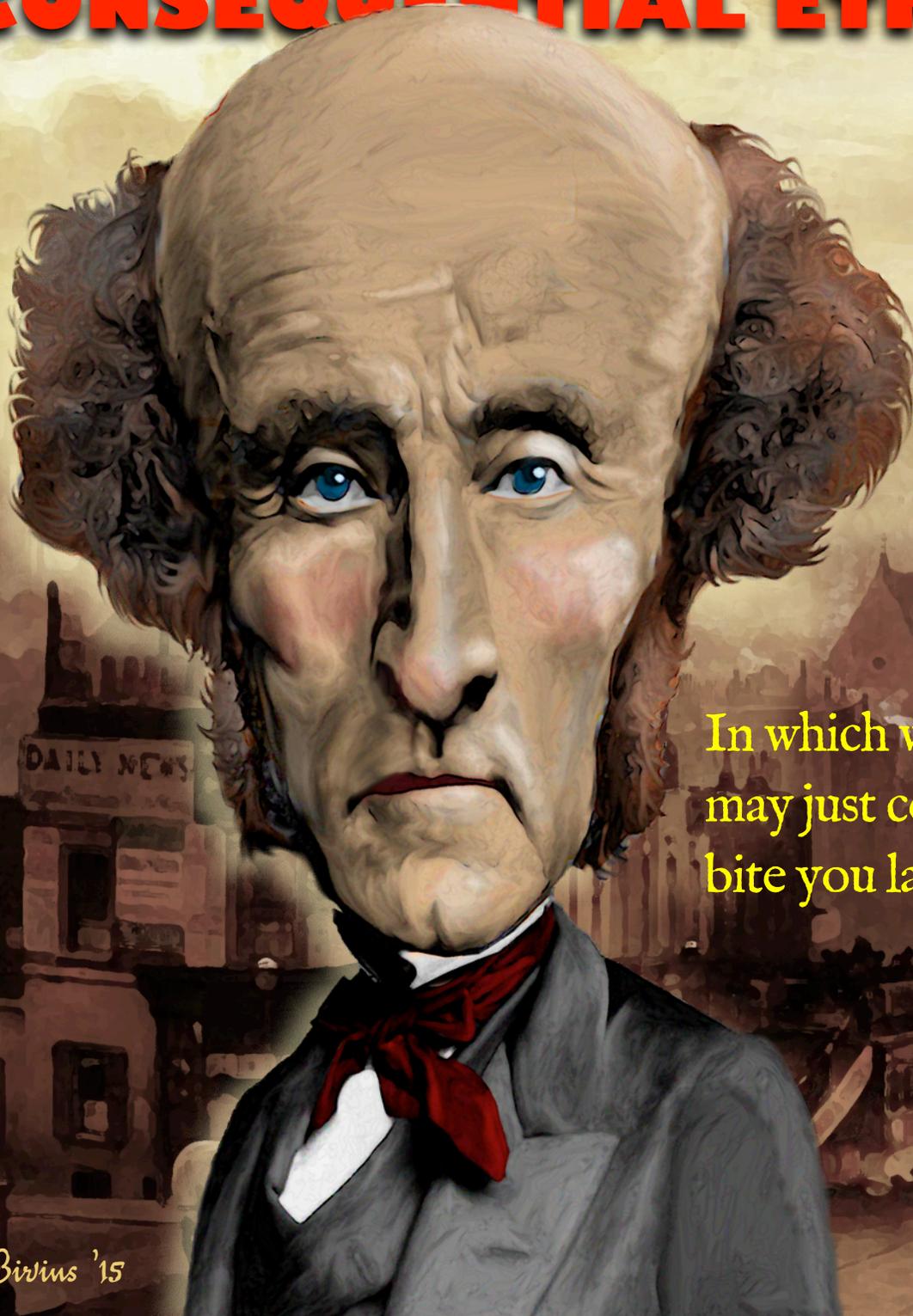


# THE STORY OF **ETHICS**

*How the media got moral, or not*

## **CONSEQUENTIAL ETHICS**



In which what you do  
may just come back to  
bite you later.

# Consequential Theories

## CONSEQUENTIAL THEORIES

- Contend that the moral rightness of an action can be determined by looking at its consequences.
- If the consequences are good, the act is right.
- If the consequences are bad, the act is wrong.

WHAT IS RIGHT IS DETERMINED BY CONSIDERING THE RATIO OF GOOD TO EVIL THAT THE ACTION PRODUCES.

- The right act is the one that produces, or is intended to produce the greatest ratio of good to evil of any alternative.

