

# **Ethical Theories: A Very Brief Overview**

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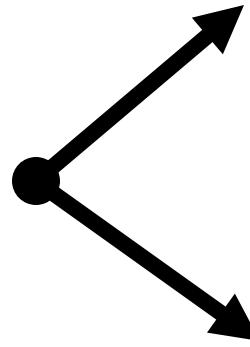
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# The Basic Question of Ethics

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

**Fundamental  
Question**



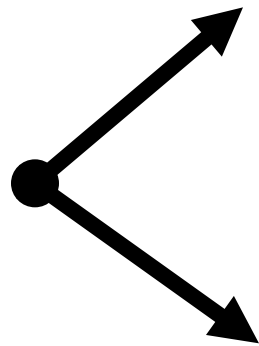
Act-oriented approaches:  
**How ought I to act?**

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:**

- n 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?

For whom?	Name of Position
Just me	Egoism
My group <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family</li><li>• Country</li><li>• Religion</li></ul>	Group consequentialism
Everyone <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All human beings</li><li>• All sentient beings</li></ul>	Utilitarianism

# Yardstick for measuring consequences

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

**Pleasure/pain**

- (Bentham)

**Happiness**

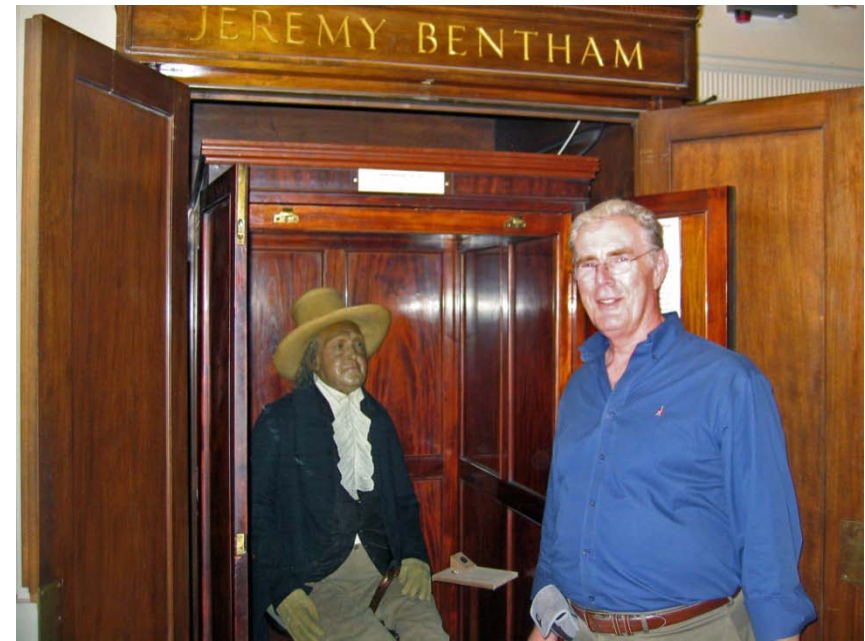
- (John Stuart Mill)

**Ideals**

- (G. E. Moore)

