

Utilitarian Ethics



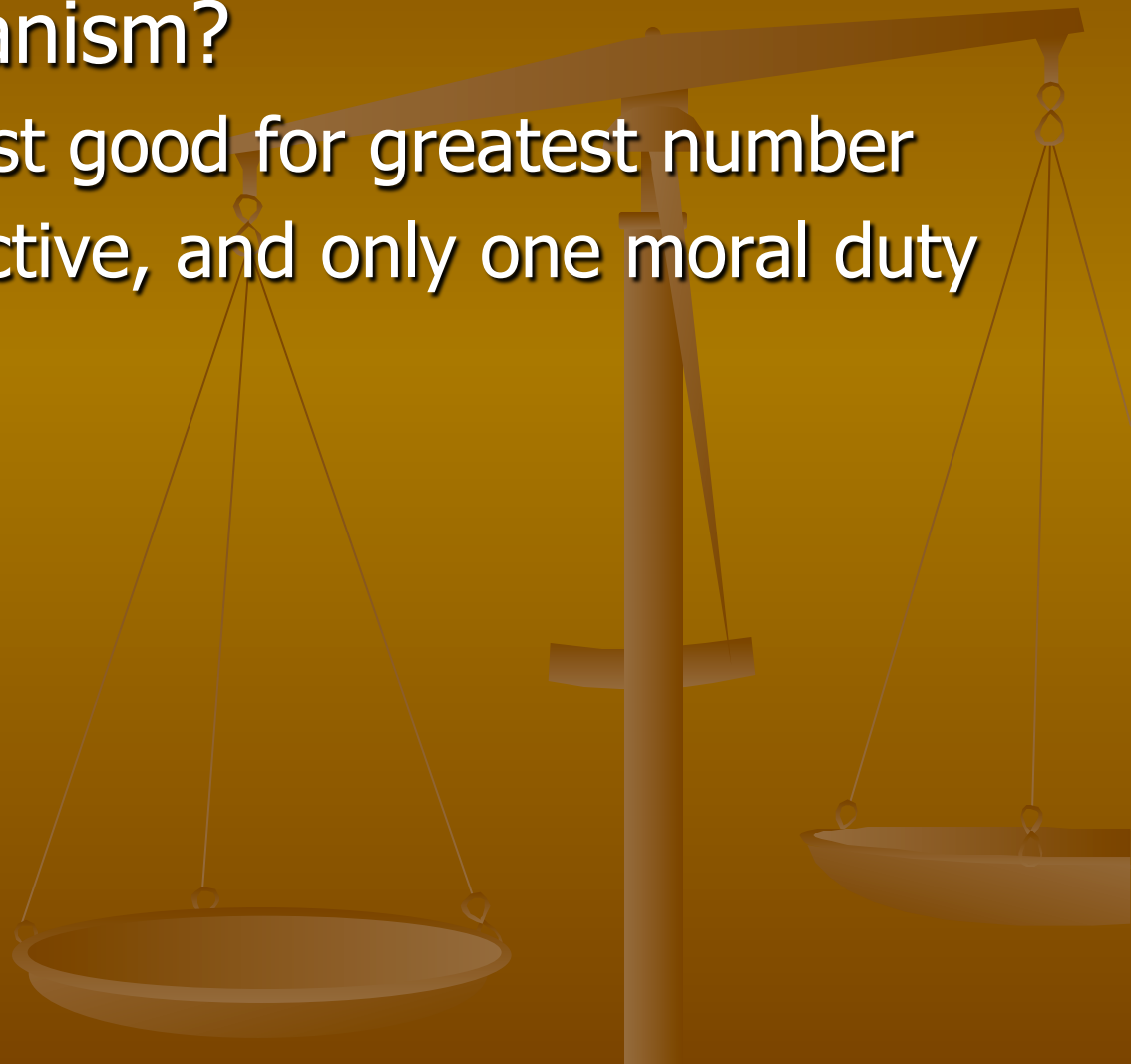
Utilitarian Ethics

■ Introduction:

- Egoism had something right in that ethics has something to do with happiness, what is good for us; life affirming
- But what's "good" for me might not be good for you; interpersonal conflicts big problem; also my good versus the good of the community
- So a solution might to extend the sphere of happiness to what's good for everyone—leads to Utilitarianism
- This, in many ways, fits our moral intuitions, especially as Christians