There are 2 types of consequential theory

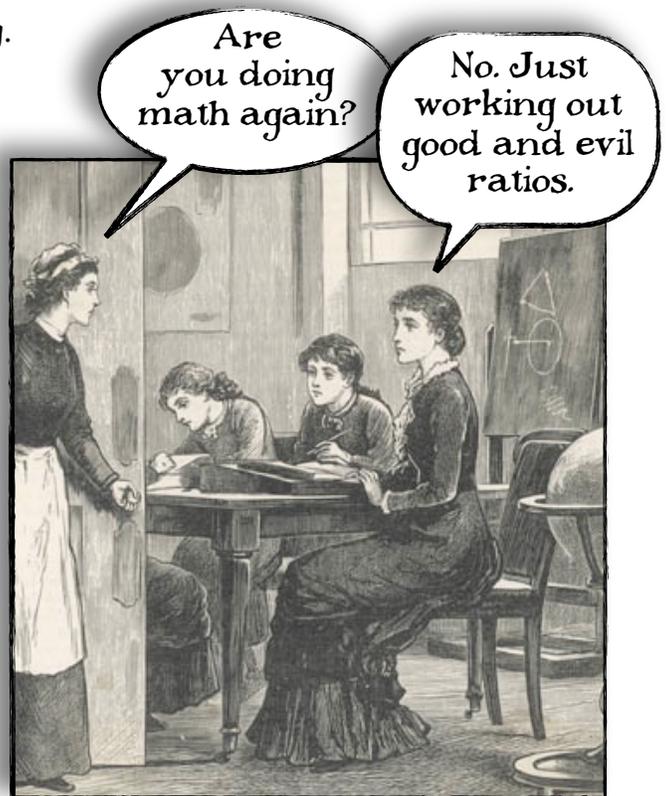
**Egoism**

**Utilitarianism**

## UTILITARIANISM

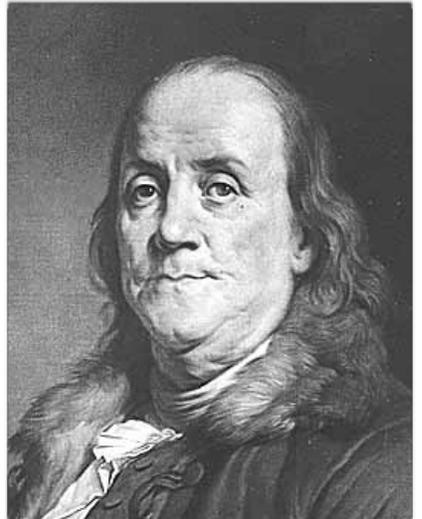
Asserts that we should always act so as to produce the greatest ratio of good to evil for everyone concerned with our decision

- Utilitarianism is the philosophy underlying the modern welfare state
- Originally formulated by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, and fully developed by John Stuart Mill in the 19th



It all adds up. Trust me.

Jeremy Bentham was an English philosopher and political radical. He was a strong believer in human rights (especially women's rights) and animal welfare. His philosophy of utility (utilitarianism) was based on the advancement of pleasure over pain: "The greatest happiness of the greatest number." Although his "moral calculus" seems a bit strange to us today, his heart was clearly on the side of social reform.



Jeremy Bentham & Ben Franklin—separated at birth?

## UTILITARIANISM'S FUNDAMENTAL IMPERATIVE

**Always act in the way that will produce the greatest overall amount of good in the world.**

The emphasis is clearly on consequences, not intentions.

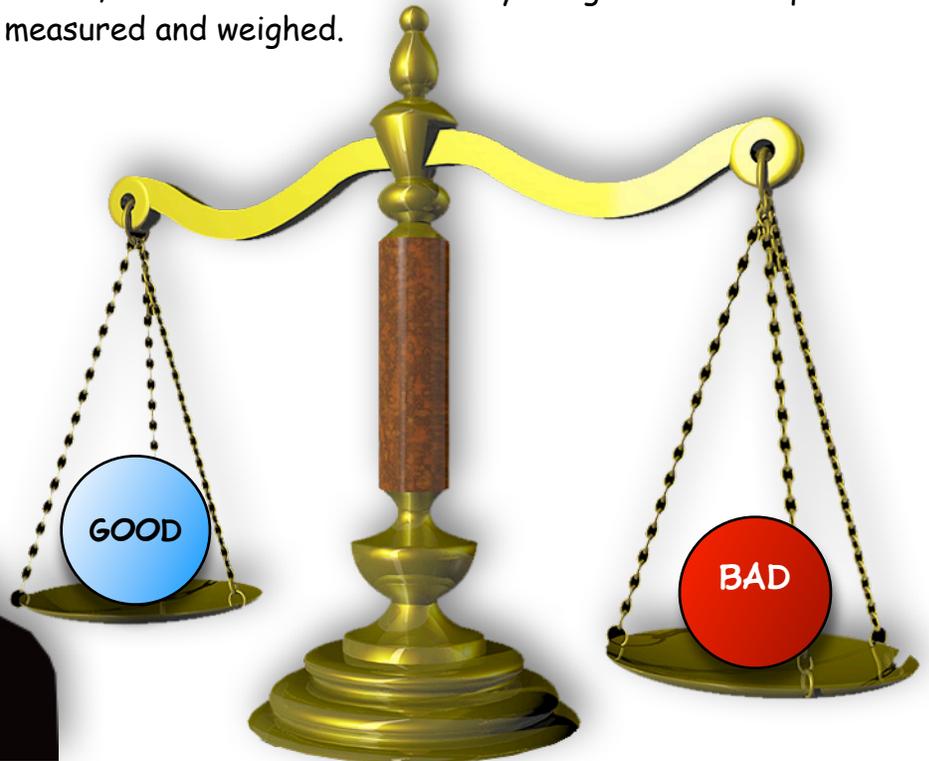
Utilitarianism is a **morally demanding** position for two reasons:

- It always asks us to do the most, to maximize utility, not to do the minimum.
- It asks us to set aside personal interest.

## THE UTILITARIAN CALCULUS

- Under Bentham, math and ethics had finally merged: all consequences must be measured and weighed.

MATH  
IS COOL!



Seriously. Doesn't he look like Ben Franklin?

## THE **BIG** QUESTIONS!

### WHAT DO WE CALCULATE?

- Pleasure may be defined in terms of
  - Happiness
  - Ideals
  - Preferences
- For any given action, we must calculate:
  - How many people will be affected, negatively as well as positively
  - How intensely they will be affected
  - Similar calculations for all available alternatives
- Then choose the action that produces the greatest overall amount of utility

Gee...  
That much  
work  
makes my  
head hurt.

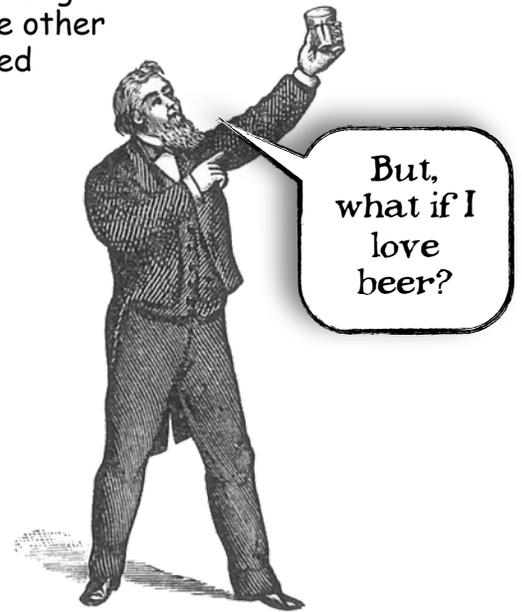
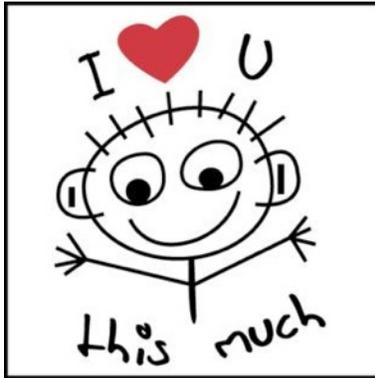


# HOW MUCH CAN WE QUANTIFY?

TWO DISTINCT QUESTIONS ARISE:

- **Can everything be quantified?**

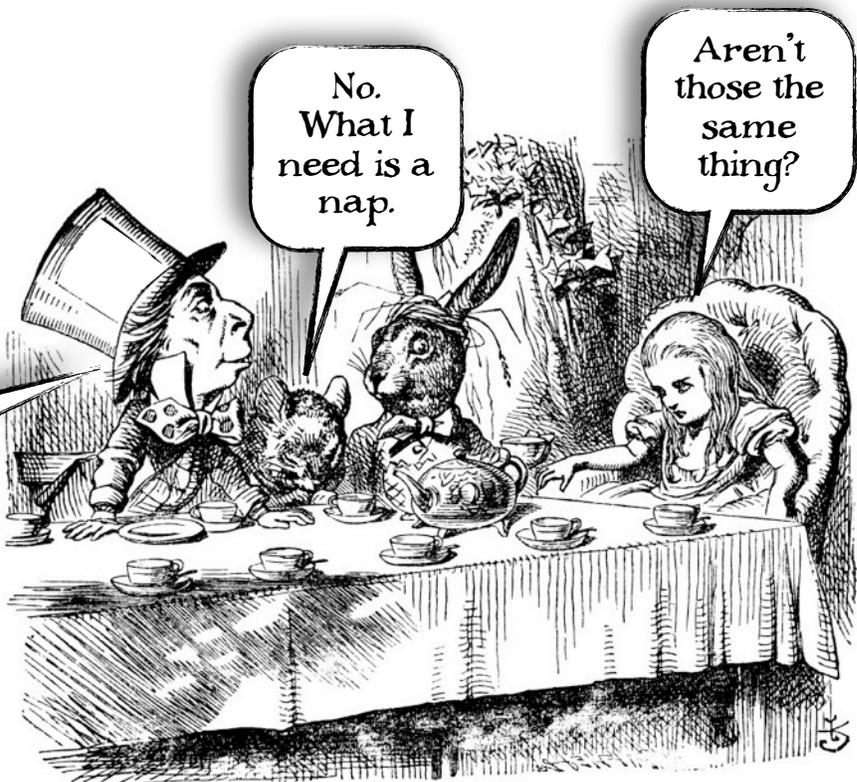
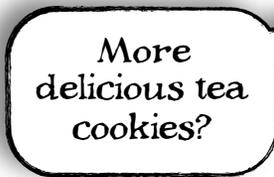
- Some would maintain that some of the most important things in life (love, family, etc.) cannot easily be quantified, while other things (productivity, material goods) may get emphasized precisely because they are quantifiable.
- The danger: if it can't be counted, it doesn't count.



