

# Utilitarianism

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RIGHT

WRONG

Maybe?

# Utilitarianism

**Part 1: what is it?**

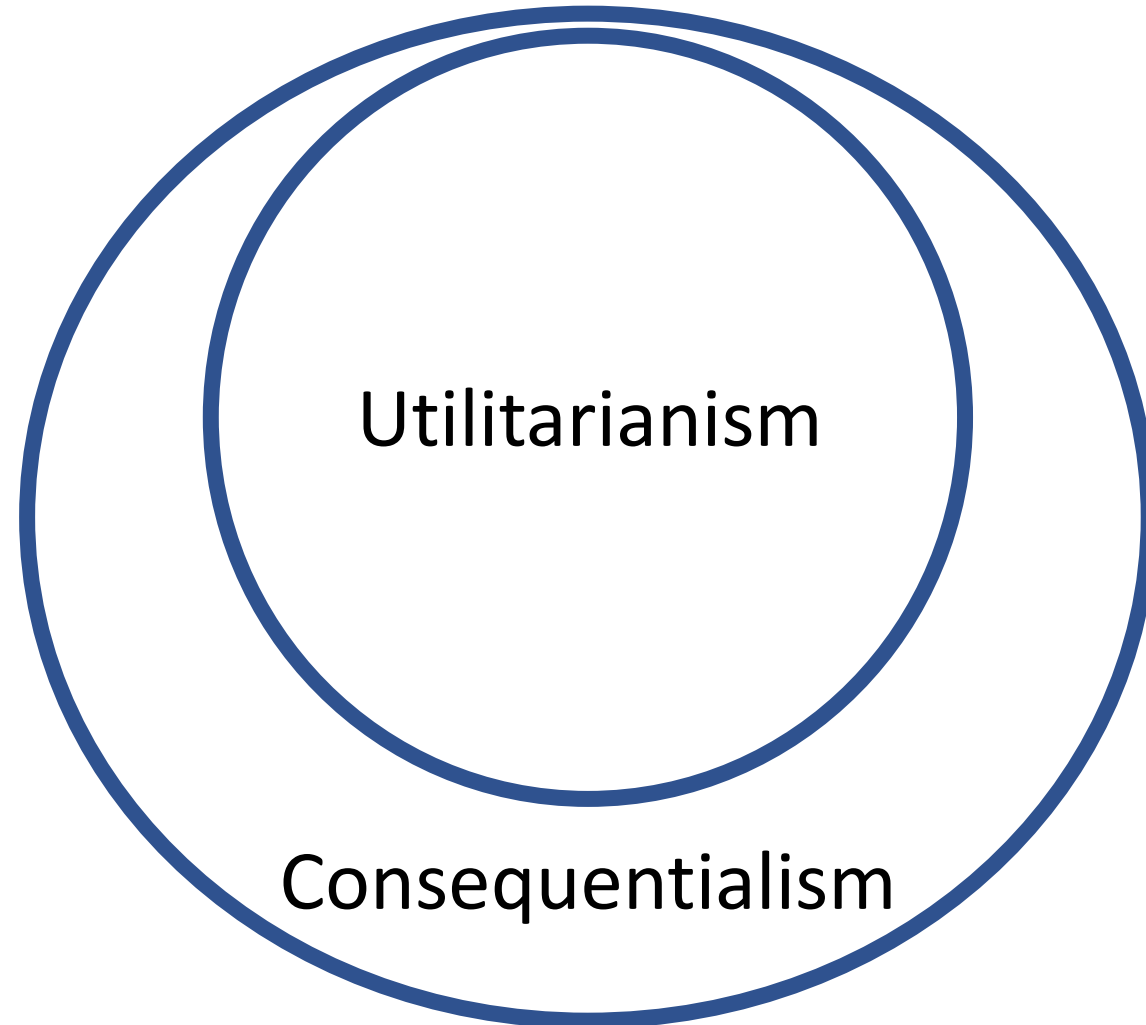
**Part 2: can it work?**

**Part 3: Any problems?**



# Utilitarianism: the commonest form of consequentialism

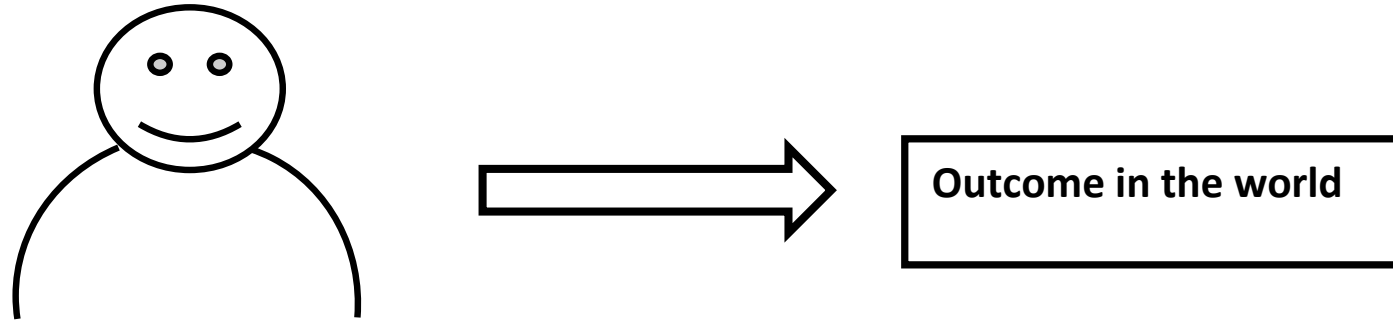
Consequentialism = morality is determined solely via a calculation of likely outcomes





# The moral analysis of actions

The three main moral realist systems give guidance at the three different features of an act:



Feature:

the agent

the act

the consequence

Moral theory:

virtue

deontology

consequentialism

- Virtue guides our choice in the end or motive of an act.
- Deontology guides our choice regarding the nature of an act itself.
- Consequentialism guides our choice when we take into account the specific circumstances of an individual instance of an act.



**Jeremy Bentham** 1748 - 1832

**An Introduction to the  
Principles of Morals and  
Legislation. 1780**



A N  
I N T R O D U C T I O N  
T O T H E  
Principles of Morals and Legislation.

---

I N T R O D U C T I O N.

C H A P. I.

**N**ATURE has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it,

INTROD.  
CHAP. I.

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Mankind  
governed by  
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INTROD.  
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Mankind  
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## Jeremy Bentham

1748 – 1832

Utilitarianism:

Morality = the  
greatest good of the  
greatest number

---



# Bentham

**Good = the maximum net pleasure with the least net pain.**

**Or “the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is in question”**



# Bentham's Felicific calculus.

## 7 "vectors" of hedonic act utilitarianism

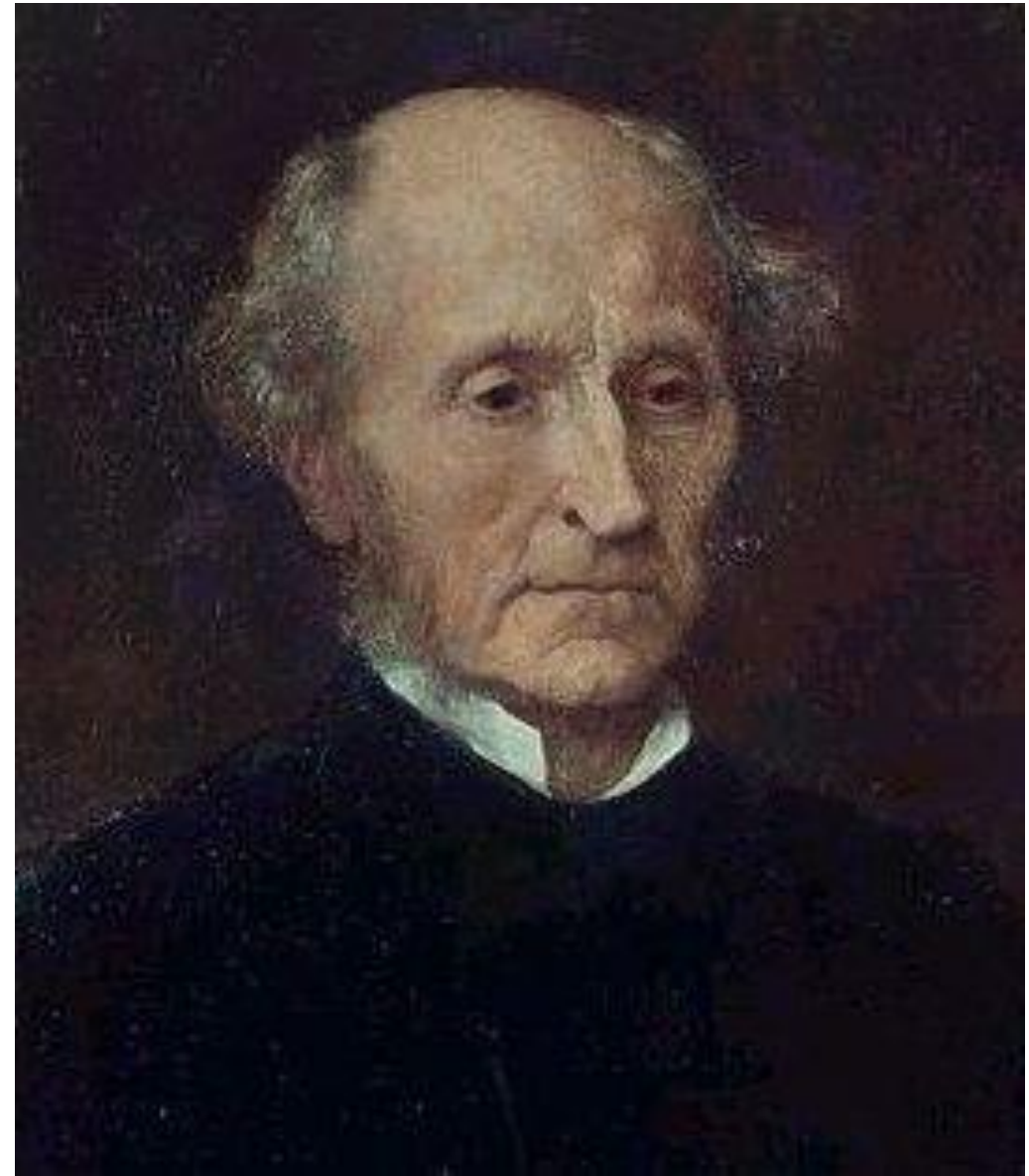
- Intensity: How strong is the pleasure / pain?
- Duration: How long will it last?
- Certainty: How likely or unlikely is it that it will occur?
- Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will it occur?
- Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
- Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
- Extent: How many people will experience it?



**J.S.Mill 1806 – '73**

**Higher and lower  
pleasures:**

So... not all pleasures are equal



Mill JS. On Liberty. 1859. London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p69.





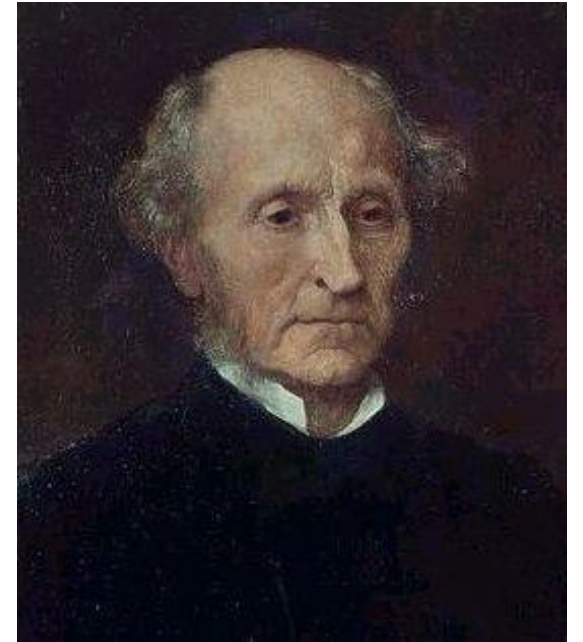
## J.S.Mill 1806 – ‘73

### Autonomy:

*“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”*

**Therefore only I can determine what constitutes my good.**

Mill JS. On Liberty. 1859. London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p69.



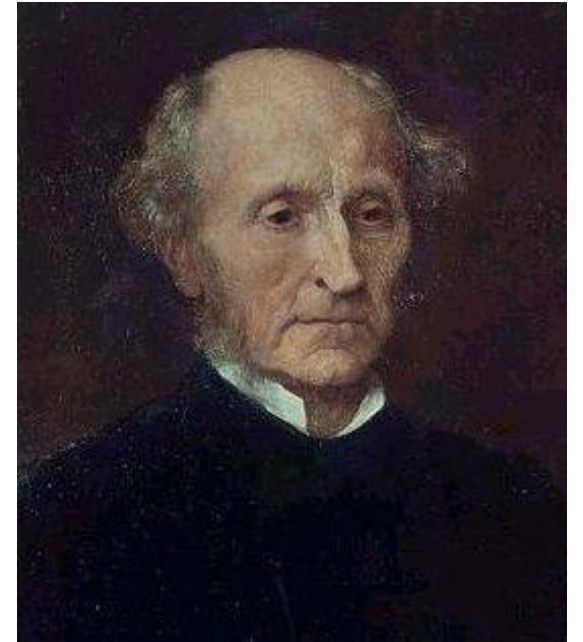
# Rule utilitarianism

**Act utilitarianism may be too impractical**

**So construct rules which have the greatest utility.**

**Strong rule utilitarianism – stick to them!**

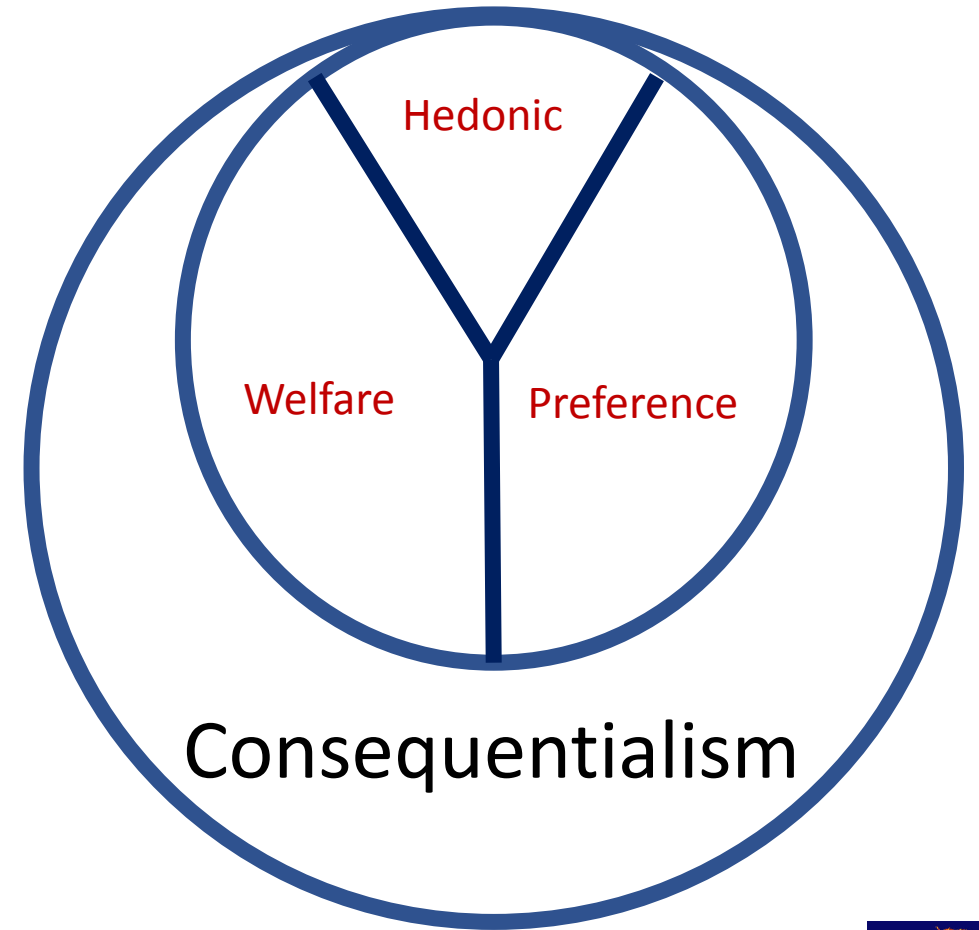
**Weak rule utilitarianism – stick to them,  
...unless there is a good reason not to!**



