



# Ethical Theories: A Very Brief Overview



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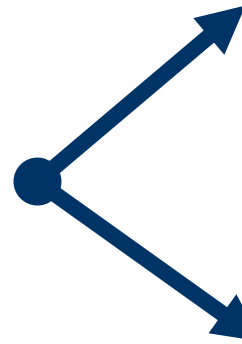
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# The Basic Question of Ethics

Historically, philosophers have disagreed about what the basic question of ethics is. They fall into two camps

Fundamental Question



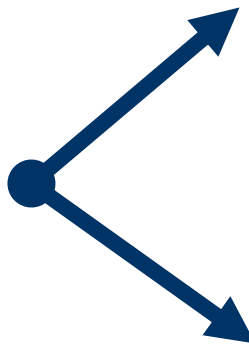
Act-oriented approaches:  
How ought I to act?

Character-oriented approaches:  
What kind of person ought I to try to be?

# Act-oriented Approaches

There are two basic ways of answer the question, “How should I act?”

Act-oriented approaches



## Consequentialism:

- Look at the consequences and choose the action that has the best consequences

## Deontology:

- Look at the rules and follow the rules (ten commandments, duty, human rights, justice).



# Consequentialist Approaches

## Issues for consequentialist approaches:

- Consequences for whom?
- Yardstick for measuring consequences
- Act or rule consequentialism



# Consequences for whom?

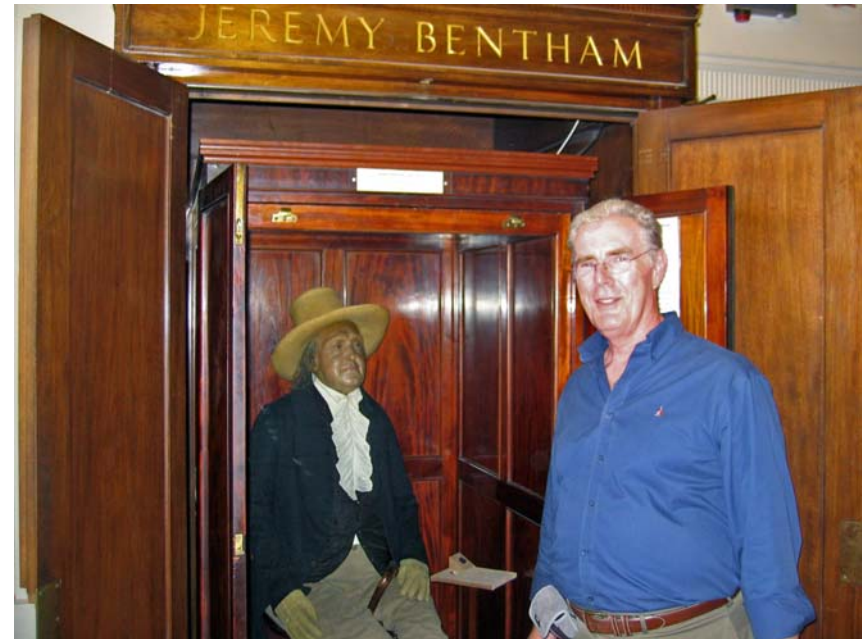
**When we consider consequences,  
whose consequences count?**

- **Just me—egoism**
- **My group—group consequentialism**
- **Everyone—utilitarianism**
  - All human beings
  - All sentient beings

# Yardstick for measuring consequences

What yardstick or standard of utility do we use when we measure consequences?

- **Pleasure/pain**
  - (Bentham)
- **Happiness**
  - (John Stuart Mill)
- **Ideals**
  - (G. E. Moore)
- **Preference satisfaction**
  - (Kenneth Arrow)





# Act or Rule Consequentialism

By definition, consequentialism considers consequences, but do we look at the consequences of:

- Each **individual act**, or
- Adopting **general rules** to guide human behavior?



# Rule-oriented Approaches

**Numerous approaches have one thing in common: rules trump consequences.**

**No matter how much good might be accomplished, you cannot break the rules (e.g., experiment on infants to develop new medicines).**



# Types of Rule-oriented Approaches

- **Religious approaches**
  - 10 Commandments
  - Islamic Sharia
- **Human Rights**
- **Justice**
- **Kant & Deontology**



# Character-oriented Approaches

- **Fundamental Question: What kind of person do I want to be?**
- **Emphasizes strengths of character necessary to human flourishing**
  - **Example: courage**
- **Emphasizes flexibility of rules for new situations**



# Pluralism

**How do these approaches relate to one another? Possible answers:**

- #1: One is right, others are wrong
- #2: Each tells part of the story, none tells the whole story