You can count beer bottles... but can you count love?

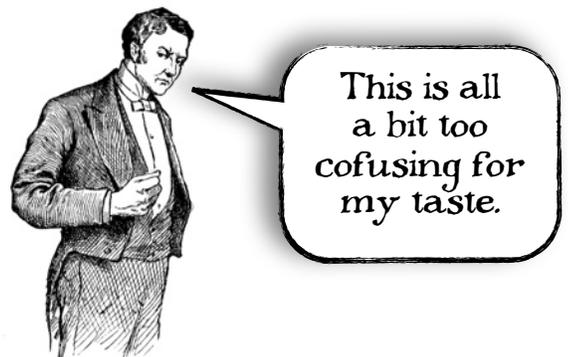
- **Are quantified goods necessarily commensurable (is one equal to the other)?**

- Are a fine dinner and a good night's sleep commensurable? Can one be traded or substituted for the other?



This only makes sense if you're lost in Wonderland.

BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM WAS VIEWED BY MANY TO BE CONFUSING, COLD, AND DISTANT FROM REALITY.





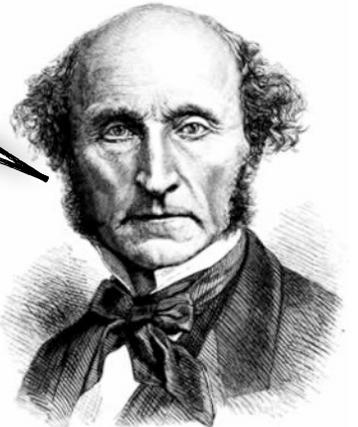
Seemed like a good idea at the time.



### THEN, ALONG CAME JOHN STUART MILL...

The result of John Stuart Mill's work was a utilitarian philosophy much more amenable to the individual and less rigid in its attention to the majority's happiness, and in one of his greatest works, *On Liberty* (1859), he asserted once and for all the rights of the individual.

Just call me J.S.



When Bentham died, his request was to be "embalmed" and displayed. This is his stuffed skeleton at King's College, London. The head is wax, but the real one is at his feet. Don't try this at home, kids.

Where Bentham had insisted that the majority's needs were paramount, Mill supported the individual's sovereignty over his own actions. In other words, the majority isn't always right. When they impose their will (either through laws or social pressure) it becomes a literal "tyranny of the majority."

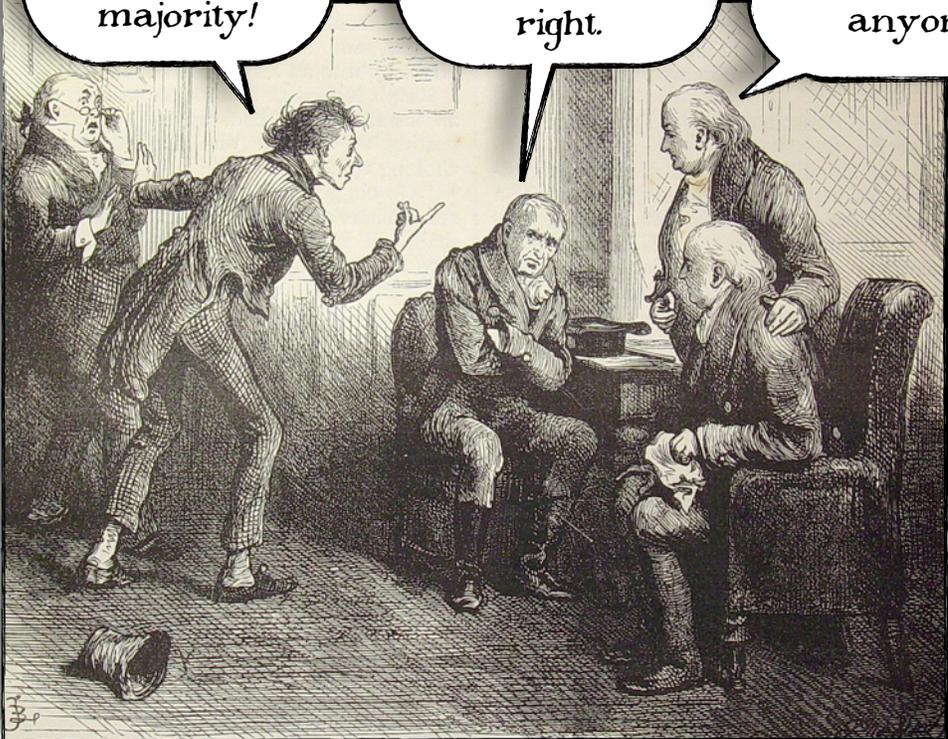
Mill noted that personal freedom should only be interfered with if it caused harm to another or to society as a whole.

