

Utilitarianism and Rawls

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Introduction



John Rawls (1921-2001)

- One of the most important political philosophers of the 20th century
- A famous critic of utilitarianism (cf. *A Theory of Justice* [Rawls 1999])



The purpose of this presentation:

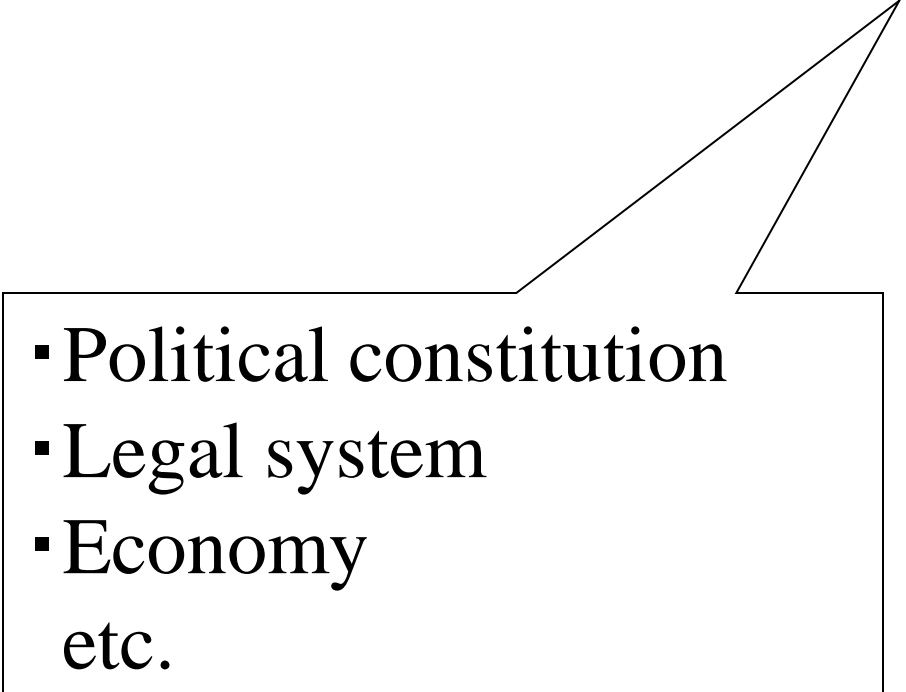
to demonstrate that utilitarianism is superior to Rawls's theory despite his criticism against it.

The structure of this presentation

1. What is political philosophy?
2. Utilitarianism and Rawls's criticism against it
3. Rawls's 'two principles of justice'
4. Is Rawls's criticism correct?
5. A flaw in Rawls's theory
 - : His theory cannot provide good reasons for why immoral actions against the disabled are impermissible.
6. An advantage of utilitarianism
 - : It can provide such reasons.

1. What is political philosophy?

Political philosophy provides a standard by which to evaluate social and political institutions (Moseley 2005).

- 
- Political constitution
 - Legal system
 - Economy
 - etc.

Social and political institutions have a great influence on our lives.

Institutions

Our lives

Just

→

Good

Unjust

→

Bad

Political philosophy focuses on such influential institutions.

→ Not only philosophers but all of us should be interested in political philosophy.

2. Utilitarianism and Rawls's criticism against it

The two components of it:

1. Welfarism
2. Consequentialism

(Shaw 2006, 202—203)

Utilitarianism proposes a standard by which to evaluate social and political institutions.

