Ethical Theories: Utilitarianism

- Why do we need to reason about complex moral problems?

- We will examine several formal ethical theories. Important things to remember:
  1. None of them can give us a definitive answer about what is right/wrong.
     They can only help us make reasoned decisions.
  2. None of them are perfect, but they are useful

- We'll examine five different ethical theories:
  1. Act utilitarianism
  2. Rule utilitarianism
  3. Kantianism
  4. Social contract theory
  5. Virtue ethics

Utilitarianism

- From English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

- Utilitarianism is based on the principle of utility:

  An action is right or wrong to the extent that it increases or decreases the happiness of the affected parties.

- Act utilitarianism: an ethical theory in which the principle of utility is applied to determine whether a specific action is good/bad
  - An action is good if it results in a net increase in happiness, and it is bad if it results in a net decrease in happiness.
  - Under this utilitarian theory, the action we should choose in any given situation is the one that maximizes overall happiness.
• Note: utilitarianism does not weigh a person’s motivation in determining whether an action is good / bad. The only thing that matters under act utilitarianism is the outcome.
  ○ Such a theory is called consequentialist.

• What factors go into a utility (i.e. cost/benefit calculation)?

• What are some of utilitarianism’s strengths?

• What are the weaknesses of act utilitarianism?
Another form of utilitarianism, known as **rule utilitarianism**: apply the principle of utility to lead us to moral rules that, if adopted by everyone, would lead to the greatest overall increase of happiness for all affected parties.

In focusing on moral rules, rule utilitarianism is similar to Kantianism but:
- **Utilitarian**: whether an action is good / bad is based on that action’s **consequences**,  
  - **Kantian**: whether an action is good / bad is based on the action’s **motivation**.

What are some of the strengths of rule utilitarianism?

What are some weaknesses of rule utilitarianism?