

J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863)

PHIL 102, UBC

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John Stuart Mill

(1806-1873, England)



Mill “had a lifelong goal of reforming the world in the interest of human well-being”

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/>

Groups on moral questions

Read the question assigned to your group (see instructions on the doc) and write down:

- Your own answers to the question
- What you think a utilitarian who agrees with Mill would say about it

<http://is.gd/PHIL102Mill>

When asking what is right/wrong morally, what to evaluate?

Person

- Intention
- Motive
- Habitual disposition to act in some ways

Action

- What kind of act is it?
- What was actually done?

Consequences

- What results from the action?



Mill focuses here

Consequentialism

“whether an act is morally right depends only on *consequences* (as opposed to the ...intrinsic nature of the act or anything that happens before the act).”

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on consequentialism:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/#ClUtI>

Hedonistic consequentialism

- **Value hedonism:** “all and only pleasure is intrinsically valuable and all and only pain is intrinsically disvaluable.”
-- Internet Encycl. of Philosophy:
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/hedonism/#SH1b>
- **Hedonistic consequentialism:** we can determine the moral value of consequences, and therefore of acts, by how much pleasure/pain produced

Utilitarianism, Chpt 1

“There ought either to be some one fundamental principle or law, at the root of all morality, or if there be several, there should be a determinate order of precedence among them...” (1).

Why?

What is that principle, for Mill?

Simplified overview of Mill's Utilitarianism

We can judge the moral value of actions by the degree of happiness they tend to produce for the sentient creatures involved



Greatest Happiness Principle

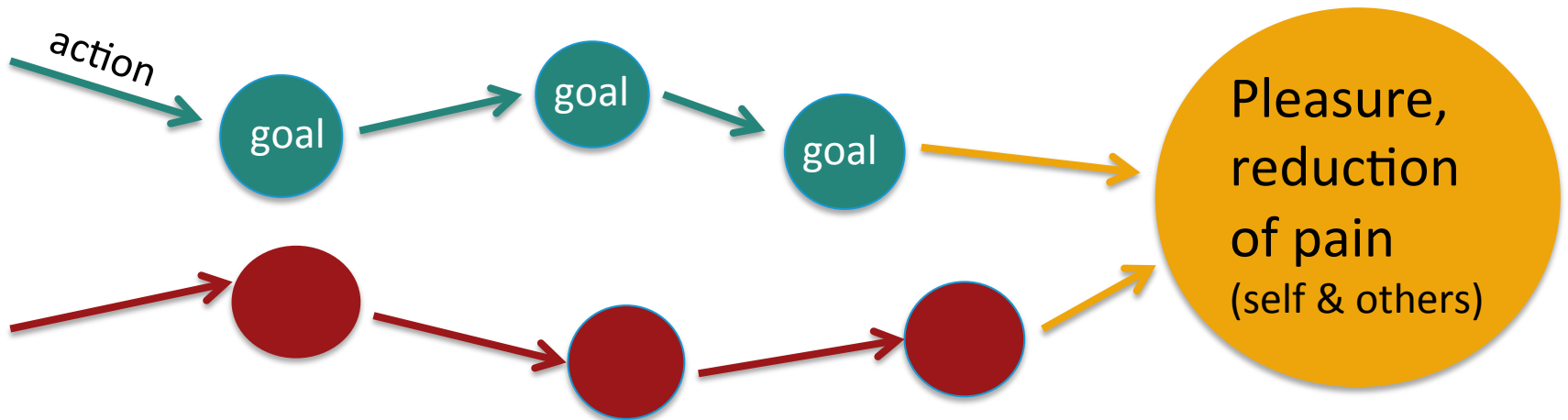
“actions are [morally] right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, [morally] wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Mill, Chpt. 2, p. 2).