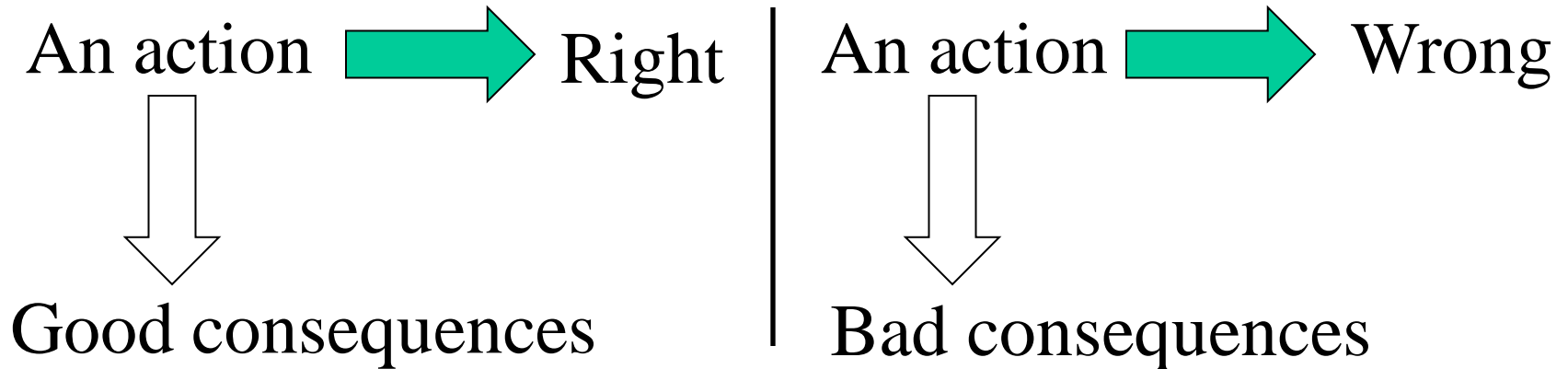
Welfarism

Individual happiness = The solo good
(welfare)

the only thing that is valuable for its own sake

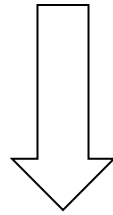
	Happiness	Unhappiness
Early Utilitarians	Pleasure	Pain
Modern Utilitarians	Satisfaction of desire	dissatisfaction

Consequentialism



- Utilitarianism is also a maximising doctrine.
→ It requires us always to act so as to bring about as much happiness as possible.

Welfarism + Consequentialism



The basic moral principle of utilitarianism

An action is right if and only if it brings about the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness for everyone affected by the action; otherwise, it is wrong.

Which action is right?

Options	Happiness	Unhappiness
Action A	20 units	8 units
Action B	15 units	4 units
Action C	15 units	2 units

C A B
Total 13 > 12 > 11

The right action is C.

The basic moral principle of utilitarianism can also be used to evaluate social and political institutions.

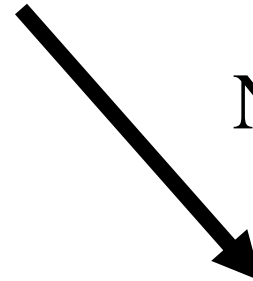
Are institutions arranged so as to produce the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness?