# So - what sort of utilitarianism?

e.g:

- Hedonic? Maximise pleasure
- Welfare? Maximise health / wellbeing
- Preference? Maximise the preferences of the group or society



# Utilitarianism

Part 1: what is it?

Part 2: can it work?

Part 3: Any problems?







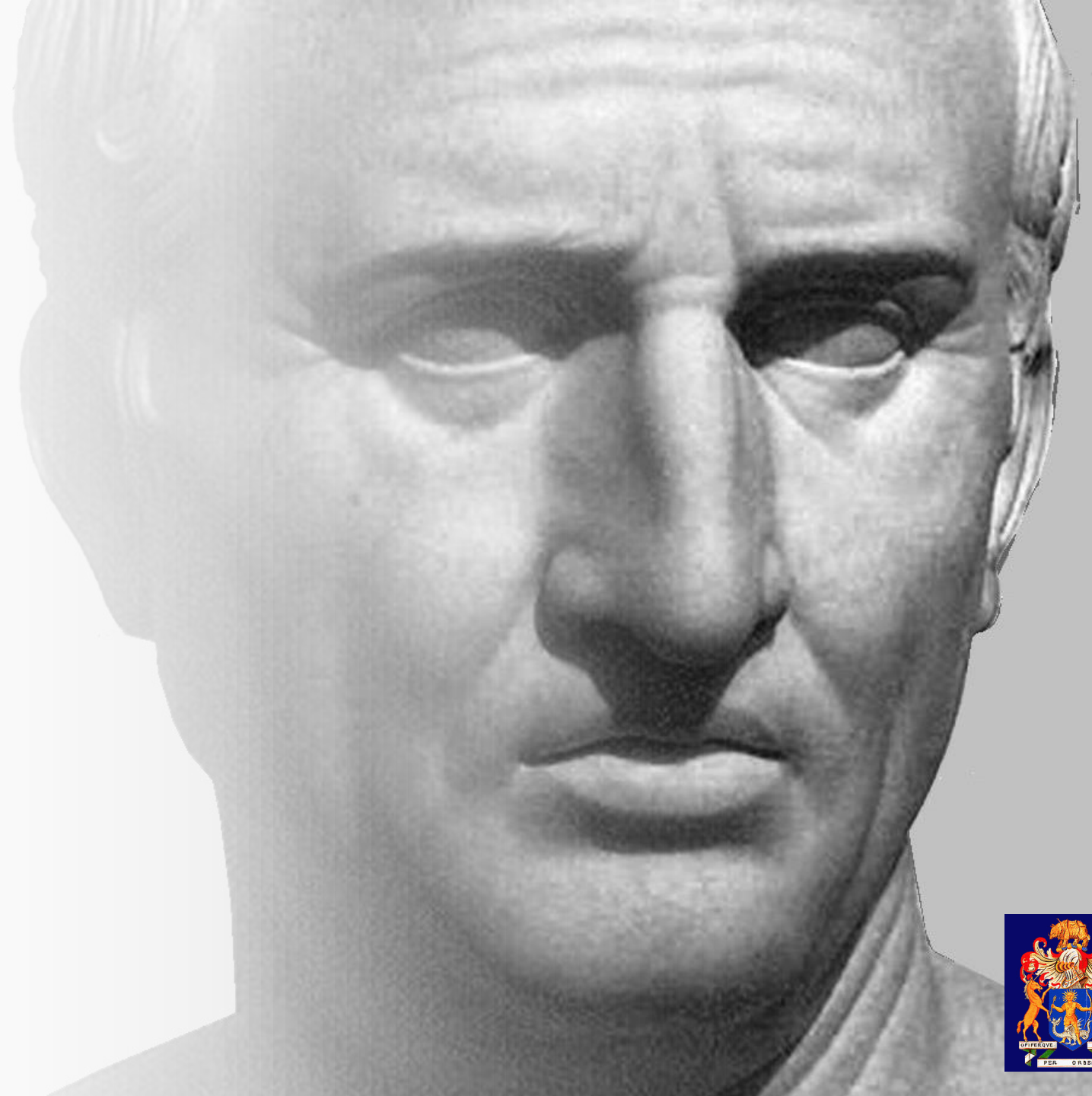
*Salus populi  
suprema lex esto*

**Cicero** 106 – 43BC

*De Legibus*

book III, part III, sub. VIII)

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The Walworth Clinic, Southwark, built 1937

THE HEALTH  
OF THE PEOPLE IS  
THE HIGHEST LAW



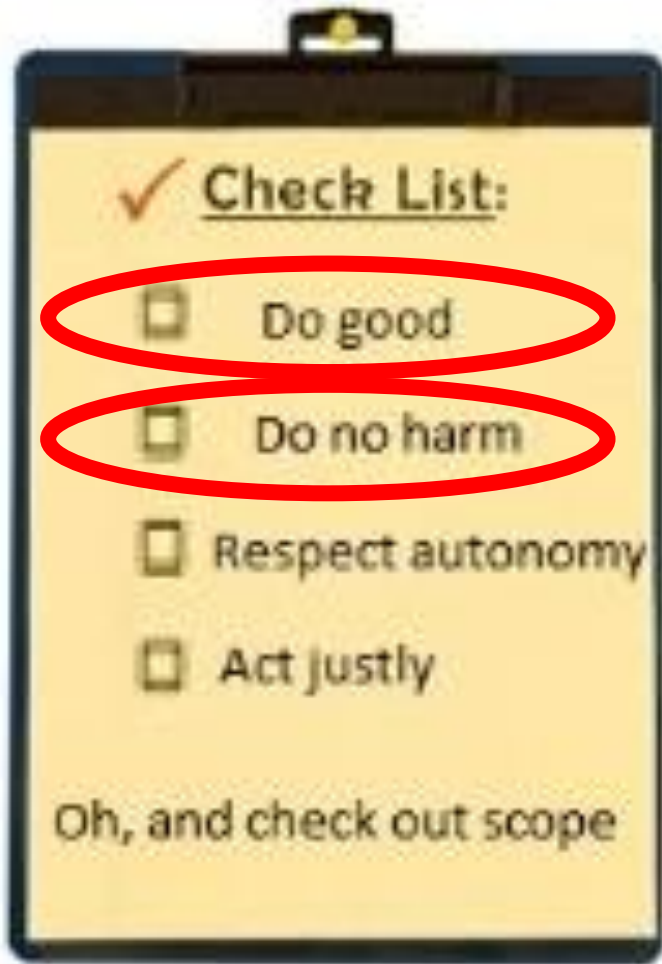
# Principlism - a checklist



Beauchamp T and Childress J. *Principles of biomedical ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 7<sup>th</sup> Edn 2013.