Utilitarian Ethics

- What is utilitarianism?
 - Ethics is greatest good for greatest number
 - It's clear, objective, and only one moral duty

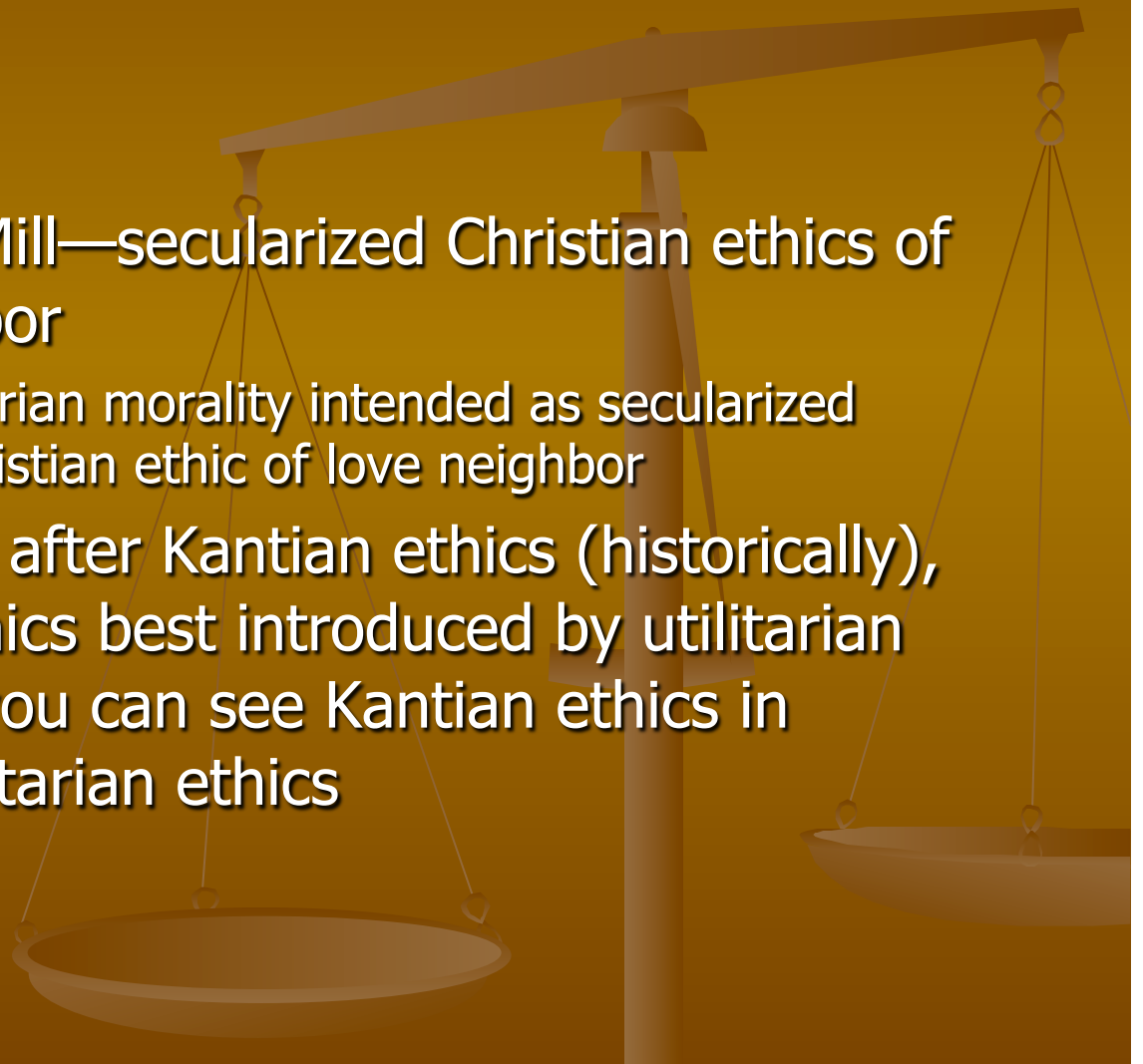


Utilitarian Ethics

- Why believe it?

