1724 – 12
February 1804

Categorical imperative

The First Formulation

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."

The Second Formulation

"Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."

Duty and Good Will

Kantian themes

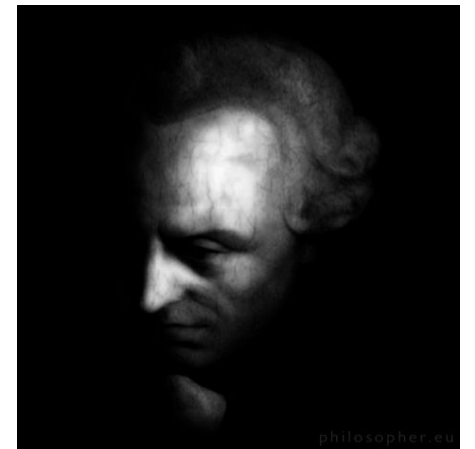
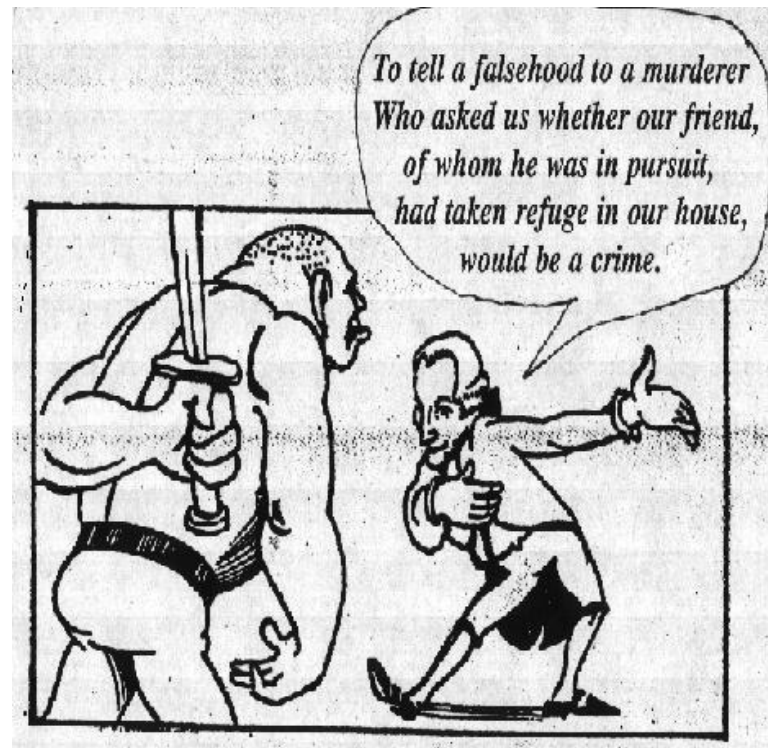
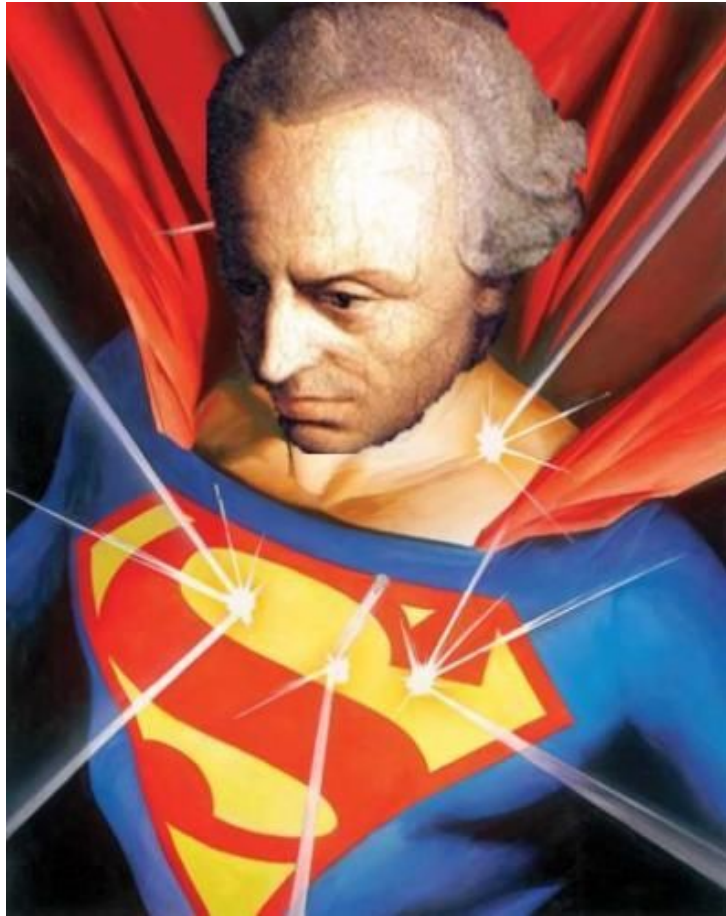
1. Duty:

- the moral action is one that we must do in accordance with a certain principle, not because of its good consequence.

2. Respect:

- Persons should always be treated as an end, not a means. ‘No persons should be *used*.’