Ultimately, however, Mill assures us that personal freedoms should have positive consequences on society as a whole to be valid.

You must agree with us! We are the majority!

I just want to be left alone. I should have that right.

Let him be. He's not harming anyone.



## ACT AND RULE UTILITARIANISM

Over time, some utilitarians wondered if all the calculation that is needed for each individual decision is worth all that trouble. The result is what is known as **RULE UTILITARIANISM**.

Act utilitarianism looks at the consequences of each individual act and calculates utility each time the act is performed. This is too tedious for some people.

Rule utilitarianism looks at the consequences of having everyone follow a particular rule and calculates the overall utility of accepting or rejecting the rule. The rule is based on benefiting the greater good.



Here's how it works.

If a journalist makes up fictitious characters, but the resulting article raises overall awareness of a major social issue, isn't the greater good benefited by this single act?

A Rule Utilitarian would say that lying ultimately damages the reputation of journalism as a whole, which would not benefit the greater good in the long run. So, a rule should be made that journalists don't lie.

*HOWEVER, THE DEBATE STILL GOES ON...*

*RULE UTILITARIANS CLAIM:*

- In some cases, act utilitarianism can justify disobeying important moral rules and violating individual rights.
- Act utilitarianism also takes too much time to calculate in each and every case.

*ACT UTILITARIANS COUNTER:*

- Following a rule in a particular case when the overall utility demands that we violate the rule is just rule-worship. If the consequences demand it, we should violate the rule.
- Furthermore, act utilitarians can follow rules-of-thumb (accumulated wisdom based on consequences in the past) most of the time and engage in individual calculation only when there is some pressing reason for doing so. (okay, but isn't this Rule Utilitarianism?)



# STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN UTILITARIANISM

WEAKNESSES OF UTILITARIANISM ARE OF SEVERAL TYPES:

## BLATANT WRONGS

Both act and rule utilitarianism ignore actions that appear to be wrong in themselves

- Both act and rule utilitarianism ignore actions that appear to be wrong in themselves
  - Lying or even murder could theoretically be allowed if the action furthered the greater good.
  - This allows, for instance, capital punishment and war.



## JUSTICE

The principle of utility may come into conflict with that of justice

- Serving only the greater good can result in a deserving minority not being served—what Alexis de Toqueville called "the tyranny of the majority."
- This can be as radical as the Nazi party's takeover in Germany prior to WWII, or it can result in responsible action taken to redress a past injustice—such as Voting Rights and Affirmative Action laws in the U.S.



In some cases, the majority is REALLY WRONG!

## RESPONSIBILITY

- Utilitarianism suggests that we are responsible for all the consequences of our choices.
- The problem is that sometimes we simply can't see far enough into the future to predict all the possible consequences of our actions. Nor can we foresee consequences of other people's actions that are taken in response to our own acts.



Well intentioned actions can have unintended consequences.

## INTEGRITY

- Utilitarianism often demands that we put aside self-interest. Sometimes this means putting aside our own moral conviction, which could result in damaging our own sense of integrity.

Thomas More was Chancellor of England under Henry VIII. He vehemently opposed Henry's proposed break from the Catholic church and his campaign to divorce his Catholic wife. Because he wouldn't sacrifice his integrity, More was ultimately accused of treason and beheaded in 1535.



My ax is mightier than your integrity.