# Principlism - a checklist with 2/4 items Hippocratic and Utilitarian

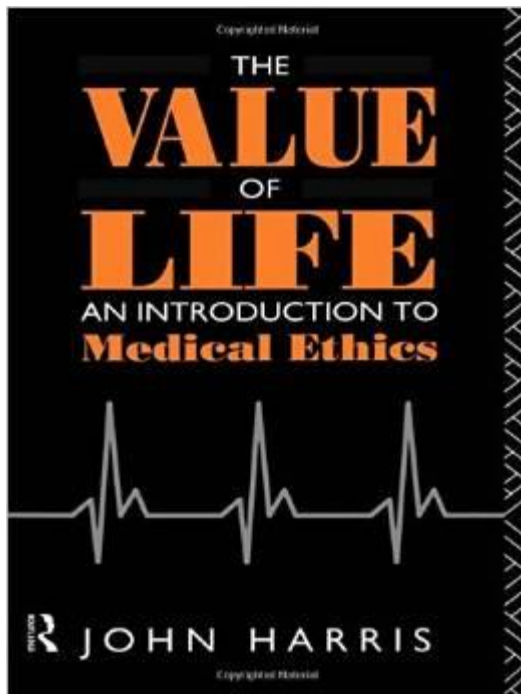


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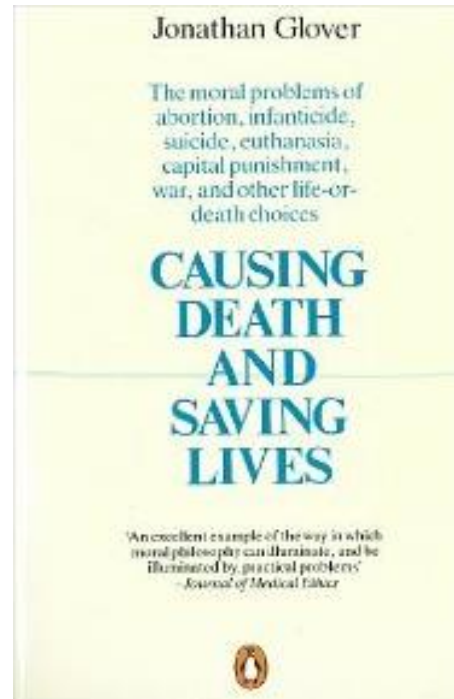




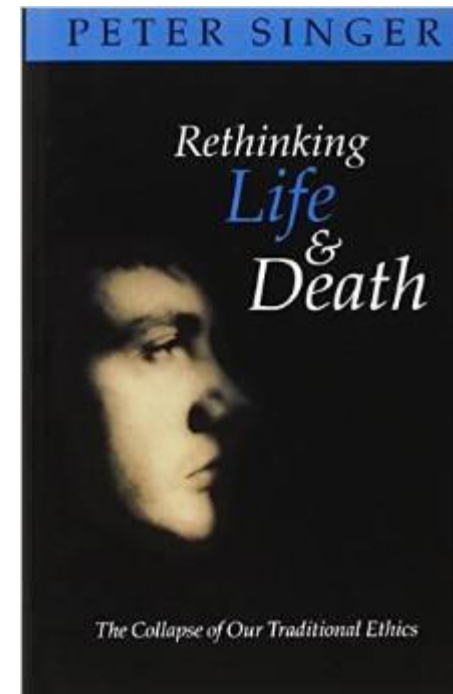
# The “New Utilitarians”



1985



1986



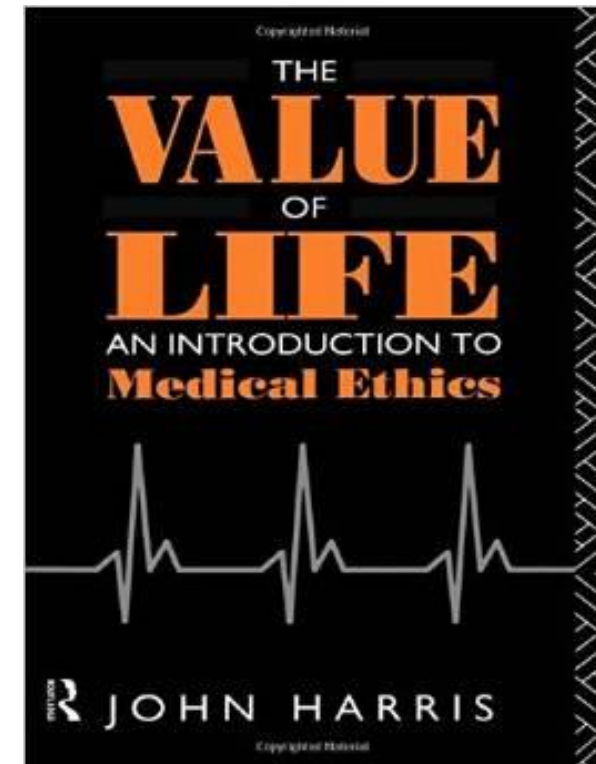
1995



# The “New Utilitarians”

John Harris 1945 -

- “A person will be any being capable of valuing its own existence”
- No moral distinction between positive and negative actions



# The “New Utilitarians”

Peter Singer 1946 -

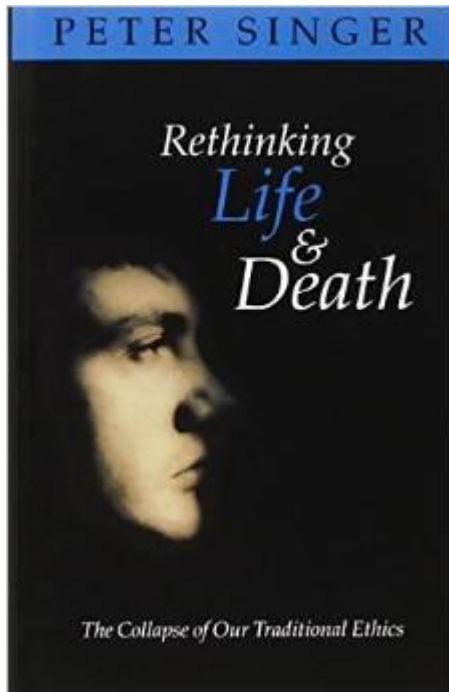
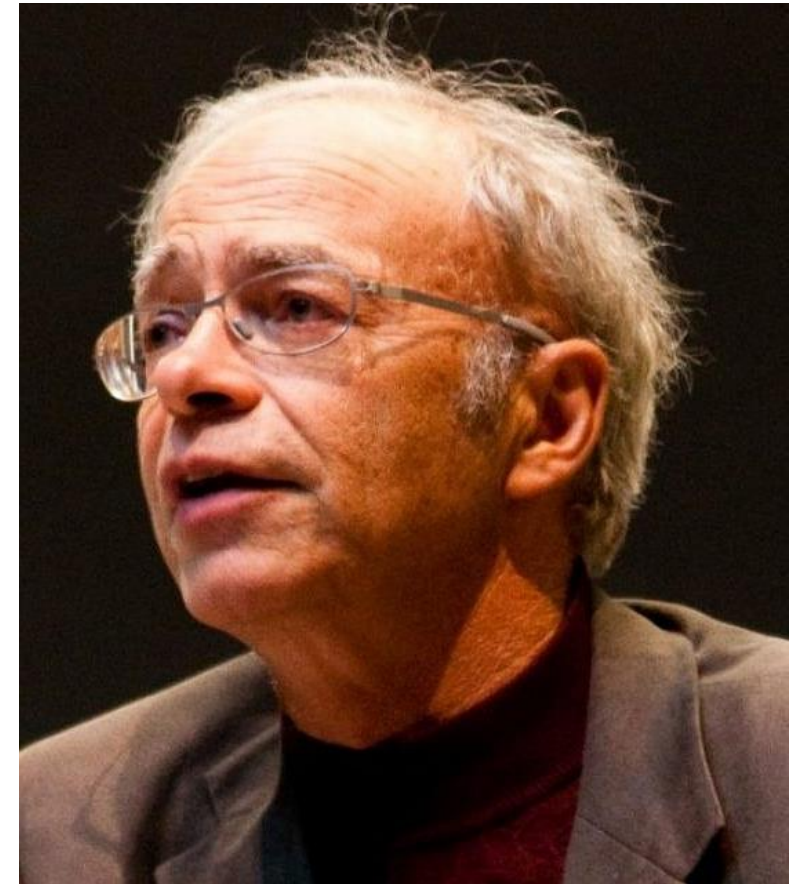
“First new commandment”:

*Recognise that the worth of human life varies*

“... We should treat human beings in accordance with their ethically relevant characteristics..... “

e.g.:

- Consciousness
- Capacity for physical, social and mental interaction with others
- Conscious preference for continued life
- Ability to have enjoyable experiences
- Effects of one’s life on others (e.g. dependents)



# QUALYs: Quality Adjusted Life Year

An important approach to resource allocation in healthcare.

1 QUALY = 1 extra year of full health

0.5 QUALY = 1 extra year of 50% utility health

So, allocate resources to maximise QUALYs





# Utilitarianism

Part 1: what is it?

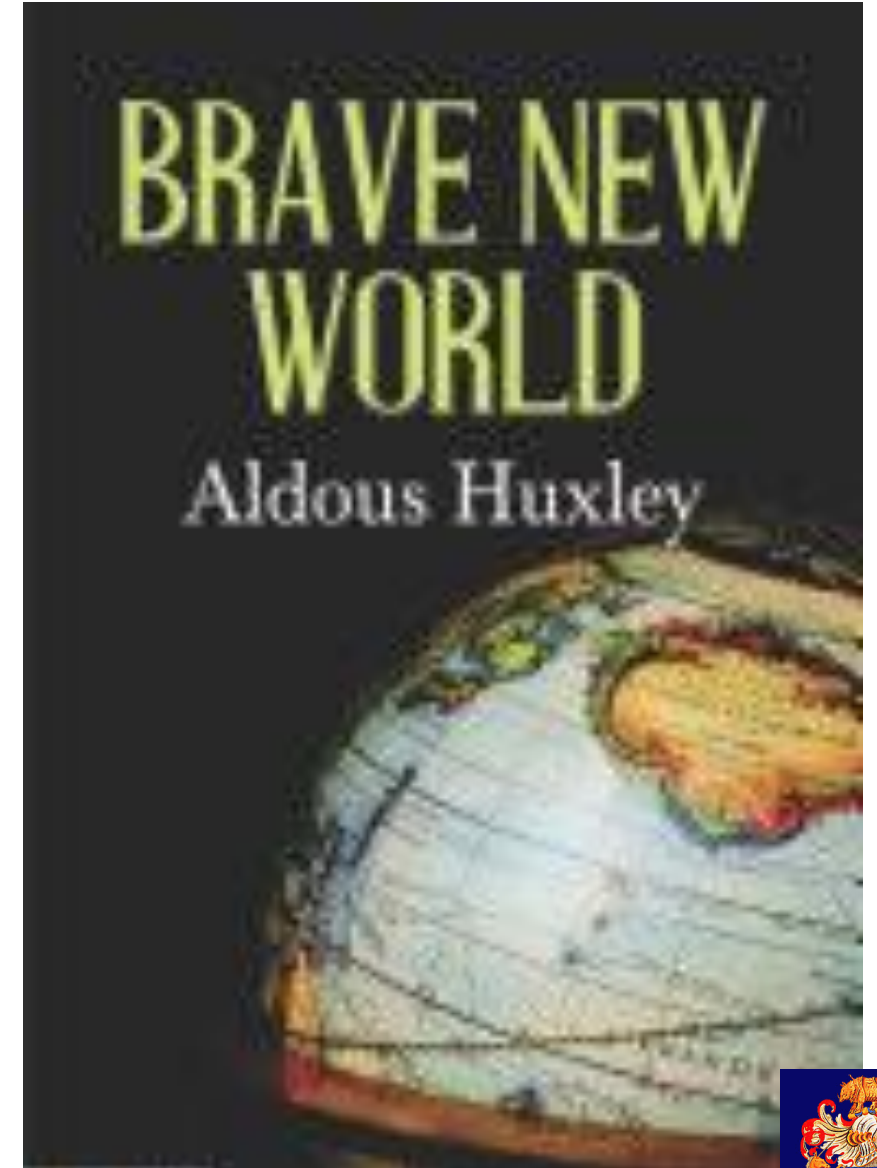
Part 2: can it work?

Part 3: **Any problems?**



# Brave New World?

Is maximising pleasure an adequate concept of human good?



# Jeremy Bentham

- “Justice” is a legal category, to maintain social order, it is not a moral requirement.
- Human rights are “*nonsense*”, and inalienable rights are “*nonsense on stilts*”.



Is this OK?





# Derek Parfit 1942 - 2017

The mere addition paradox:



Consider a really happy community of 10,000 people. Each person has 10 units of happiness (h), net, = 10,000h





# Derek Parfit 1942 - 2017

## The mere addition paradox (or the repugnant conclusion)



Consider a really happy community of 10,000 people. Each person has 10 units of happiness (h), net, = 100,000h



The community import 10,000 migrant workers who live in poverty, each with a net 1h = 10,000h. Previously they were in dire poverty, each with a net 0.5h.

This new enlarged community is better according to a utilitarian account, because the total happiness of the community has increased from 105,000h to 110,000h



Is this OK?



# Derek Parfit 1942 - 2017

## The mere addition paradox (or the repugnant conclusion)



Consider a really happy community of 10,000 people. Each person has 10 units of happiness (h), net, = 100,000h



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Is this OK?

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# Negative utilitarianism?