- “happiness” is defined in terms of pleasure and reduction or absence of pain

Support for GHP

(more in Chpt. IV)

- “pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the **only things desirable as ends**” (2)
- Mill on the highest good (5)
- The “end of human action is necessarily also the **standard of morality**” (5)



Pleasure as only intrinsic value (p. 2, & Chpt 4)

So



Use happiness, defined in terms of pleasure, to evaluate consequences of acts

So



Decide if acts moral/immoral with Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP)

Which consequences to look at to do so?

Actual
consequences
the act had?

What was
intended as
consequence?

Usual
consequences
for this kind of
act?

Consequences for whom?

- Sentient beings (5)
- Not the whole world for all actions (6)
- Impartiality (5)



Different kinds of pleasures

Mill distinguishes between different kinds of pleasures in Chpt. 2:
intellectual & sensual

Why?



Which kind of pleasure is best, and why?

Those who have experienced both prefer the "higher," "intellectual" pleasures (3-5)



A "pig satisfied"



A "Socrates dissatisfied"

Do we have to calculate consequences each time we act?

- No; we can use “subordinate principles” from the “fundamental principle” (GHP) (8)
- These are drawn from human experience of which kinds of actions tend to promote more/less pleasure & pain (7-8)

Greatest Happiness Principle
(GHP): acts are morally right as they
tend to produce happiness

Use GHP to determine subordinate
rules by asking about usual
tendencies of kinds of actions

Subordinate rules (7-8)
e.g., lying is usually wrong (7)

Act R/W?

Act R/W?

Act R/W?

Act R/W?

Chpt IV: Argument for GHP

(optional reading)

1. Pleasure/happiness is the only thing desirable as an end goal of human action: the only intrinsically good thing
2. We should use the only intrinsically good thing to decide which acts are morally right/wrong
3. More of what is intrinsically good is better than less

True?

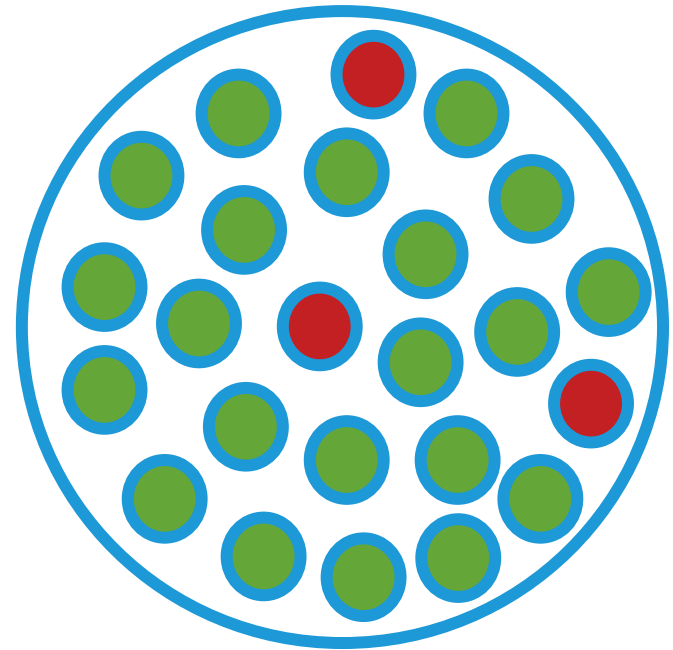


Therefore, we can judge which acts are morally right/wrong by how much happiness they produce for all involved

Chpt V: Utilitarianism & Justice

Two questions addressed here:

1. What differentiates justice from the rest of morality?
2. Would utilitarianism allow people to act unjustly if that would promote more happiness in a group overall?