- Secular

- Bentham and Mill—secularized Christian ethics of love thy neighbor
 - Agreed: utilitarian morality intended as secularized version of Christian ethic of love neighbor
 - Actually comes after Kantian ethics (historically), but Kantian ethics best introduced by utilitarian ethics so that you can see Kantian ethics in contrast to utilitarian ethics



Utilitarian Ethics



- Scientific
 - Empirically verifiable—take a poll and see what people actually prefer; remember, though this is not a conventional, relativistic ethic
- Simple
 - One moral duty
- Sensible
 - Communities matter; we calculate these kinds of things all the time
- Positive
 - Oriented to making the world a better place for the greatest number
 - Extending the correct intuition of EE—Morality has to do with well being, pursuit of Good, making life better—consequences count

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■ Problems

- Problems with hedonism (theory of value); (that is problem with early version of utilitarian ethics)
 - All pleasures on a level—on the quantitative version; better to be a pig than Socrates (Socrates was dissatisfied much of the time, but pig is usually satisfied)
 - Fewer sensed pains, more consistent sense pleasures; lower pleasures indistinguishable from higher—but this is against our intuitions

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- No moral distinctions between pleasures
 - What is the objective Good is defined as what is desired
 - Note the difference here between conventional relativism & utilitarian ethics—subjective vs. objective
 - But bad things are desired!
 - If Ted Bundy experience is more pleasurable than Mother Teresa, then what he does is better!
 - If same, no moral difference between them, but that's wrong, some things more desirable (i.e., should be desired), but you can't get that out of hedonism
 - Morality versus non moral good
- The pleasure machine

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- Mill's response: that's right; have to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures; try to keep distinctives
 - Morality: human beings like both higher and lower; higher is better—but on what grounds?
 - People, all things being equal, prefer higher; more like prodigal son—if try both, prefer higher (unless get addicted)
 - So still based on empirical data—preferences

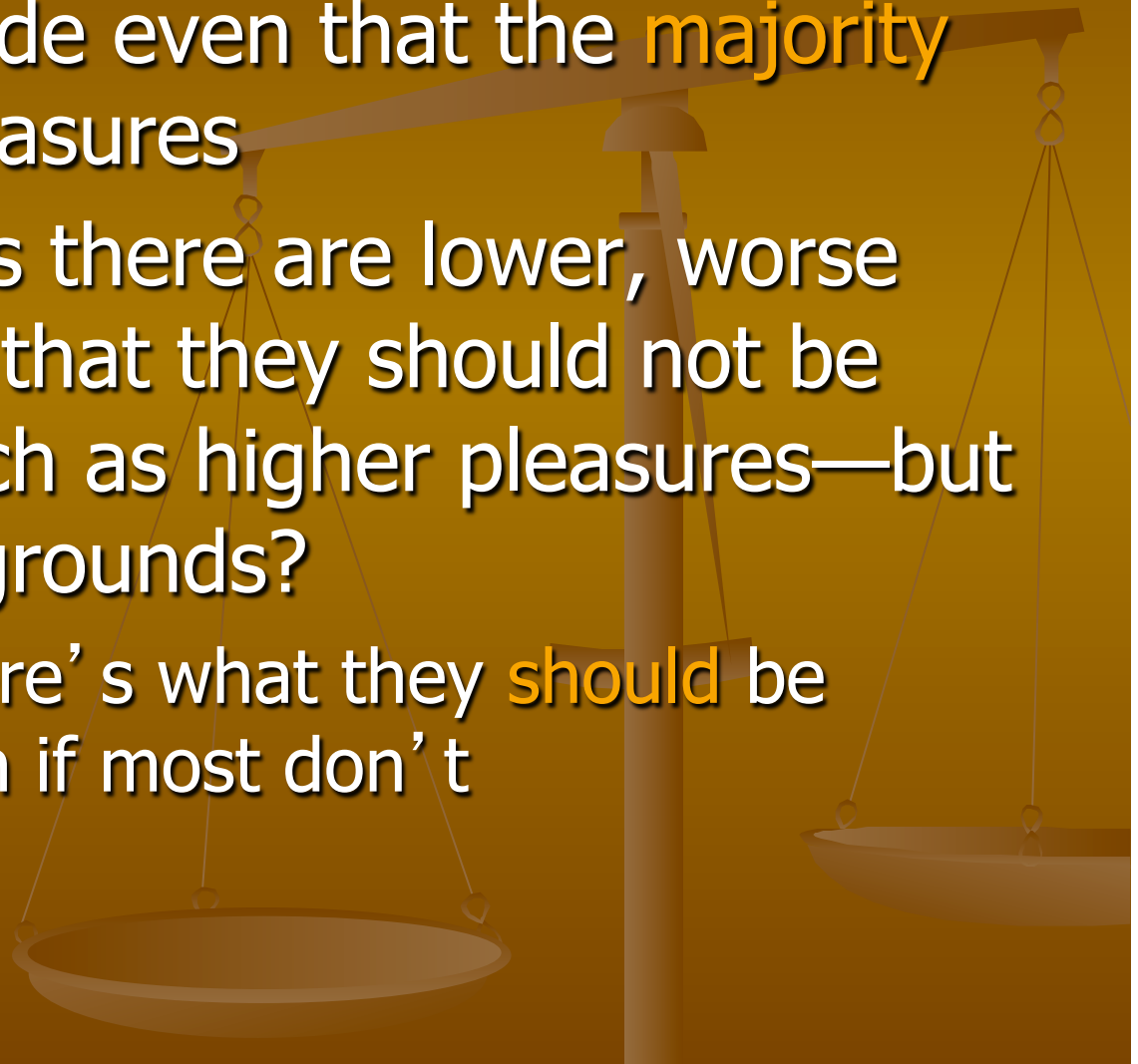
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- **Morality: do survey: what do most prefer?"**
 - “irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it”
 - Still non-moral good, but not crude quantitative measuring—also no machines; just let experienced people say what they like
 - Morality: better to be Socrates dissatisfied than pig satisfied
- Still tied to preferences, but putting them on levels; also recognizes that many do prefer lower pleasures