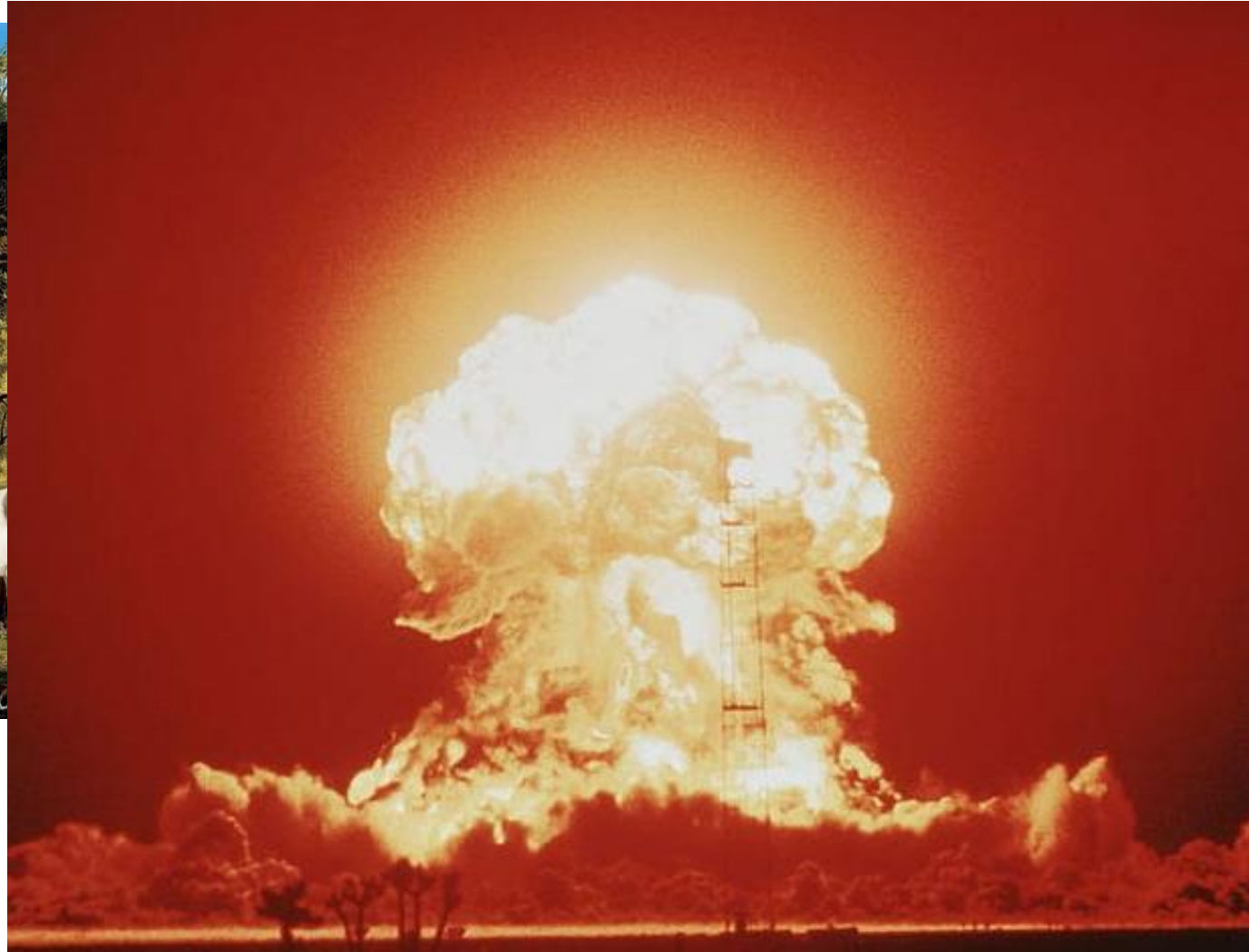
We cannot create paradise on earth.  
Perhaps we should mostly try to  
minimise suffering?



# Negative utilitarianism?



We cannot create paradise on earth.  
Perhaps we should simply try to  
minimise suffering?



Eliminating all life on earth would eliminate suffering. Is this a good result?







# QUALYs

Explicitly discriminate against:

- The elderly
- The disabled





The trolley  
problem:

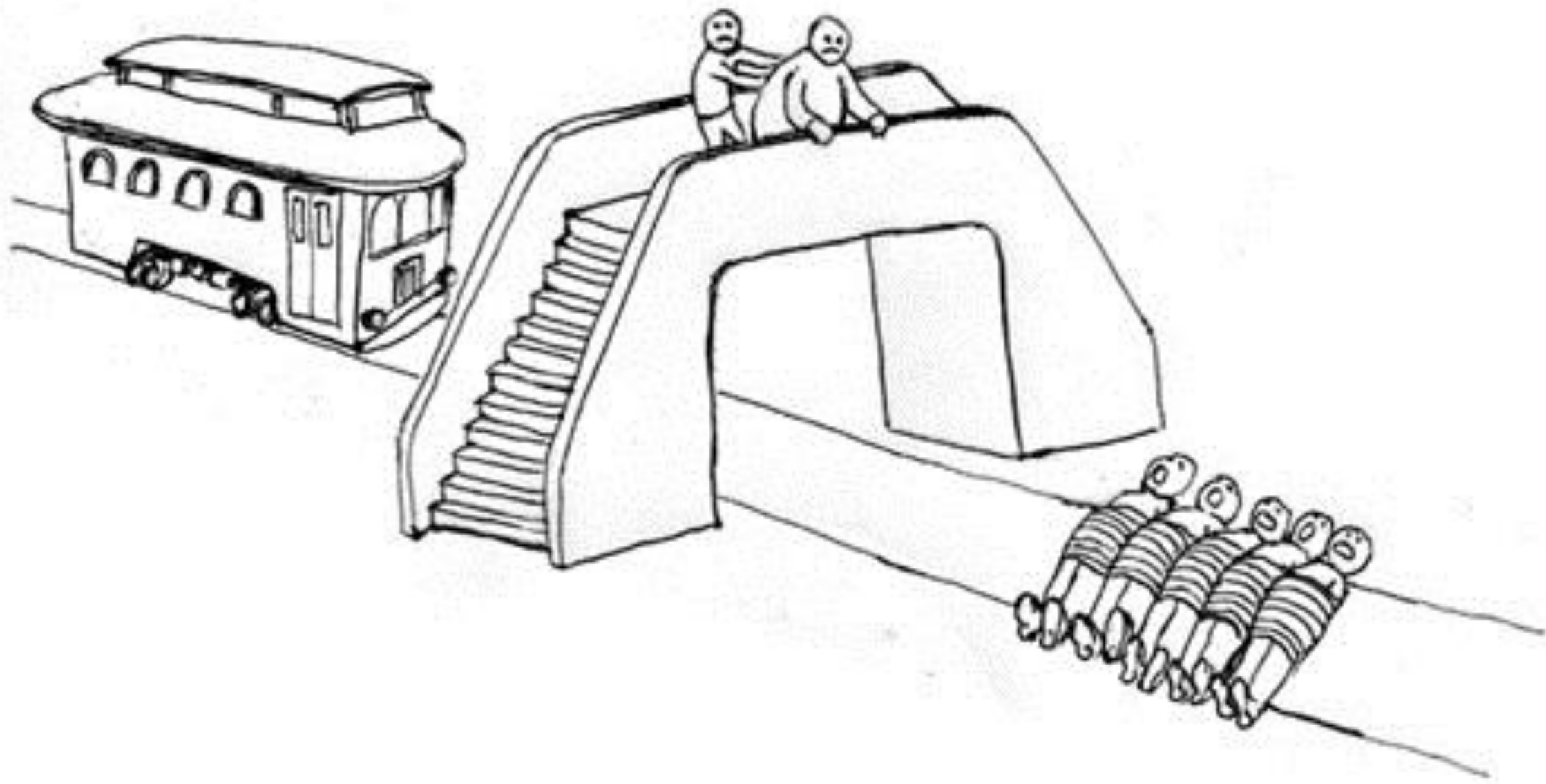
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**Philippa Foot**  
1920 - 2010