Examples

What produces happiness

Study for exams

Morality

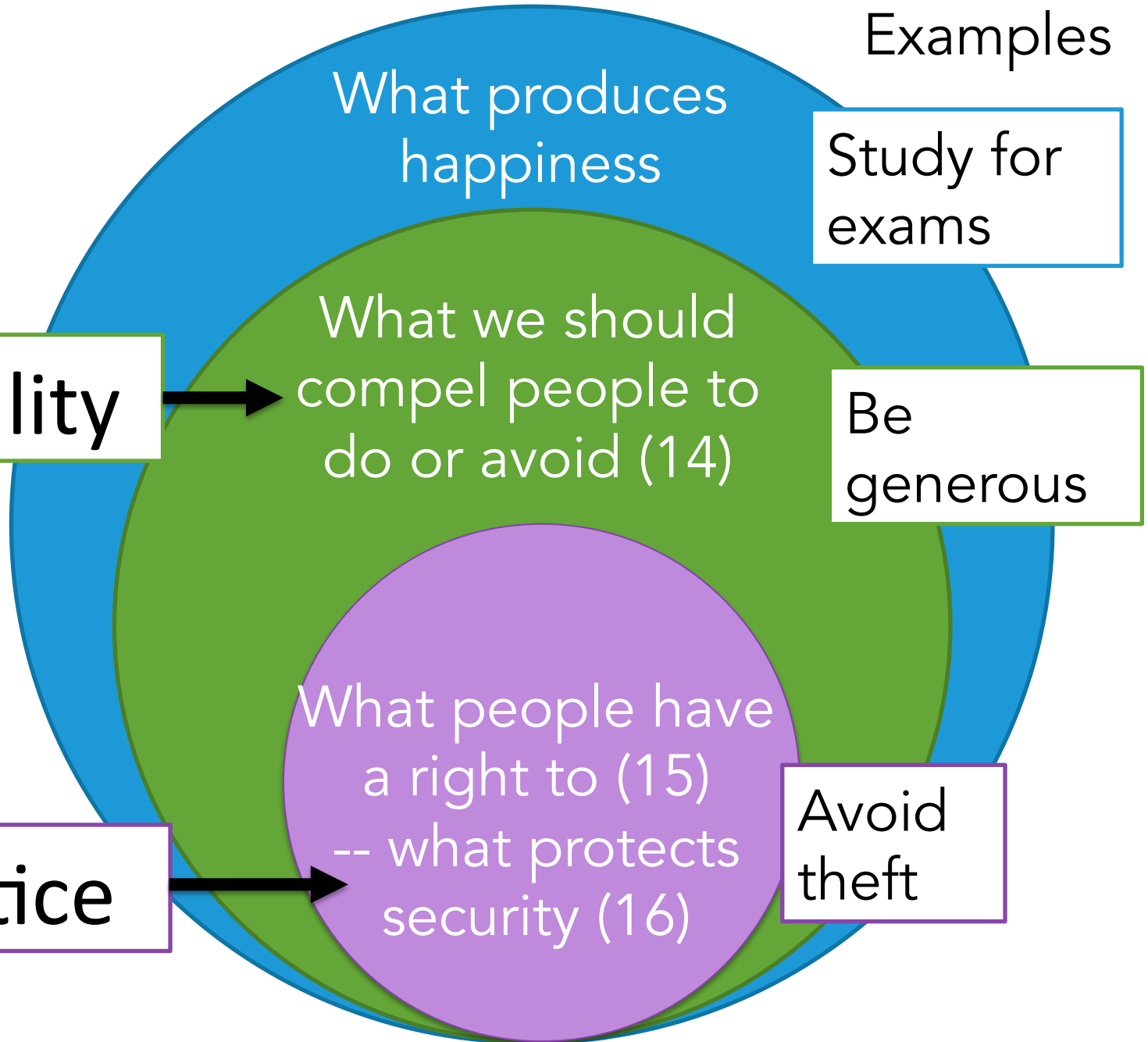
What we should compel people to do or avoid (14)

Be generous

Justice

What people have a right to (15)
-- what protects security (16)

Avoid theft



Question 2:

Would utilitarianism allow people to act unjustly if that would promote more happiness in a group overall?

How would Mill respond, and why?

Still...

Even rules of justice can be overridden sometimes by other moral duties (17).

