Act and Rule Utilitarianism
J.J.C. Smart’s “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”

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Normative Ethics

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Recall that metaethics is “meta”, a step above, and is about ethical discourse (e.g. whether there are true moral statements).

In comparison, normative ethics is the “ground level”, and is about what ethical theories are correct, and what they say.
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Once we’ve learned each of the theories, their pros and their cons, we’ll move on to applying them in the last portion of the course.
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According to Smart, utilitarianism is the doctrine that the rightness of actions is to be judged by their consequences.

But what does this mean?

Take the first part. Smart means to be defining **right action**, i.e. what the right thing to do is.

Specifically, he’s defining right actions in terms of their consequences.
So utilitarians argue that the right thing to do depends on what the consequences of the action in question is.
Utilitarianism and Utility

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We’ll talk more about utility next time. But for now, think of utility as something like happiness.
Utilitarianism and You and Everybody

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This is how utilitarianism gets the informal gloss: “the greatest amount of good (happiness) for the greatest amount of people”.
Extreme and Restricted Systems

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Instead we will distinguish between “act” and “rule” utilitarianism (respectively).
Two Types of “Actions”

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Alternatively, we might mean action types, or classes of actions, which aren’t individual actions but general types of actions.

Consider a scenario where Arthur punches Bruce. The particular action is that punch. But there’s also a type of action being referred to - punching in general.
Acts and Rules

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Now we’re going to refer to action types in terms of rules. A rule will be a general statement that refers to action types rather than actions.

For example, “Keep your promises” is a rule.

Note that it doesn’t refer specifically to any particular actions, i.e. any particular promises. Nonetheless, it can refer to particular actions insofar as they are part of the right action types.
Act Utilitarianism

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Call a theory **act utilitarian** if it says that the rightness of an action depends on that particular action’s consequences.
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Act utilitarians can, and do, use rules as *rules of thumb*.

We can refer to them when needed, but they aren’t the final say, and don’t determine whether an action is right.
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For example, the rule utilitarian’s theory is slightly more complicated than the act utilitarian.

This is because they think that we should judge acts in terms of the rules about their action types, and those rules in turn by the consequences of adopting them.
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That is, the rule utilitarian says that it is the rules which make things right, not the consequences of particular actions.
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For one, utilitarianism is intuitively promising - it seems to match our common-sense judgments about morality.
As we’ve seen, there are two types of utilitarianism. So for what reasons should we be rule utilitarians?
Why be a Rule Utilitarian?

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Smart doesn’t actually give any. But what can we come up with?
Avoiding Terrible Acts

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For example, act utilitarians will often say that murder, genocide, etc. are morally right, if the stakes are extremely high.

Rule utilitarians can block this move, keeping in line with a common-sense dictum that some actions are just always wrong.
Why to Not be a Rule Utilitarian

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Why does he think this?