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- Seems to concede even that the **majority** go for lower pleasures
- But Mill still sees there are lower, worse pleasures—and that they should not be weighed as much as higher pleasures—but again on what grounds?
 - Assumption: here's what they **should** be preferring, even if most don't



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- But that smuggles in a new standard of judging of pleasures and desires into the picture
 - Making value judgments/moral judgments NOT merely on the basis of preferences—even opposing that; so how are these value judgments made?
 - Says there is NO other tribunal except judgment of qualified experiencers—but how do you determine who is qualified?
 - If they get the right answer?
 - But that begs the question—is Ted Bundy qualified?
 - Pt. Is that we **have to be able to make moral distinctions between pleasures and desires** and hedonism doesn't have the tools to do it. What in utilitarian ethics qualifies people to “see” and make these judgments?

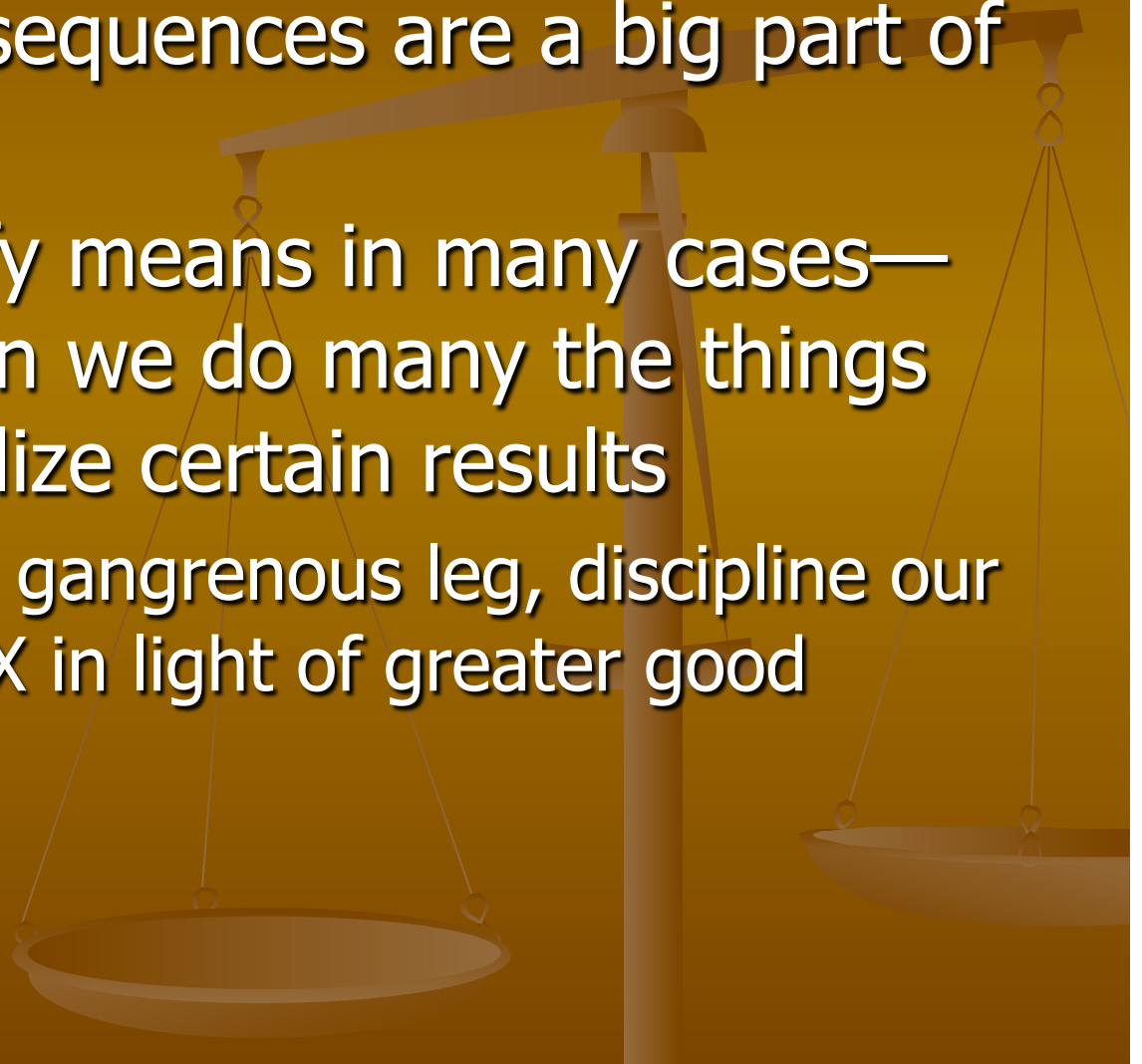
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- Problems with consequentialism (theory of action)
 - Value of action, or what is right or wrong *solely* depends on consequences or results
 - Motives don't count; have nothing to do with morality of action
 - But this is equal to the end justifies the means; but not every end justifies just any means
 - Again: empirical can measure (which is a virtue of a system); easy to get bogged down in the question of motives & sometimes not needed
 - e.g. Fred caused the death of X number of people—don't need motive

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- Certainly consequences are a big part of ethics