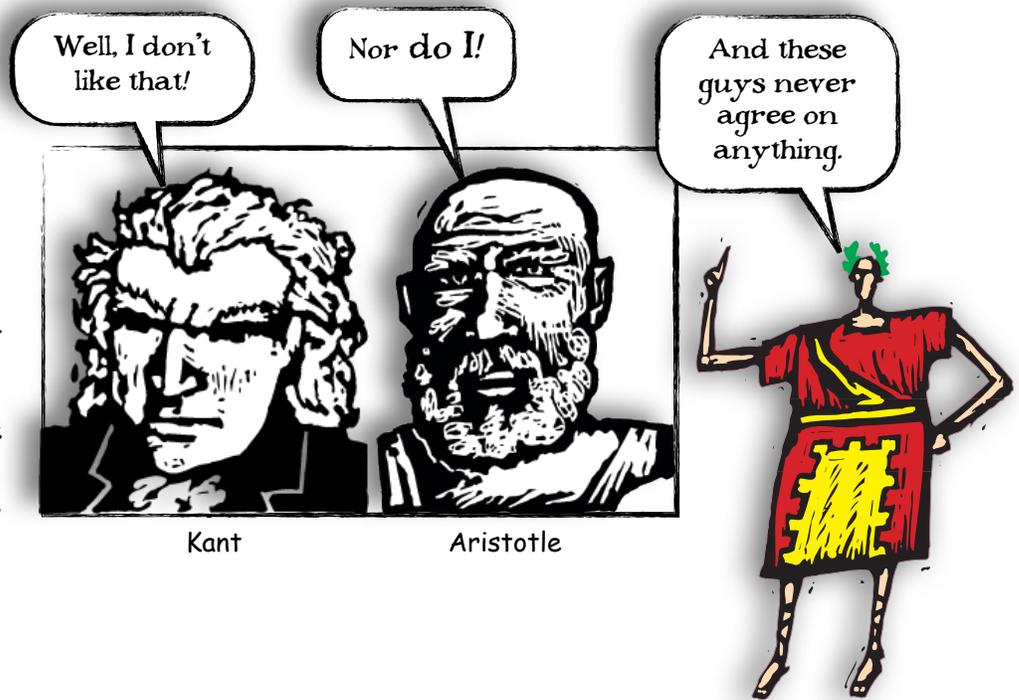


Run for it!  
The King's mad again!



## INTENTIONS

- Utilitarianism is concerned almost exclusively about consequences, not intentions.
- This rules out the notion of good character or duty entirely.

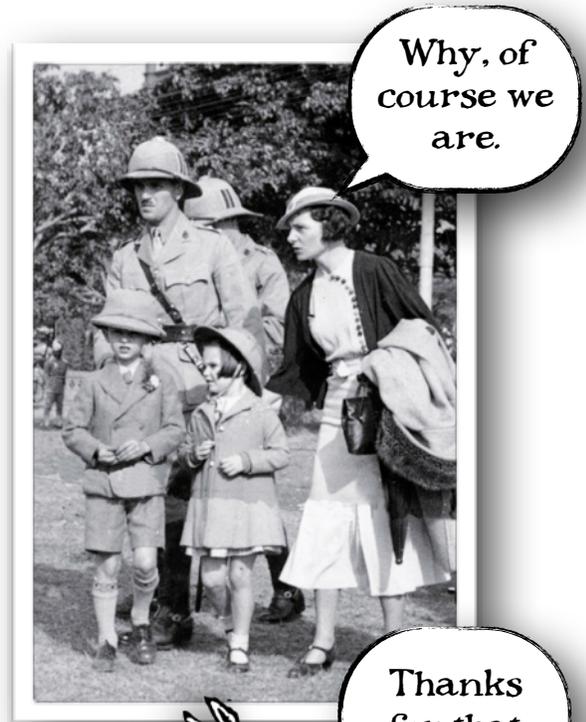


## MORAL LUCK

- By concentrating exclusively on consequences, utilitarianism makes the moral worth of our actions a matter of luck. We must await the final consequences before we find out if our action was good or bad.
  - This seems to make the moral life a matter of chance, which runs counter to our basic moral intuitions.
  - We can imagine actions with good intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended bad consequences
  - We can also imagine actions with bad intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended good consequences.

## WHO DOES THE CALCULATING?

- Typically, the count differs depending on who does the counting
- Historically, this was an issue for the British in India. The British felt they wanted to do what was best for India, but that they were the ones best able to judge what that was.



## WHO IS INCLUDED?

- When we consider the issue of consequences, we must ask who is included within that circle.
  - Those in our own group (group egoism)?
  - Those in our own country (nationalism)?
  - Those who share our skin color (racism)?
  - All human beings (humanism or speciesism)?
  - All sentient beings?
- Classical utilitarianism has often claimed that we should acknowledge the pain and suffering of animals and not restrict the calculus just to human beings.