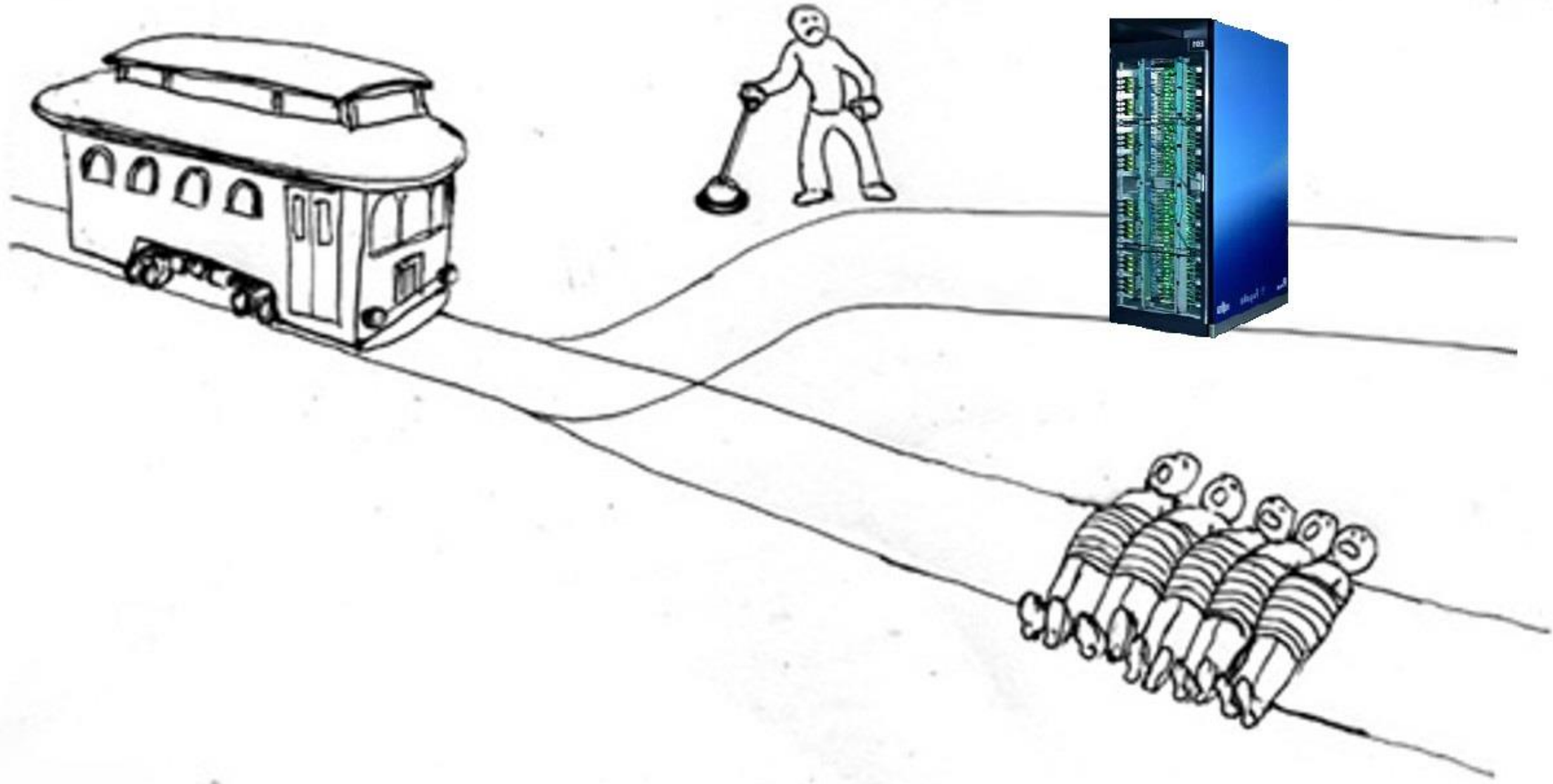












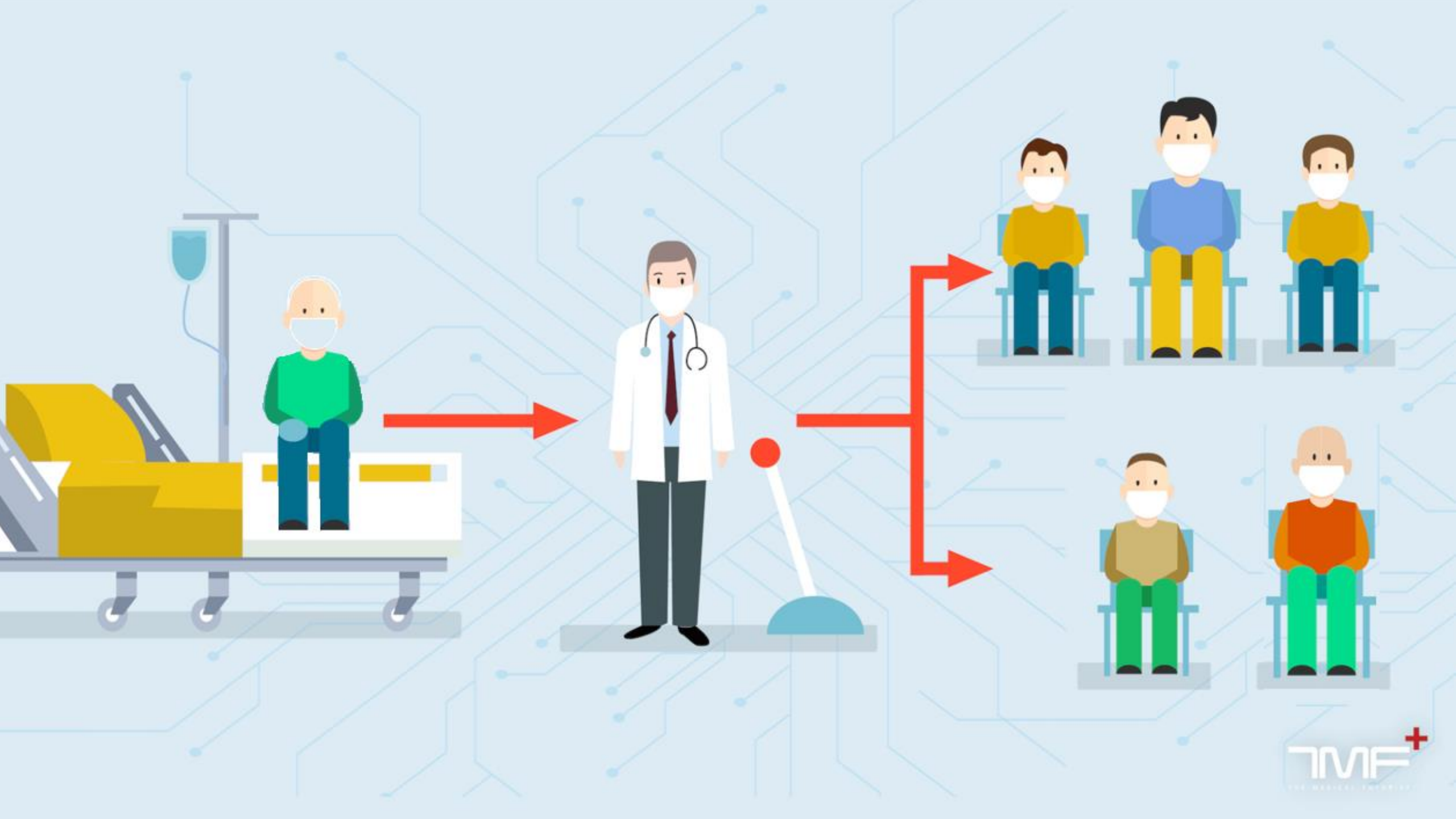


# Bernard Williams 1920 - 2003

Jim is travelling in a South American country led by a brutal dictator. He finds himself in a small town where 20 rebel sympathisers have been arrested.

The army captain in charge says that if Jim will shoot one, the others will be released in honour of Jim's status as a guest, but if he does not, they will all be shot.