- Ends do justify means in many cases—it's the reason we do many the things we do: to realize certain results
 - E.g.: remove gangrenous leg, discipline our children; do X in light of greater good



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- But there are problems
 - Besides criticism Wilkins makes
 - How can we know results if only in the future?
 - When do we know an act is right or wrong?
 - In fact we're in very little control of results
 - I want to teach you ethics; you don't want to learn; but then I was immoral because the consequences were "bad"
 - By making consequences all that matter in ethics, certain things we are convinced deeply matter morally either drop out or are unjustified

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■ Agency

- When motives don't matter: we become calculating machines, utility calculators
- Who we are, why we do what we do, whether it's us or someone else who does it; what it does to us and our character if we do something—all these factors drop out; a computer could be an ideal utilitarian agent—calculator, conduit
- Character matters only in so far as it promotes the greater happiness
- Integrity is a good thing if and only if it leads to overall maximal happiness; praise and blame, not because what do is right or wrong, reprehensible/praiseworthy—but only because it promotes greater happiness

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- Consider: A and B shipwrecked: room for 1 on log (A of less value to society than B);
 - 2 scenarios
 - A voluntarily gives up his life
 - B pushes A off
 - Utilitarian morality: these actions are of the same value, no moral difference
 - But don't we think they differ morally? On what grounds?

