

MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE TWO

PHILOSOPHY IN A WEEKEND

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In this session we are going to spend half an hour on political philosophy, and half an hour on moral philosophy






In looking at political philosophy we are going to examine a famous thought experiment – the Wilt Chamberlain experiment – devised by Robert Nozick (1938-2002)

In looking at moral philosophy we are going to compare and contrast two popular accounts of what makes actions right and wrong: utilitarianism and deontology

Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill)

Principle of Utility
(Also known as *Greatest Happiness Principle*)



An action is *right* to the extent that it *increases* the total happiness of the affected parties
An action is *wrong* to the extent that it *decreases* the total happiness of the affected parties.
Happiness may have many definitions such as: advantage, benefit, good, or pleasure



The problem of distributive justice is a key problem in political philosophy

It is the problem of determining how a State should distribute burdens and benefits amongst its citizens in as fair a way as possible

**Benefits: food, water, land, education, votes,
freedoms....**

Burdens: work, taxation, community service....

It is easy to imagine distributions that we would consider unfair:

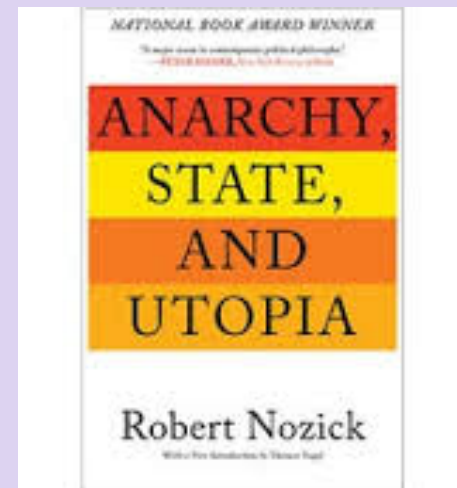
- **men get all the benefits, women get all the burdens**
- **blue eyed people get all the benefits, brown-eyed people all the burdens**
- **healthy people get all the benefits, unhealthy ones all the burdens**



It is less easy to come up with sensible distributions that would be considered fair by everyone

Robert Nozick in his famous book Anarchy, State and Utopia suggests that:

- **there are two different types of theory**
- **one type is *not* fair**



The two types of theory he identifies are:

- **patterned theories**
- **historical theories**

***A patterned theory* of distributive justice is a theory that states a distribution is just only if it satisfies a certain pattern**

The following theories are patterned theories of justice:

- **Egalitarianism**
- **Utility maximisation**
- **Maximin**

We will need a ‘snapshot’ of society at a given time t to tell us whether:

- **all citizens have equal holdings**
- **the holdings of citizens will promote the GHGN**
- **the holdings of citizens maximise the position of the least advantaged**

Nozick claims that *no patterned theory of justice is just*

His argument for this is that *patterned theories necessarily involve interference with individual freedom*

Nozick's argument consists in a thought experiment: the Wilt Chamberlain Thought Experiment



This experiment starts by asking us to imagine a *situation D1* in which all the holdings in society are justly distributed according to our favourite patterned theory of justice

The experiment continues by asking us to imagine Wilt Chamberlain, a famous and hugely popular basketball player

Wilt insists he will play only if 25c from the price of each ticket of admission goes to him (in addition to his normal salary)

Over one season one million people come to see Wilt play and happily drop 25c into a special box with Wilt's name on it



At the end of the season we have a new *situation D2* in which the holdings in society do not meet the pattern you originally chose because Wilt has \$250,000 that no-one else has

D2 came about by just moves from a just starting point:

- **D1 was chosen by you as a just starting point**
- **D2 came about as a result of:**
 - **Wilt's freely choosing under what conditions he would exercise his talents**
 - **everyone else's voluntarily choosing to give Wilt 25c because they wanted to see him play**

Nozick's challenge is: how is D2 unjust?

The only way we can return to the pattern is by interfering with

- **the freedom of individuals to choose how they will exercise their talents**
- **the freedom of individuals to choose how to spend the holdings to which they are entitled**

According to Nozick the Wilt Chamberlain arguments shows us that:

- **liberty and equality are essentially in tension**
- **HUGE inequalities can be fair (taxation is forced labour)**
- **all patterns are disrupted by freedom**

How do you respond to the Wilt Chamberlain argument?