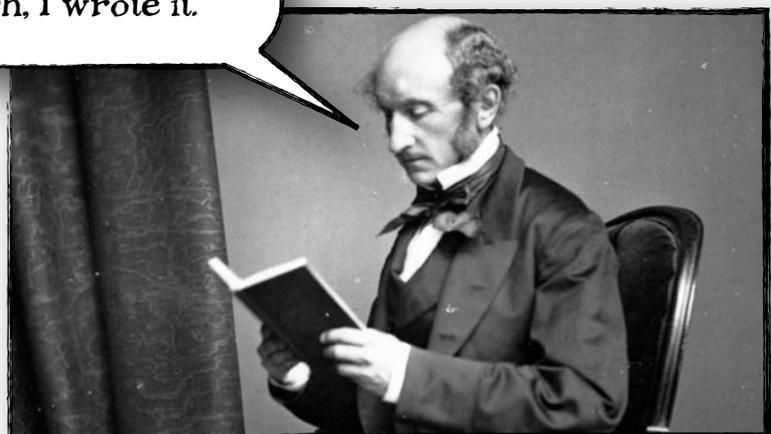
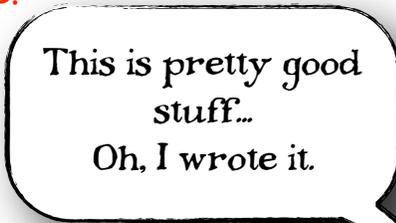
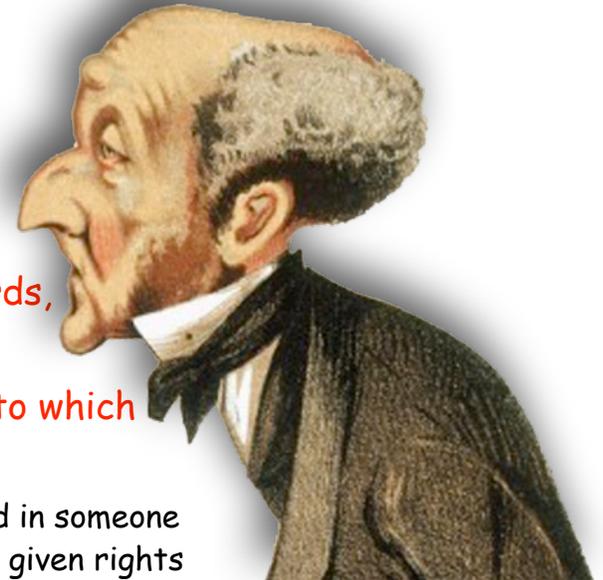


Thanks for that anyway.

THESE POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WERE NOT LOST ON JOHN STUART MILL WHO, IN HIS TREATISE ON UTILITARIANISM, TRIED TO DEAL WITH SOME OF THEM.

Mill admits that certain examples of justice and injustice merit a higher consideration than the mere meting out of pleasure. For example, he agrees that we:

1. Should not deprive anyone of his or her personal liberty, property, or any other thing that belongs to him or her by law. In other words, do not violate a person's legal rights.
2. Should not take or withhold from anyone that to which they have a moral right.
  - This is especially important if a bad law has resulted in someone either being deprived of their rights or having been given rights they do not deserve.
  - The fact that these rights are conferred by law makes them legal rights;
  - however, the fact that the law may have deprived someone of rights that they deserve makes those rights (prohibited by the law) moral rights.
    - Think of the segregation laws prior to the 1960s.
3. Should give to those who are deserving, and withhold from those who are not deserving (the notion of distributive justice).
4. Should keep promises that we have entered into voluntarily.
5. Should not show partiality in circumstances in which impartiality is considered appropriate.



## CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

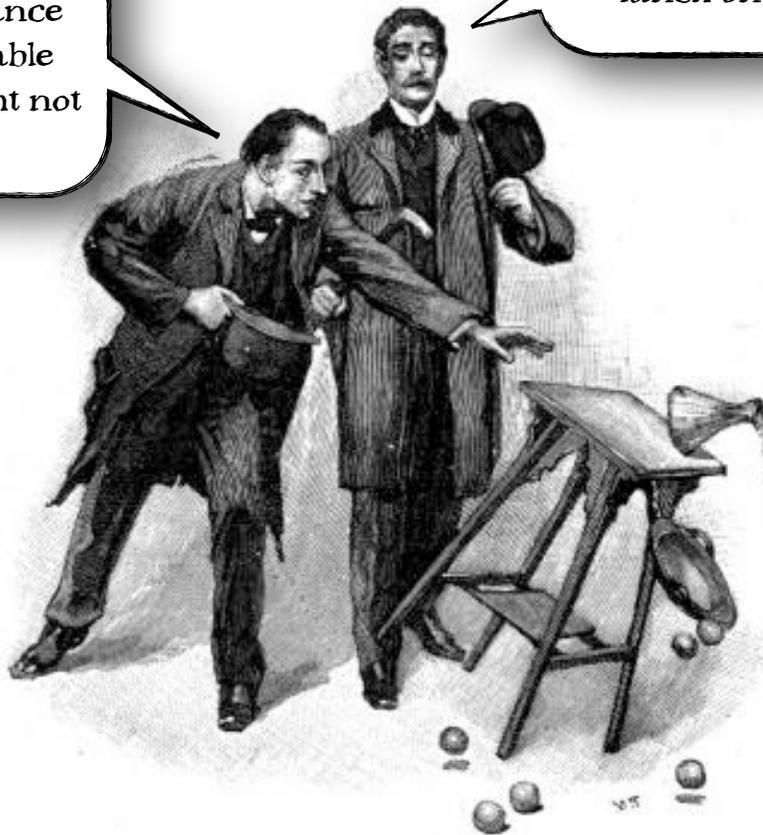
Utilitarianism is most appropriate for policy decisions, as long as a strong notion of fundamental human rights guarantees that it will not violate rights of small minorities.