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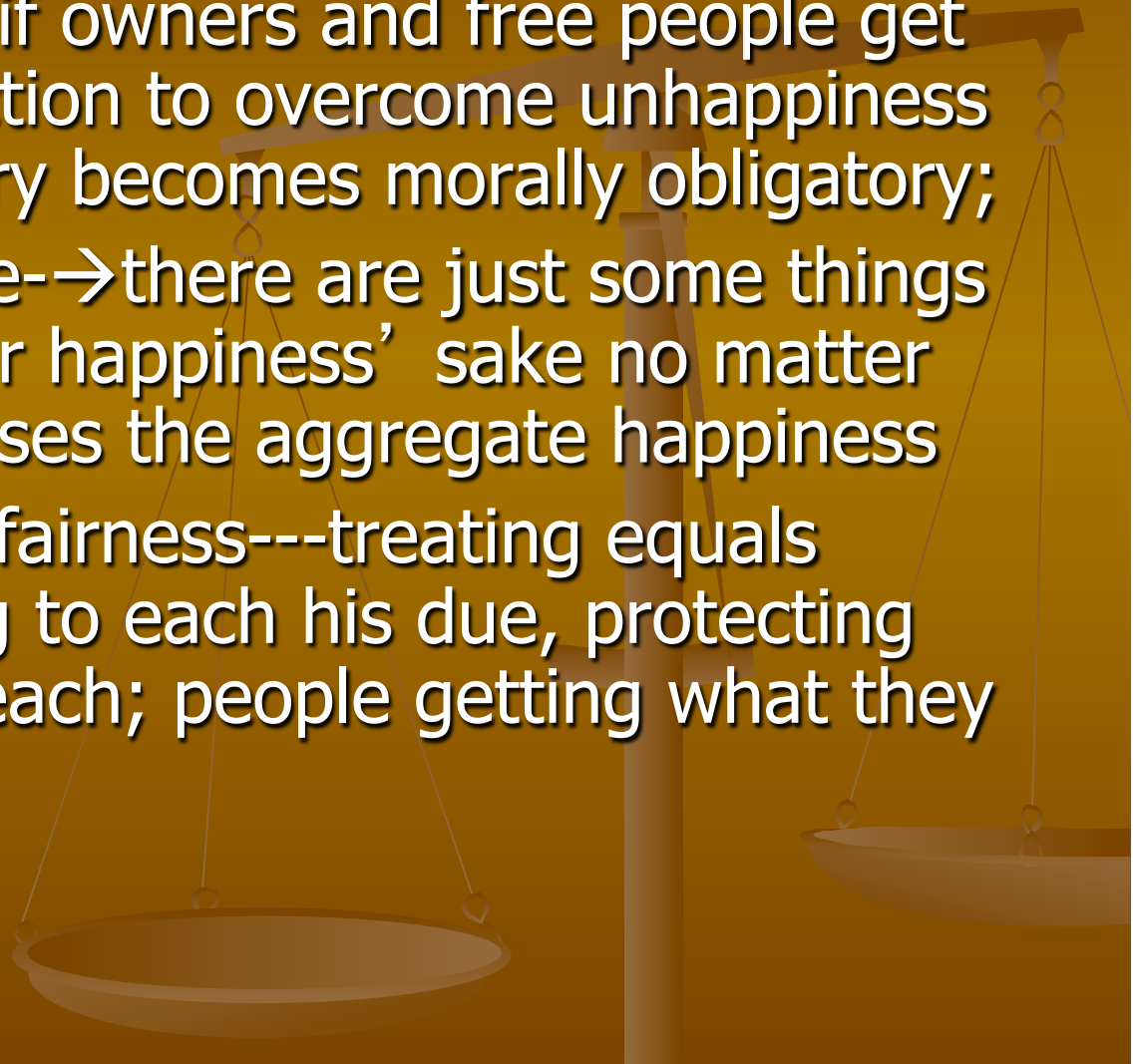
■ Justice

■ Aggregate general good → how do we decide what is Good?

