Utilitarianism:

Act always so as to promote the greatest good for the greatest number of persons.
The needs of the many...

- [YouTube](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eViil0DyKssl&feature=related)

...outweigh the needs of the few or, the one....
Utilitarianism is **hard universalism** – that is, there is an absolute, universal principle of morality which is not subject to cultural interpretation.

Utilitarianism is also a **consequentialist theory** – in that only the consequences of an act count – not the intentions which precipitated the act.

Utilitarianism asks us to consider the total good or bad which will obtain from any given action. In other words, **consequences count and individual desires may be subordinated for the good of the majority of the members of society!**
Jeremy Bentham:

Bentham, one of the earliest founders of Utilitarianism was an English philosopher and political radical.

Although he never practiced law, Bentham did write a great deal of philosophy of law, spending most of his life critiquing the existing law and strongly advocating legal reform. Throughout his work, he critiques various natural accounts of law which claim, for example, that liberty, rights, and so on exist independent of government. In this way, Bentham arguably developed an early form of what is now often called “legal positivism.”

He devised a plan for the now infamous “Panopticon”—a model prison where all prisoners would be observable by (unseen) guards at all times—a project which he had hoped would interest the Czarina Catherine the Great. After his return to England in 1788, and for some 20 years thereafter, Bentham pursued—fruitlessly and at great expense—the idea of the panopticon. Fortunately, an inheritance received in 1796 provided him with financial stability.

By the late 1790s, Bentham’s theoretical work came to have a more significant place in political reform. Still, his influence was, arguably, still greater on the continent. (Bentham was made an honorary citizen of the fledgling French Republic in 1792, and his The Theory of Legislation was published first, in French, by his Swiss disciple, Etienne Dumont, in 1802.)
The Goal:

To derive a **quantifiable, inclusive and universalizable** standard for moral decision making.
Bentham’s Utilitarianism

- Good = Pleasure

- Pleasure includes:
  - Physical
  - Moral
  - Political
  - Religious
The Argument:

P1) All people desire pleasure and seek to avoid pain
P2) This principle does not depend on societal contexts – it is universal
P3) The power to maximize this good lies within the position of the legislator within a society

C) The sole duty of that legislator is to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number of people
Bentham’s Utilitarianism

The Moral Universe:
How should people’s pleasure or lack thereof be counted?

Answer: Equally – we cannot count the pleasure of the Covent Garden flower girl with her bottle of Gin as no more nor no less worthy than that of the wealthy couple on their way to the Opera.
Bentham's Utilitarianism

The Moral Universe:
Whose pleasure should be included in the calculus?

Answer: Every being who is capable of suffering, ...including animals.

―Lord Peter‖
Bentham’s Utilitarianism

The Hedonic Calculus
- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty – how certain are we that the act will generate pleasure
- Propinquity vs. remoteness (whether it is easy/near or difficult/far to achieve)
- Fecundity (capable of being followed by similar sensations – e.g. tequila shooters are not terribly fecund!)
- Purity (mixed or unmixed with pleasure)
- Extent – how many people will be affected by our action

Bentham’s “Auto-Icon” at University College in London
Bentham’s Utilitarianism

Strengths of Bentham’s Utilitarianism:

- **Objective & universalizable**: One does not assign priority of concern for others based on one’s own subjective definition of pleasure. The calculus requires one to act with consideration for others regardless of whether one actually does take pleasure in what others value. Pleasure is a product of sentience thus all sentient beings are included in the moral deliberations.

- **Quantifiable/measurable** – specific values are assigned to outcomes.

- **Democratic** – One’s own ends do not outweigh the ends of others nor is one necessarily required to constantly sacrifice one’s own ends.
Challenges to Bentham’s Utilitarianism:

- **Values assigned to outcomes must always reflect a bias** within a particular operating system – i.e. the test will be rigged & thus not as objective as it might appear.

- **Process is unwieldy** – there’s rarely sufficient time to perform the calculus thoroughly for every moral decision – or even for big moral decisions.

- **Future will always be uncertain** – we don’t know for sure which outcome we intend will actually produce greatest good. Further, those consequences for even small acts may reverberate throughout generations – going well beyond what may be reasonably foreseen.

- **Problem of sheer numbers** – if pleasures and pains are not qualitatively ranked then it seems justifiable to torture one person for the amusement of the many.
“It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

John Stuart Mill
Mill’s Utilitarianism

Mill’s Argument:

P1) Actions are to be judged solely in virtue of their consequences
P2) The only consequence which matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness produce by the actions
P3) In calculating the amount of happiness produced, no one’s happiness is to be counted as more important than anyone else’s.

C) Therefore the correct moral act is that which maximizes the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people
Mill’s Utilitarianism

- **Good = Happiness**
  - Happiness involves
    - **Pride** (as in Aristotle not the Christian version)
    - A love of liberty & personal independence
    - a love of power (**empowerment**) & excitement
    - **dignity** – the “**most appropriate appellation**”
Mill’s Utilitarianism

On Tyranny of the Majority, Rights and the Harm Principle:

- Mill feared that the central problem of Utilitarianism would become the “tyranny of the majority” that egregious harms to the minority would be justifiable by the benefit to the majority.
- Mill proposed the institution of rights to protect the minority from being tyrannized and to protect the majority from becoming tyrants – an end inconsistent with the good as Mill had defined it.
- However, rights were not meant to be absolute or completely inalienable. Mill established the limitations of rights based on what he called, the “harm principle.” Mill argued that “the only purpose of interfering with the life of someone is to prevent harm to others.” This position has been called “classical liberalism because of its emphasis on personal liberty.” However, these rights do not extend to “children and idiots” (see John Locke) because they are not sufficiently able to make proper decisions for themselves.
Mill on the Rights of Women:

“That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes — the legal subordination of one sex to the other — is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.”