Yes



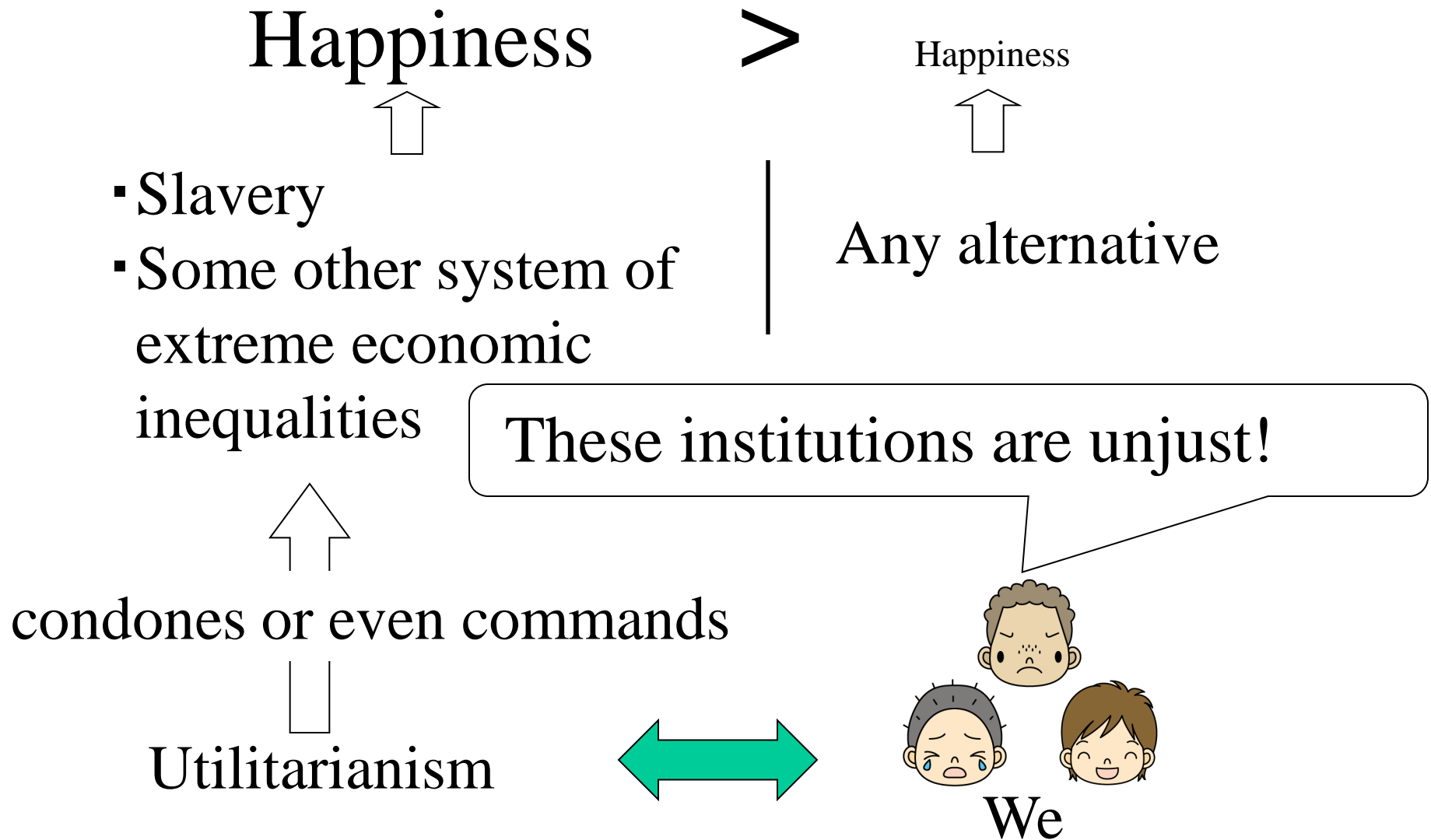
These institutions are just.

No



These institutions are unjust.

Rawls's criticism against utilitarianism



(Rawls 1999, 24—23; Rawls 2001, 100) ¹²

3. Rawls's 'two principles of justice'

First Principle: Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: (a) they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; (b) they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle) (Rawls 2001, 42—43).

The first principle

It affirms for all citizens basic rights and liberties.

1. Political liberties

(the rights to vote, to hold a public office etc.)

2. Liberty of conscience

3. Freedom of association

4. Freedom of speech

5. Freedom of movement

6. Free choice of occupation etc.

The second principle

(a) The first condition:

It requires that citizens with the same talents and willingness to use them should have the same educational and economic opportunities regardless of whether they were born rich or poor.

(b) The second condition (the difference principle):

It requires that social institutions should be arranged so that the inequalities of wealth and income work to the advantage of those who will be the worst off.

Which economy does the difference principle select?

