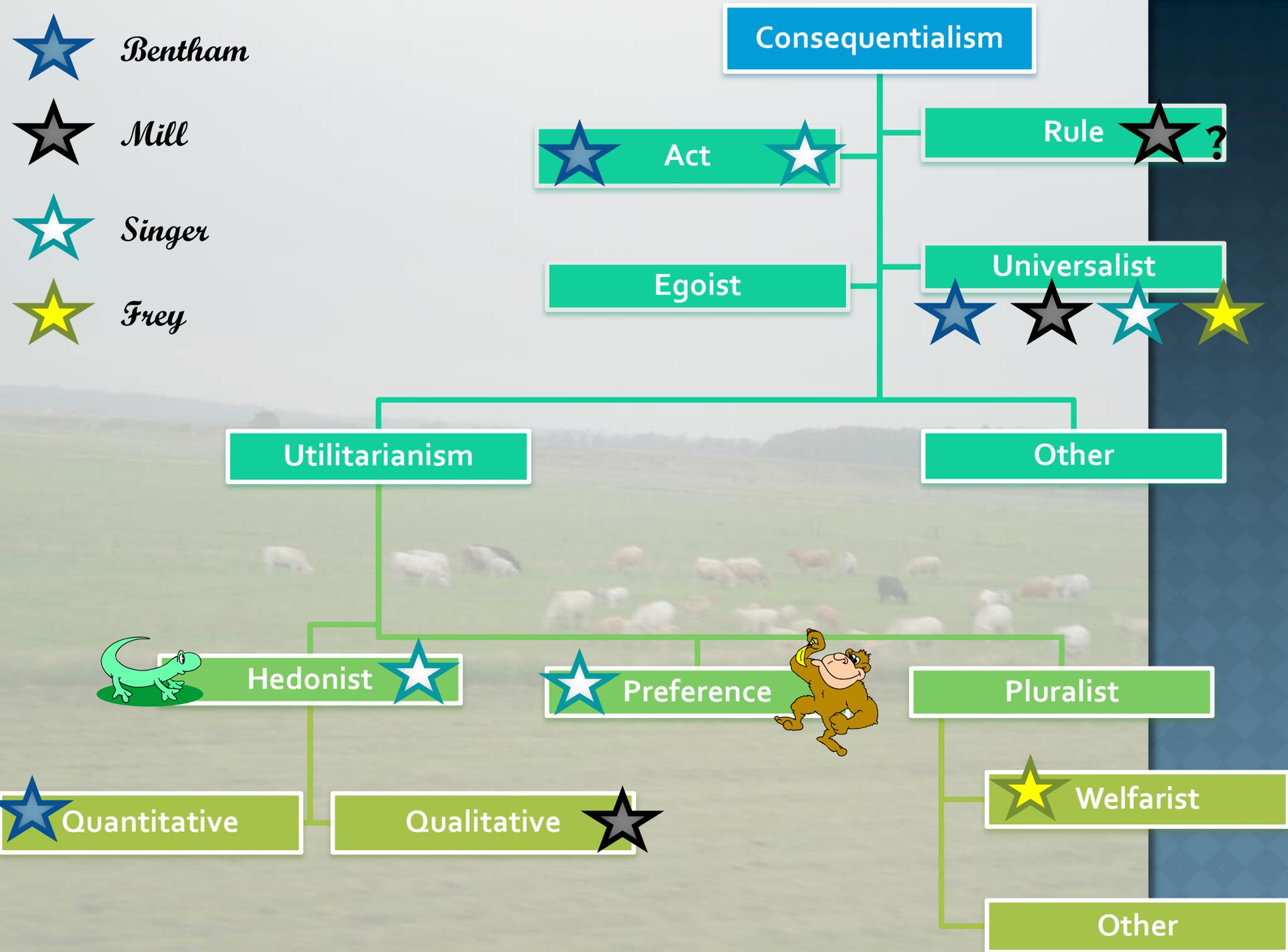




# *Utilitarianism & Animal Suffering*

Bioethics & Animals (Spring 2013)

Laura Guidry-Grimes



# Rule vs. Act Utilitarianism

- ◎ **Act:** An act is right only insofar as it maximizes net utility (happiness over suffering).
  - Analyze the act *directly*
  - Can lead to some unpalatable, counterintuitive results (e.g., organ harvesting of the homeless)
  
- ◎ **Rule:** An act is right only insofar as it complies with a utility-maximizing rule.
  - Step 1: Determine which rules, if followed generally, would produce most utility for the most (sentient) beings.
  - Step 2: Figure out what to do by referencing rules established in step 1.
  - Can prevent counterintuitive results (e.g., respecting bodily integrity—as a rule—can maximize utility overall.)

