



Ethical Theories: A Very Brief Overview



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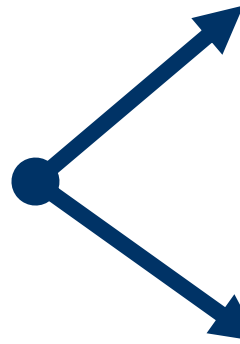
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The Basic Question of Ethics

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

Fundamental Question



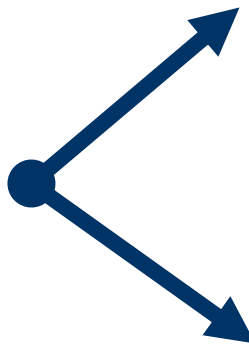
Act-oriented approaches:
How ought I to act?

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?

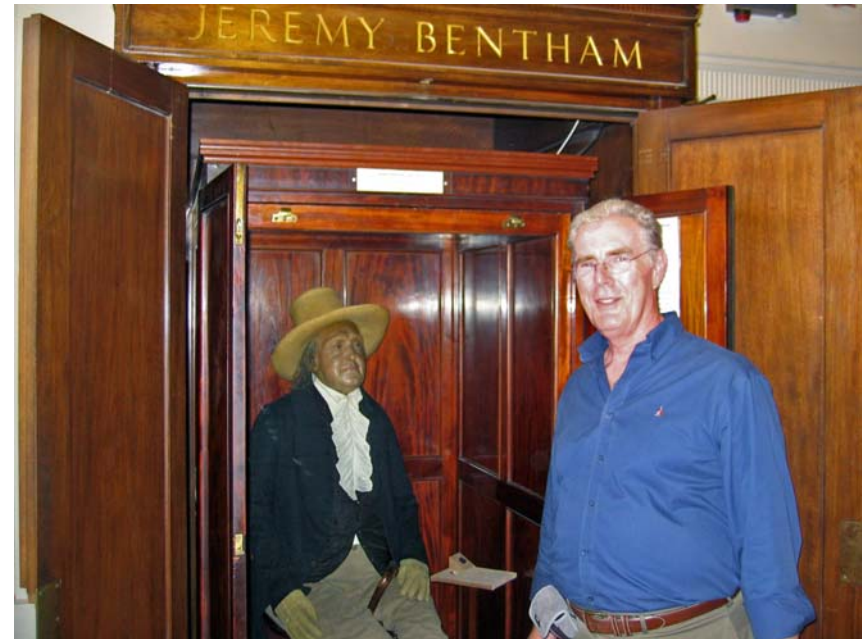
**When we consider consequences,
whose consequences count?**

- **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