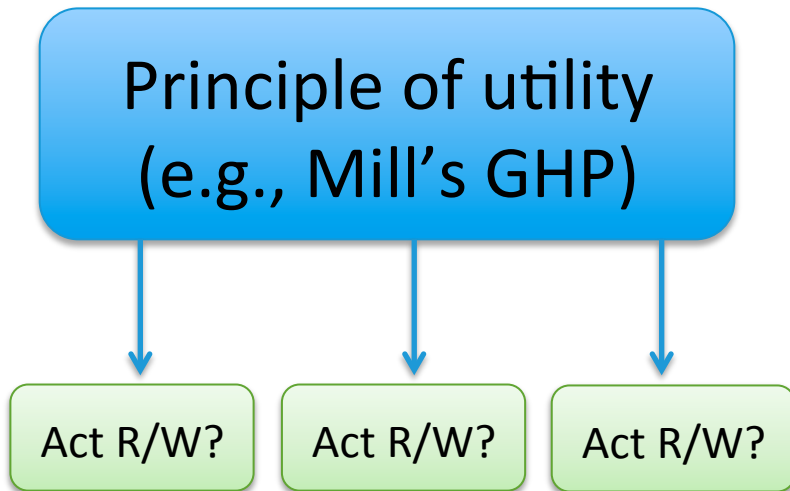


Act vs Rule utilitarianism

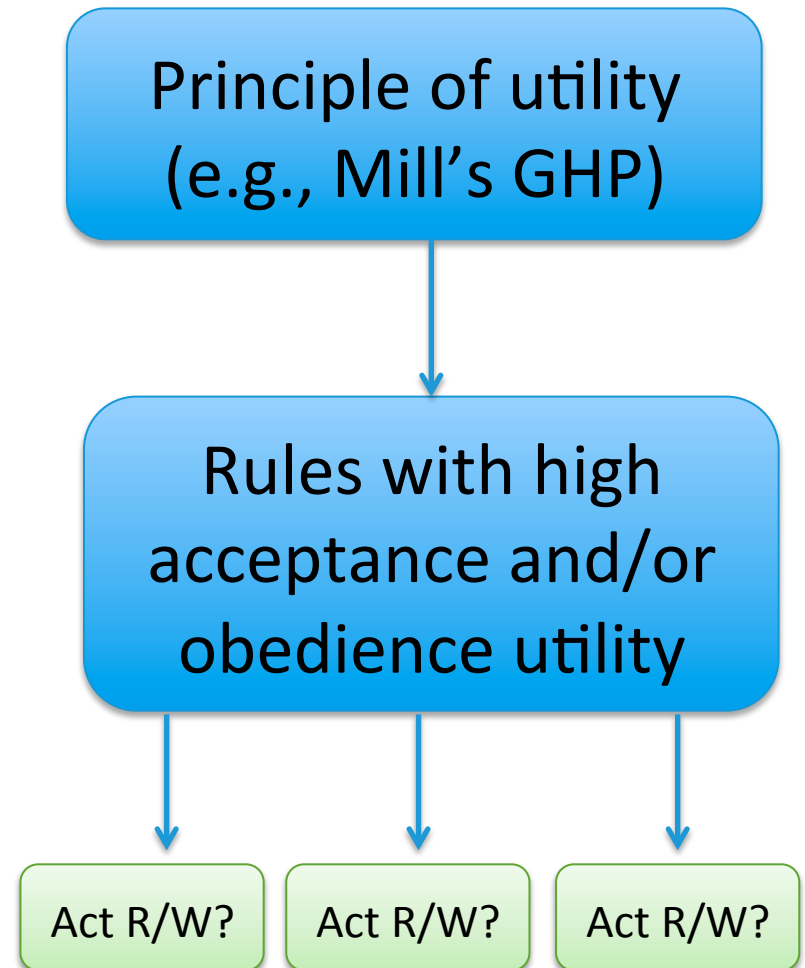
A distinction that didn't exist when Mill was writing

- **AU:** moral value of acts judged by utility of consequences of those (kinds of) acts
- **RU:** moral value of acts judged by whether they follow rules; rules judged by utility of their consequences if generally accepted and/or followed

Act utilitarianism



Rule utilitarianism



Where does
Mill's view fit?