## WHEN USING UTILITARIANISM, TRY THE FOLLOWING EXERCISE:

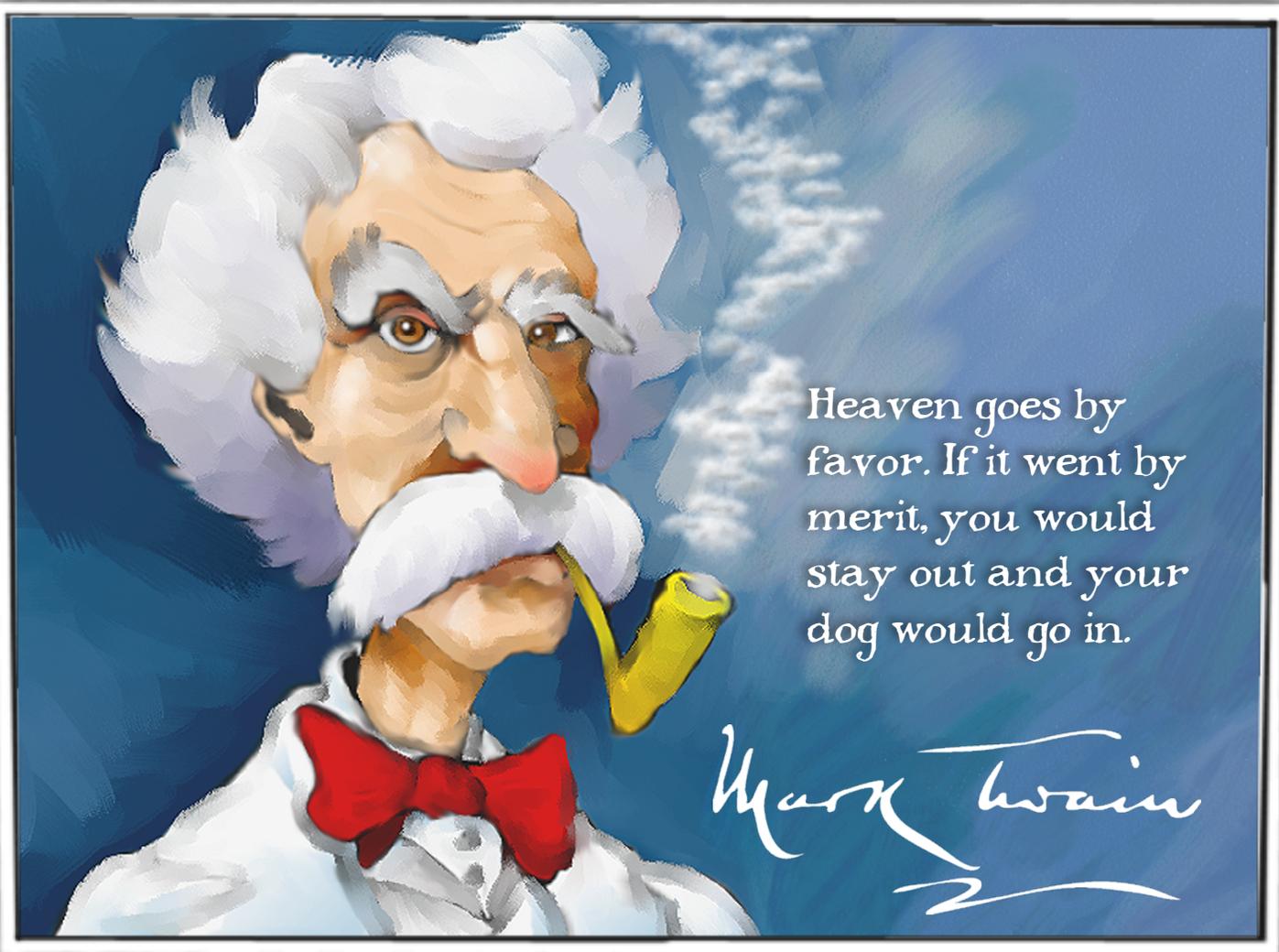
- Ask yourself which of the alternatives you're exploring will generate the greatest benefit (or the least amount of harm) for the greatest number of people?
- However, keep in mind that the precepts of justice require that you consider the merit of those who are affected by the consequences of your action.

You see Watson. It's all about consequences. I push over the table. Lunch falls on the floor. And now we go hungry till dinner time. Had I but considered my actions in advance based on the probable consequences, I might not have done this.

Oh Holmes! You give me a headache with all your bloody calculations. Let's just make up some rules. For example, "Never throw lunch on the floor."



From *The Case of the Overturned Lunch*, by Arthur Conan Doyle



Heaven goes by  
favor. If it went by  
merit, you would  
stay out and your  
dog would go in.

*Mark Twain*