Now let's talk about moral philosophy

**A lot of people ask me the difference between
'morality' and 'ethics'**



Morality involves *first order* thinking about actions

Questions such as ‘is abortion right or wrong?’ and ‘is it always wrong to lie? count as ‘morality’, also sometimes called ‘applied ethics’

Here we think about particular (types of) action, and ask whether they are morally acceptable or unacceptable

Ethics involves *second* order thinking – thinking about morality

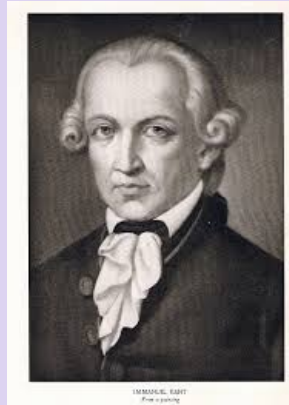
Questions such as ‘what is it for an action to be right?’, ‘do moral values really exist?’ count as ‘ethics’, sometimes also called ‘metaethics’

Here we think about moral judgments in general and ask how we can justify them

We're going to compare and contrast two ethical theories

The first ethical theory we'll look at is called 'Deontology'

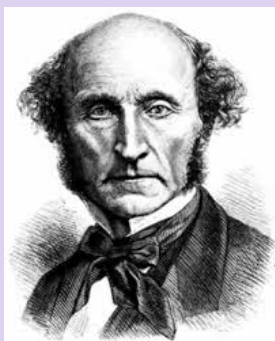
The second ethical theory we'll look at is called 'Utilitarianism'



Immanuel Kant is probably the most famous deontologist

A deontologist believes that moral rules are *absolute*, i.e. they hold everywhere, for everyone, at every time

So the right action is the one that is in accordance with the rules



John Stuart Mill is probably the most famous utilitarian

A utilitarian believes the *right* action is that which produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number

**Let's look first at an argument for
Utilitarianism....**



A ship is way out to sea, several days from the nearest land

A fire breaks out in the engine room

If the fire takes hold hundreds of sailors will die

The captain knows that if he shuts off the oxygen in the engine room the four sailors in the engine room will die

Should the captain shut off the oxygen to the engine room?

If you think yes, then Utilitarianism seems to give us the right answer

Now let's look at an argument for Deontology...



A tramp is brought into hospital because he has had too much to drink

The tramp has no friends or family, and he is not at all happy with life, he is however, quite young and fit

The doctor treating him has four other patients, each of whom is about to die for want of a heart, lungs, kidney or liver

Each of these four patients is a parent, part of a loving family, embedded in a healthy friendship network and economically active

If the doctor were to kill the tramp (having waited for him to sober up), and harvest his organs, he could save the lives of the other four patients

Should the doctor kill the tramp?

If you think 'no' then deontology seems to give us the right answer

Tell me which moral theory do YOU tend towards and why?

You may have heard of ‘trolleyology’?



Experiment one:

- **There is a runaway train hurtling down the track to five workers all of whom will be killed**
- **You are watching from a bridge**
- **You are next to a lever such that if you pull it the train will divert onto another track**
- **On this track there is one worker who will be killed if you pull the lever**

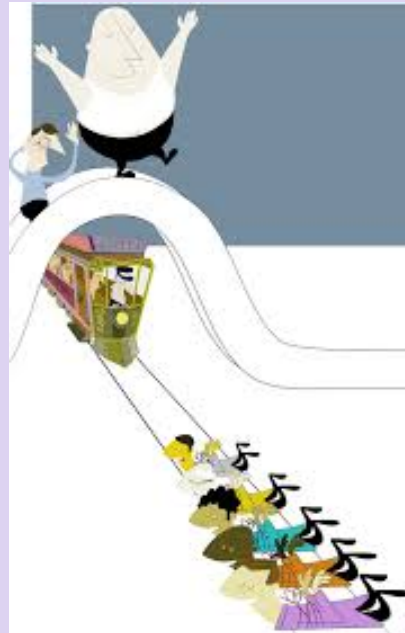
Should you push the lever?



Experiment two:

- **There is a runaway train hurtling down the track to five workers all of whom will be killed**
- **You are watching from a bridge**
- **On the bridge with you is a man fat enough that if you push him off the bridge he will block the train**
- **Although this would save the five, the fat man will die**

Should you push the fat man off the bridge?



Why is the first case different from the second?

Recently psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered the trolley problems...

...which were introduced by philosopher Phillipa Foot in 1967...

...and they have been collecting data about people's answers

**But this brings us to something very important:
it doesn't matter how many people *do* decide
one way or other...**

**...what we need to know is how they *should*
decide...**

**...and this isn't a matter for science to
decide it is a matter for philosophers**

Further Reading, Podcasts and websites:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/>

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/>

<http://www.philosopherstoolkit.com/the-trolley-problem.php>

<http://www.amazon.com/Would-You-Kill-Fat-Man/dp/0691154023>

<http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/fatman/>

<http://mariannetalbot.co.uk/ethics-an-introduction/>