# Consequentialism

Normative ethics defends general or specific
moral principles (as opposed to *metaethics*, which
is about the nature and methodology of ethics).
Normative ethics has two main approaches:

- Consequentialism (CQ): We ought to do whatever maximizes long-term good consequences. (Utilitarianism and egoism are both types of consequentialism.)

- Nonconsequentialism (NC): Some kinds of action are wrong in themselves, and not just wrong because of their consequences.

Ima
Utilitarian

(UT)
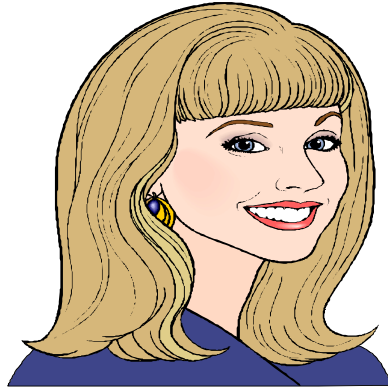
The proper aim of morality is to promote happiness and diminish misery for everyone.

I reject the exceptionless-rules approach that I was taught as a child (e.g., that it's always wrong to lie, steal, break your promises, or disobey your parents).

This exceptionless-rules approach is inconsistent: *as a matter of logic, a consistent moral system can't have more than one exceptionless norm*. It's also inhumane and has clear Dr. Evil counterexamples.

Let me explain what led me to utilitarianism.

- Human happiness and misery give a solid basis for evaluating the norms of different cultures.

- The golden rule leads to utilitarianism.

- Utilitarianism can be based on other views too; some may see it as self-evident or based on God's will.
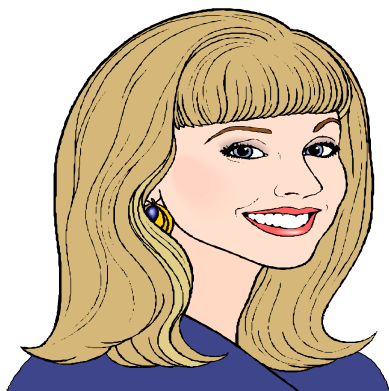
There are two ways to apply utilitarianism. The *indirect approach* uses rules of thumb (e.g. stealing usually doesn't have the best consequences). The *direct approach* sums up likely benefits and harms.

	Break promise	Don't break it
My brother	-5	+6
My mother	+6	-2
Myself	-1	-2
Total	+0	+2

Pleasures are positive.
Pains are negative.
Go with highest total.

Utilitarianism also applies
to virtues and rights.

- *Virtues* (like kindness and patience) are character traits that tend to have good consequences.

- Our basic *moral right* is to have our happiness and misery count equally with that of everyone else; social arrangements that violate this are unjust.

- Because of the *diminishing marginal utility* of wealth, a more equal distribution of wealth tends to maximize the sum total of good consequences.

Why pick *classical utilitarianism* ("We ought to do whatever maximizes the long-term balance of *pleasure over pain for everyone* affected by our action") over other consequentialist views?

(1) Whose good to maximize? *All sentient beings.*

Alternatives: ourselves (egoism), our group, all humans; these lead to **inconsistency of will** and are **self-defeating**.

(2) How evaluate consequences? *By pleasure/pain.* (*Hedonism*: only pleasure is intrinsically good, only pain is intrinsically bad.)

Alternatives: *preference view* (whatever is desired for its own sake), *pluralism* (many things: knowledge, virtue, pleasure, etc.).

Classical utilitarianism

We ought to do whatever maximizes the long-term balance of pleasure over pain for everyone affected by our action.

Utilitarianism is *difficult to hold consistently*, since it has little respect for individual rights.


Imagine a "lynching is fun" case where lynching *you* maximizes the balance of pleasure over pain.

Are you willing that if you were in this situation then you be lynched?
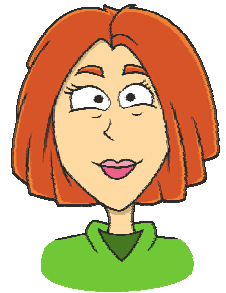
Utilitarians can respond by:

- biting the bullet,
- denying that such cases are possible, or
- modifying their theory.

Utilitarianism can be *self-defeating*, since its loose approach to norms can have bad results.
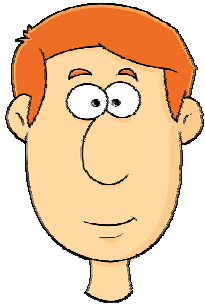
Candidate A

"I think electing me would have the best consequences – and lying about my opponent promotes this. So, as a utilitarian, I lie about my opponent."

Candidate B

In the "lying politicians" case, utilitarian reasoning leads both candidates to lie. So politics turns dirty, which harms democracy. It would have better results if people followed strict norms against dirty politics.

Would these things automatically be right if they maximized the total pleasure?