Deontology Pro and Contra

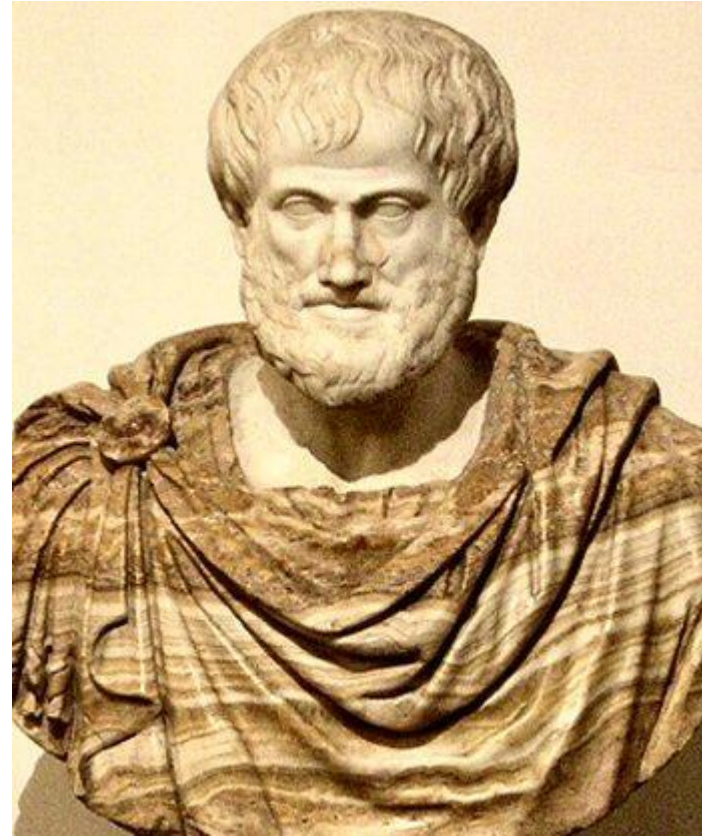


Virtue ethics

Why Should I Be Moral?
Because of My Character!

Ethics>Ethos>Character

Virtuous person knows what to do.



Aristotle
384 BC - 322 BC

Purpose of life Eudaimonia



Aristotle begins the Nicomachean Ethics with the question ‘What is the good for human beings?’ What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life?

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is usually translated as ‘happiness’ but Aristotle says it is ‘living well and faring well’. We have some idea of what it is when an animal or plant is living and faring well – we talk of them ‘flourishing’. A plant or animal flourishes when its needs are met in abundance and it is a good specimen of its species. Gardeners try to enable their plants to flourish; zookeepers try to enable the zoo animals to flourish. So eudaimonia is ‘the good’ or the ‘good life’ for human beings as the particular sort of being we are. To achieve it is to live as best a human being can live.

Two kinds of virtue

Virtues are necessary but not sufficient for Eudaimonia.

- Intellectual virtue: the virtue of knowledge or understanding
- Practical virtue: the virtue of action and feeling.

Intellectual virtue is had by the philosopher, who lives a life of contemplation

Practical virtue

- Virtues are not innate. They are habits
- To become courageous, one must act as a courageous person does—this will help one develop the habit of being courageous

Virtue is a mean

- It is the extremes that damage people. A person who eats too much or eats too little will not be healthy.
- Similarly for the soul, a person who acts in an extreme manner will not be virtuous

The doctrine of the mean entails that we can (often, if not always) place a virtue 'between' two vices. Just as there is a right time, object, person, etc., at which to feel fear (or any emotion), some people can feel fear too often, about too many things, and towards too many people, or they get too afraid of things that aren't that dangerous. Other people can feel afraid not often enough, regarding too few objects and people. Someone who feels fear 'too much' is cowardly. Someone who feels fear 'too little' is rash. Someone who has the virtue relating to fear is courageous. The virtue is the 'intermediate' state between the two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'

Examples

- Courage is the mean between recklessness and cowardice
- Self-control is the mean between self-indulgence and being “insensible”
- Generosity is the mean between extravagance and stinginess
- Wittiness is the mean between buffoonery and boorishness. (see table p. 48)

Examples

Aristotle presents the following examples. For many states of character, he notes, we don't have a common name.

Passion/ concern	Vice of deficiency	Virtue	Vice of excess
Fear	Cowardly	Courageous	Rash
Pleasure/pain	'Insensible'	Temperate	Self-indulgent
Giving/taking money	Mean	Liberal ('free')	Prodigal ('spendthrift')
Spending large sums of money	Niggardly	'Magnificent'	Tasteless
Important honour	Unduly humble	Properly proud	Vain
Small honours	'Unambitious'	'Properly ambitious'	'Overambitious'
Anger	'Unirascible'	Good-tempered	Short-tempered
Truthfulness (regarding oneself)	Falsely modest	Truthful	Boastful
Humour	Boorish	Witty	Buffoonish
Pleasant to others	Quarrelsome, surly	Friendly	Obsequious
Shame	Shy	Modest	Shameless
Attitude to others' fortune	Spiteful (rejoicing in others' bad fortune)	Righteously indignant (pained by others' undeserved good fortune)	Envious (pained by others' good fortune)

The mean is relative to us

- The mean is not the same for everyone.
- Some people get drunk on two beers, for others two beers would be the mean
- For some people going into a burning building would be reckless, for others it would be courageous.
- The mean is the appropriate way of acting given our individual nature and situation

It depends?