# Bernard Williams 1920 - 2003

Williams argued that there is a crucial distinction between a person being killed by Jim, and being killed by the captain because of an act or omission of Jim's. The captain, if he chooses to kill, is not simply the medium of an effect *Jim* is having on the world. He is the moral actor, the person with the intentions and projects.

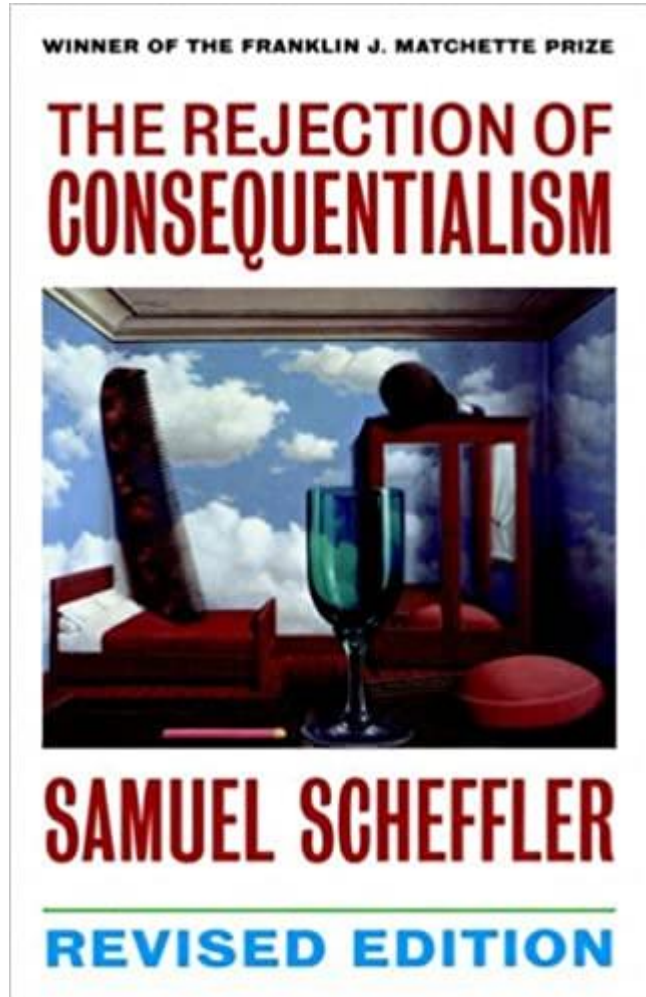
The utilitarian loses that distinction, turning us into empty vessels by means of which consequences occur.

Williams argued that moral decisions must preserve our psychological identity and integrity. We should reject any system that reduces moral decisions to a few algorithms.





# Samuel Scheffler 1951 -



1982

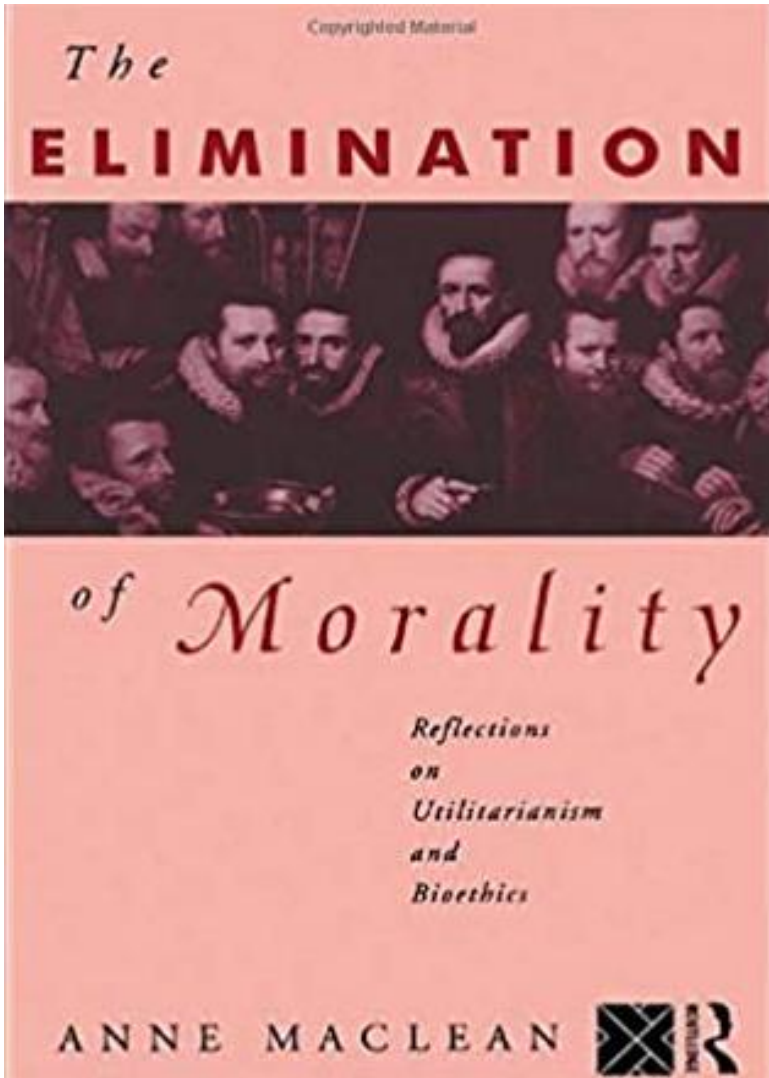
“... utilitarianism relies on implausible assumptions about human motivation, incorporates a strained and superficial view of the human good, and ignores a host of important considerations about justice, fairness and the character of human agency.....”

“... utilitarianism has gained a reputation for moral clumsiness that is unparalleled among ethical theories ..... ”

p3



# Anne Maclean 1947 -



“... At best, utilitarianism embodies an insight into how *some* moral thinking proceeds; it identifies *some* of the considerations we deem morally important....

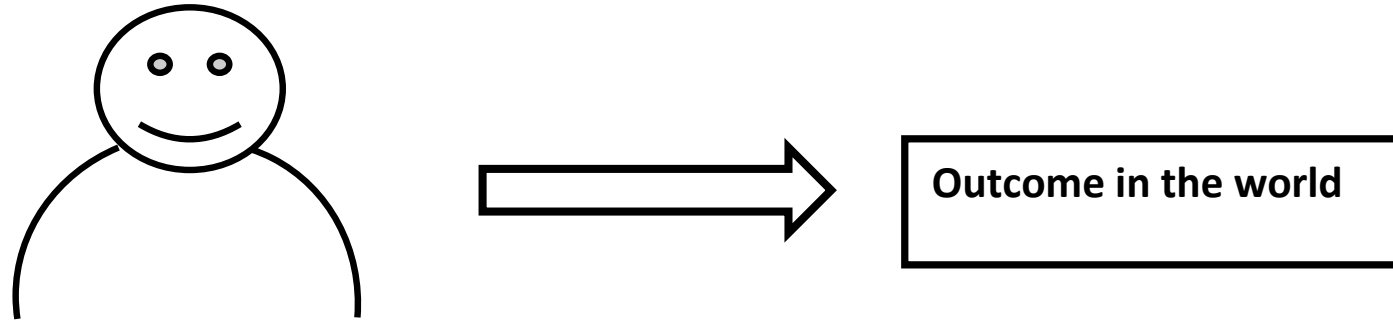
p15

1993



# Conclusion:

The **three** main moral realist systems give guidance at the **three** different features of an act:



Feature:	the agent	the act	the consequence
Moral theory:	virtue	deontology	consequentialism

- Virtue guides our choice in the end or motive of an act.
- Deontology guides our choice regarding the nature of an act itself.
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# Thank you for listening

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