- Slavery
- Killing your miserable rich father and giving his money to charity
- Sentencing an innocent person to death
- Using dishonest instead of honest means
- Hurting another
- Working for the Mafia

Another problem is that utilitarianism is difficult to apply and easy to rationalize.
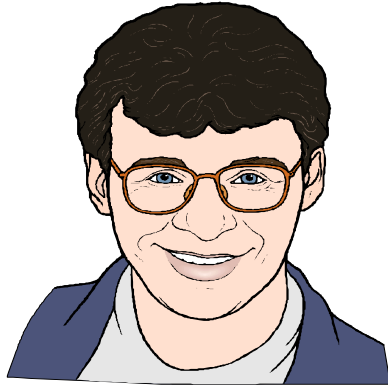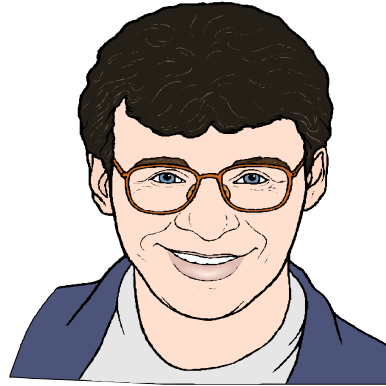
Ima Rule Utilitarian
supports pluralistic
rule utilitarianism

(RU)

We should evaluate consequences in
terms of **various** **goods**, including virtue,
knowledge, pleasure, life, and freedom.

We ought to do what would be prescribed
by the **rules** with the best consequences
for people to try to follow.

Pluralism is better than hedonism

- Our rational preferences would see some pleasures as intrinsically bad and some non-pleasure items as intrinsically good (like virtue, knowledge, life, and freedom).

- Happiness isn't the same thing as pleasure!!

- Pluralism lets us answer some of the objections to classical utilitarianism (like the lynching, slavery, and killing-your-miserable-father examples).
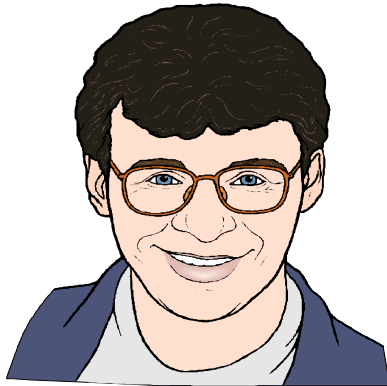
Our duties are determined by the **<u>rules</u>** with the best consequences for people to try to follow.

- Rules are easier to apply and harder to rationalize. So it often has better consequences for us to follow fairly strict rules instead of calculating consequences.

- Rule utilitarianism has less bizarre implications about killing – since presumably it has better consequences if society follows a strict rule against killing with only a few well-defined exceptions (like self-defense).

It's sensible to accept a few strict (and even excep-tionless) moral rules.
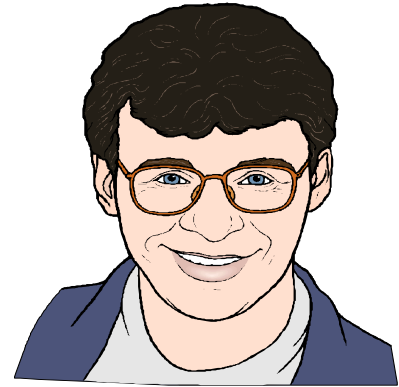
- *Consistent moral systems can have more than one excep-tionless norm*, if these are negative and carefully chosen. These won't conflict: "Never kill innocent people for their race or religious beliefs," "Never take heroin for recreational purposes," and "Never commit rape."
- Plausible exceptionless norms *forbid* inhumane actions.
- Dr. Evil cases aren't realistic (can you trust him to do as he says?). Strict norms may apply only to realistic cases.
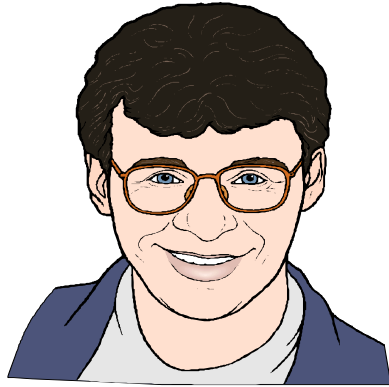
When should we
take moral norms
more strictly?

We should take a norm more strictly if doing so tends to prevent great evils or foolish choices.

"Great evils" covers things like destroying democracy, killing an innocent person, causing a drug addiction, or ruining a happy marriage. "Prevent foolish choices" reminds us that we're sometimes less rational; in our rational moments we need to decide how to act in our less rational moments.

While a big improvement, pluralistic rule utilitarianism still has problems

- It's a difficult view to apply. So it's difficult to decide if it has sensible implications.

- Even if it has the right results, it would seem to do so for the wrong reasons. Isn't it wrong in itself to kill an innocent person? Wouldn't it be wrong even if a rule permitting it had the best consequences?

Bentham and Mill

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73) were English thinkers and activists who gave the first systematic accounts of utilitarianism.

Bentham, who talked about "the greatest good of the greatest number," suggested weighing the probability of various pleasures and pains occurring, how long they'd last, and how many people would be affected.

Mill spoke of the *quality* of pleasures; higher pleasures (like over knowledge, friendship, or virtue) are more valuable than lower bodily pleasures.

The trolley problem

The "trolley problem" is a series of cases that test our utilitarian tendencies. Here's one such case:

> An out-of-control rapid-transit train is heading down the red-line track, where it would kill five workers. If you push a fat man off the bridge into the path of the train, it will kill him but stop the train, saving five workers. Should you push the fat man off the bridge into the path of the train?

Act utilitarians say "clearly yes." Nonconsequentialists tend to say "no" (since you'd be directly killing an innocent human being).