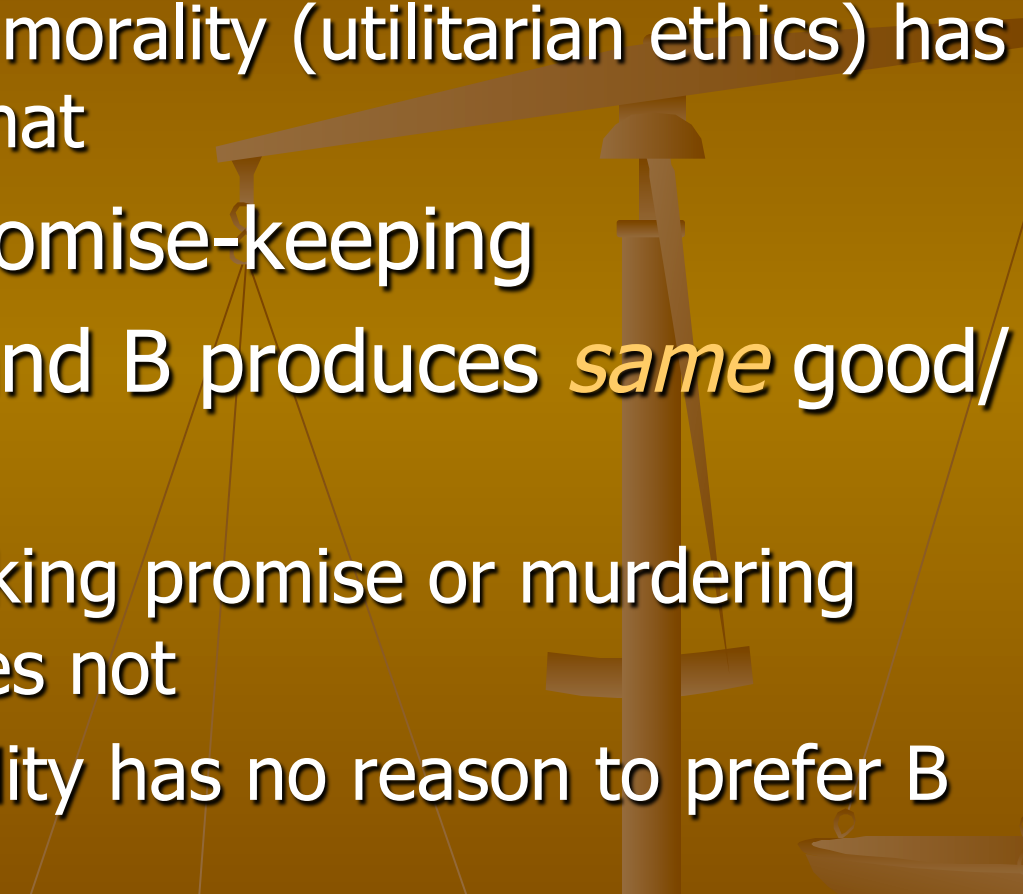
- *Sum*: additive: more is better; have to prefer world of one million with one util each over world of 100 X 100 utils each (=10,000 total); remember the large sum does not necessarily guarantee that group is not doing something we would think is morally reprehensible (or dull)—but the numbers make it moral because of greater utility!
- Average: solves problem but introduces new one:
 - 100---each receive 10 utils—total: 1000; average 10
 - 10 increase to 100
 - 60 keep original 20
 - 30 take away, give none
 - Total: 1600; average 16; must prefer to original problem: justice—Good for some at expense of others; no accountability

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- e.g. Slavery → if owners and free people get enough satisfaction to overcome unhappiness of slaves, slavery becomes morally obligatory;
- Matter of justice → there are just some things you can't do for happiness' sake no matter how much it raises the aggregate happiness
- Justice is basic fairness --- treating equals equally, rendering to each his due, protecting basic rights of each; people getting what they deserve