# Jeremy Bentham

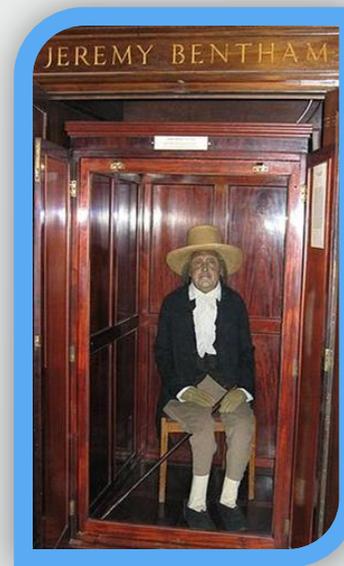
◎ 1748-1832

◎ Empiricist

- Should build moral philosophy on concrete, empirical facts of animal nature
  - *Contingencies* of our nature and the situation will determine what maximizes utility.
- Can measure the rightness and wrongness of actions

◎ Social justice activist

- Social and political hierarchies do not determine worth or elevate interests of the few
- Aim to promote overall happiness for society



# Hedonist Utilitarian Commitments

- “...the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (Bentham)
- ‘Happiness’: more net pleasure than net pain
- No value in world without entities capable of experience
  - Empirical questions re: experience
- **Sentience:** capacity for pleasure/pain
  - How should these states be defined?
  - Bentham: single state, quantifiable
  - Mill: higher and lower pleasures, *quality*

# Benthamite Calculus

○ Measure the following re: pain and pleasure, then take the sum total to determine which action produces the most good.

- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty / uncertainty
- Propinquity / remoteness
- Fecundity
- Purity
- Extent



# *Hurdles for Utilitarian Animal Ethics*

- ⦿ How strongly should we treat the sentience criterion, and what place should it have in the theory?
- ⦿ What difference does the sentience criterion make, if we always give preference to human life?
- ⦿ Do other dimensions (besides mere sentience) of valuing life come into the picture at all?
- ⦿ Are we justified in using up a life of a sentient creature? How do we compare the value of lives?

# Life Raft Problem

- Moral status argument
  - A matter of degree?
  - All-or-nothing?

- **If all-or-nothing:** Humans on the same level as sentient non-humans?
  - How do we settle moral disputes/conflicts?
    - E.g., in life-or-death situation?
  - Sneak in extra considerations? Does this undermine the utilitarian approach?

- **If matter of degree:** Do humans always win?
  - Depends on what's at stake
  - So in life-or-death situation...?



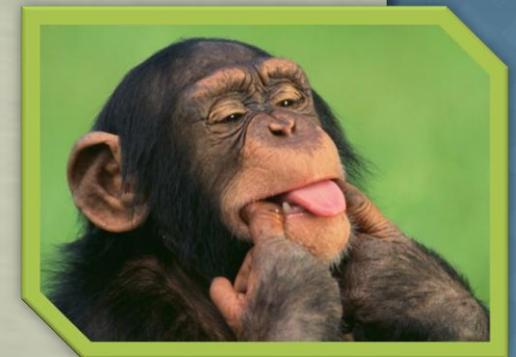
# R. G. Frey on Quality of Life

- ◉ **Moral standing:** “turns upon whether a creature has an unfolding series of experiences that, depending upon their quality, can make that creature’s life go well or badly” (184)
- ◉ “The **value** of a life is a function of its **quality**, its quality of its **richness**; it matters, then, what a creature’s **capacities** for a rich life are” (186, emphasis added)
- ◉ Many facets of a rich life...
  - Sentience
  - Autonomy
  - Moral relationships / agency

Valuable only insofar as they contribute to the richness of experiences

# *R. G. Frey on Tough Cases*

- ◉ Since most humans have more capacities for rich experiences, they will generally “win out” in the calculus.
- ◉ If we (really!) need to “use up” a life for a utility-maximizing cause, then we should sacrifice the life of the lowest value.
  - E.g., should experiment on anencephalic infant, PVS patient, or old person with advanced dementia instead of a primate.



# Questions



- What are the appeals and costs of Bentham's utilitarianism?
- Is Frey's utilitarian view cohere better with our intuitions and give us better action-guidance?
- Can either view properly handle a test case—like animal experimentation?

A wide-angle photograph of a rural landscape under a heavy, grey fog. In the foreground and middle ground, a herd of sheep of various colors (white, grey, brown, and black) is scattered across a lush green field, some appearing to graze. The background shows a line of trees and rolling hills, all obscured by the thick mist. The overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat somber due to the weather.

*Questions? Comments?*