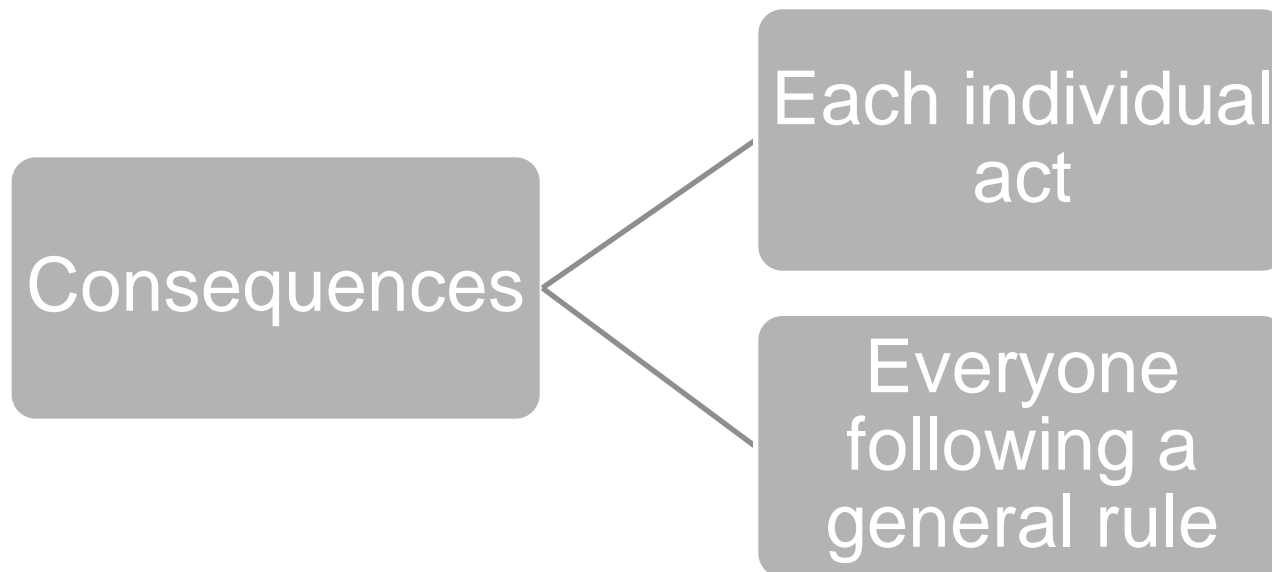
**Preference satisfaction**

- (Kenneth Arrow)



# Act or Rule Consequentialism

By definition, consequentialism –not surprisingly--considers consequences, but do we look at the consequences of?



# Act Consequentialism

Some consequentialist approaches maintain that we should calculate the relevant consequences on an act-by-act basis. Objections and replies

## **Objection #1**

- Time consuming to compute each act
- Reply: use rules of thumb unless problems arise

## **Objection #2**

- Can permit small number of morally outrageous cases (torture, deception, etc.)
- Reply: Perhaps it's justified. Anything less is rule worship.

# Rule-oriented Approaches

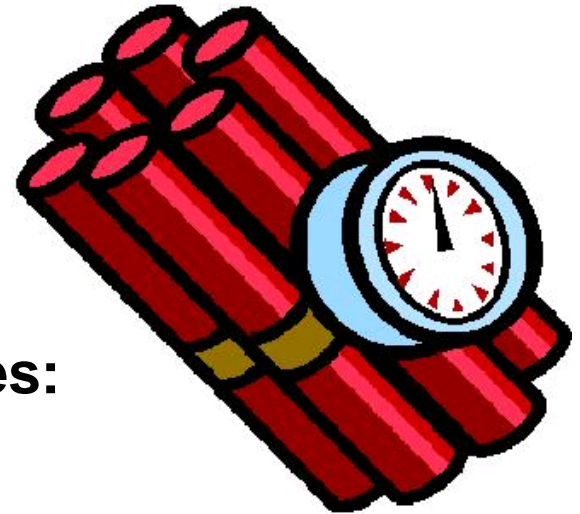
Numerous approaches have one thing in common: **rules trump consequences.**

No matter how much good might be accomplished, you cannot break the rules

- Ticking bomb example

**Examples of rule-oriented approaches:**

- **The Golden Rule**
- **Human Rights**
- **Justice**
- **Kant & Deontology**
- **Ten Commandments**



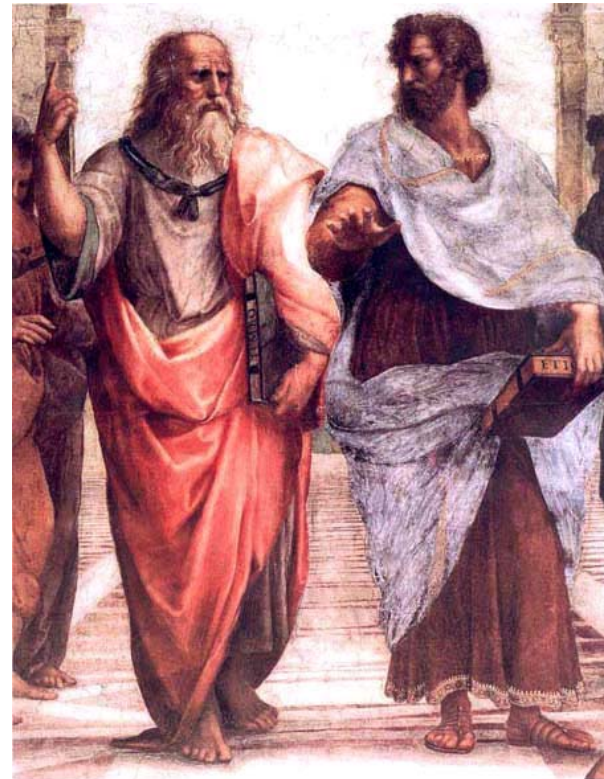
# Character-oriented Approaches

**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



Detail from facing page: Plato the teacher, in the likeness of Leonardo da Vinci and holding his *Timaeus*, strides alongside Aristotle, his greatest pupil, on our right and holding his great work: *The Ethics*.

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# Religion and Ethical Theories

## Religious Rule-oriented Approaches

- 10 Commandments
- Islamic Sharia

## Religious Consequentialism

- Possible consequences to maximize
  - Increase chances of salvation
  - Maximize influence of church
- Karmic consequentialism

## Character-based traditions

- Central to most religious traditions: the formation of character

# 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**
- 3. It is helpful to have a diversity of opinion, including those who hold alternative positions.**