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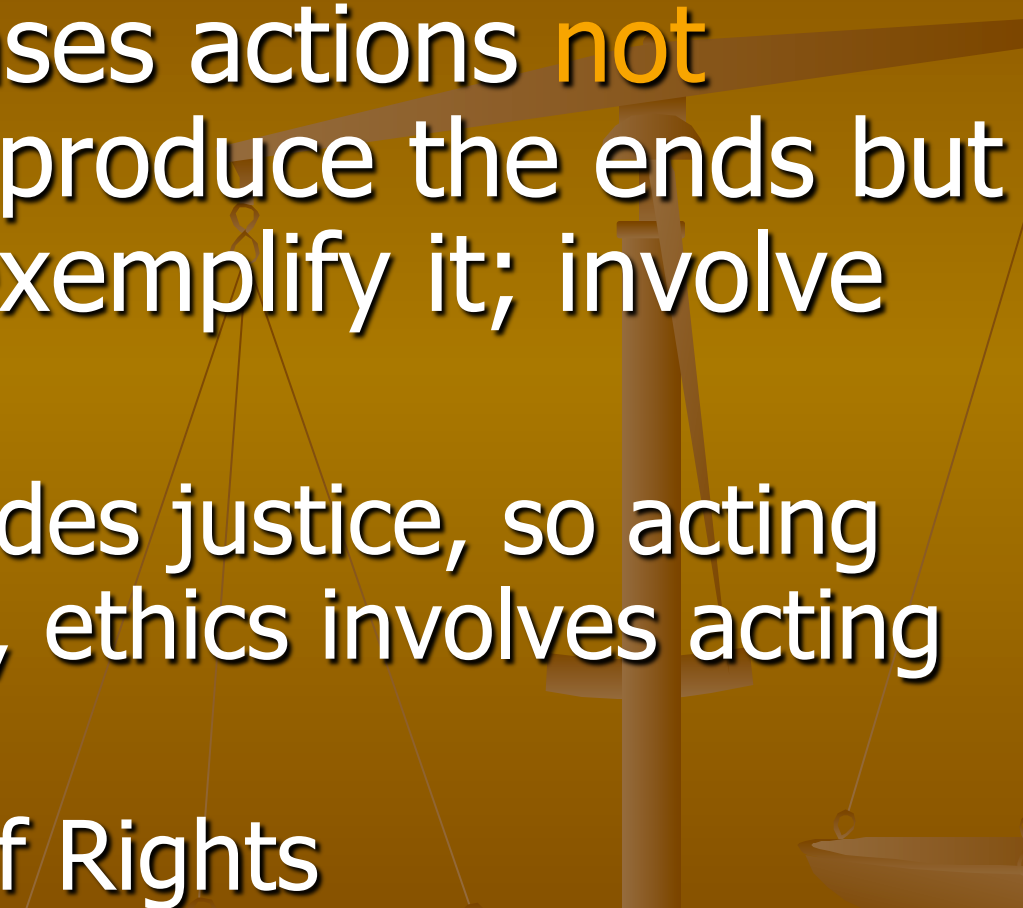
- But community morality (utilitarian ethics) has no account of that
 - Truth-telling, promise-keeping
 - 2 scenarios: A and B produces *same* good/evil
 - A involves breaking promise or murdering someone, B does not
 - Utilitarian morality has no reason to prefer B to A
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Utilitarian Ethics



- Problem is that for Community (or utilitarian) ethics, *anything* is justified if good enough consequences—no brakes
- We think the end justifies the means, but not just any means justifies any end
- How is this difference from eudaimonism? Is it consequentialist? No—eudaimonism is ethics directed, not consequentialist; because ethics and means are connected;

Utilitarian Ethics

- In some cases actions **not** seeking to produce the ends but realize it, exemplify it; involve it;
 - Ends includes justice, so acting for justice, ethics involves acting justly
 - e.g.: Bill of Rights
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■ Conclusions

- Right: we should aim to make world better place; seek Good; love neighbor
- Problem
 - Not account for limits on maximizing consequences; not accountable for moral issues re: agent selves, motives, true human dignity, value of the individual versus the conglomerate
 - Not accountable for important intrinsic goods and principles; brakes we think are just as important or more important than consequences are; indeed, utilitarian morality, at times requires us to violate these

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- From Christian Perspective

- Assumptions about human nature—hedonism, questionable
- Utilitarian morality requires us to play God (in the sense of being everywhere for everybody); crucial to see ‘love neighbor’ in context of loving God
 - Sovereignty of God—he puts us in circles of relationships, responsibility
 - We don’t have equal responsibility to every other individual; but each is a potential neighbor

Utilitarian Ethics

- Obligations to self made in image of God
 - Obligations to context of relationships that God has places us in
 - Calling versus Morality
 - Results:
 - Christian ethics=called to be faithful, not necessarily successful—often not up to us; trust, do right
 - Do good to all men, especially the household of faith, but in the context of trust, and obedience
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