Economy	Lifetime average levels of income		
	Least-advantaged group	Middle group	Most-advantaged group
A	10,000	10,000	10,000
B	12,000	15,000	20,000
C	<u>20,000</u>	30,000	50,000
D	17,000	50,000	100,000

(quoted from Wener 2008, ch. 4, sec. 3)

→ The difference principle selects Economy C

~~Slavery~~

violates

The first principle

~~Extreme
economic
inequality~~

violates

The second principle

→ The two principles of justice never condone slavery or some other system of extreme economic inequalities.

4. Is Rawls's criticism correct?

Consider the claim that slavery for minorities might produce the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness and therefore utilitarianism would condone it.

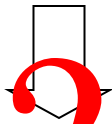


This claim is implausible.



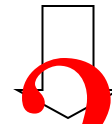
Slavery

Any alternative



Happiness

>



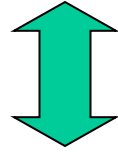
Happiness

(cf. Lyons 1989; Shaw 2006, 205 — 206)

Critics have not answered these questions asked by R. M. Hare

- How could it come about that the existence of a small number of slaves was necessary in order to preserve the happiness of the rest?
- What on earth are the slaves doing that could not be more efficiently done by paid labour?
(Hare 1979, 110-111)

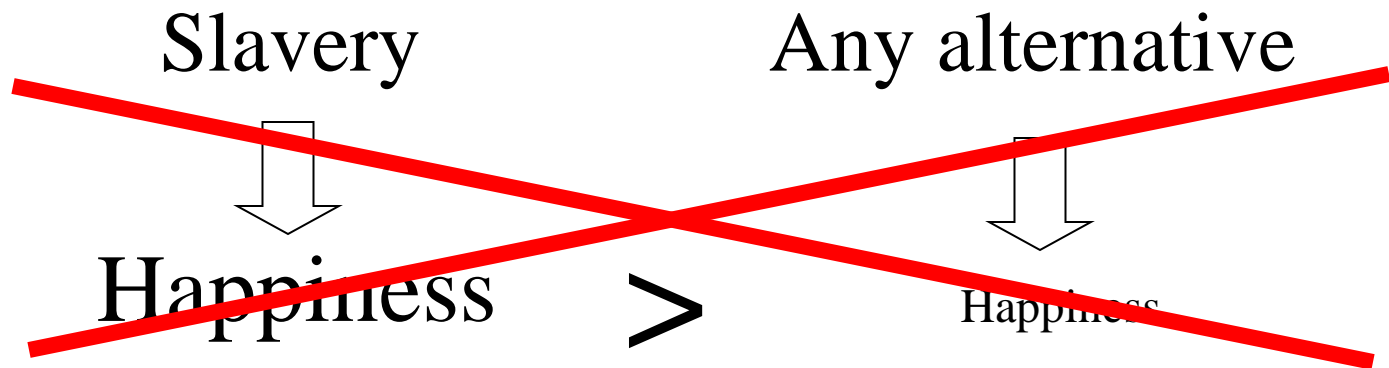
Critics have no evidence to suggest that utilitarianism would condone slavery.



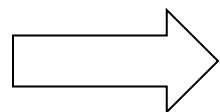
Utilitarianism condemns slavery.



A study of history and other factual observation will show:



How about the claim that utilitarianism would condone some system of extreme economic inequalities?



This claim is also implausible.



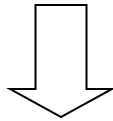
There are two utilitarian arguments for equal distribution:

- The first is based on the law of diminishing marginal utility.
- The second is based on the fact that inequality has a tendency to produce envy (Hare 1991, 126-127) .

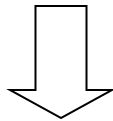
The law of diminishing marginal utility



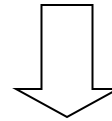
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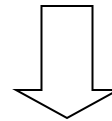
Poor person



Happiness
(Utility)



Rich person



Happiness

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Happiness



Poor person

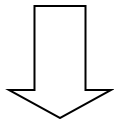


Happiness



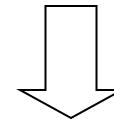
Rich person

Reducing inequalities



Happiness

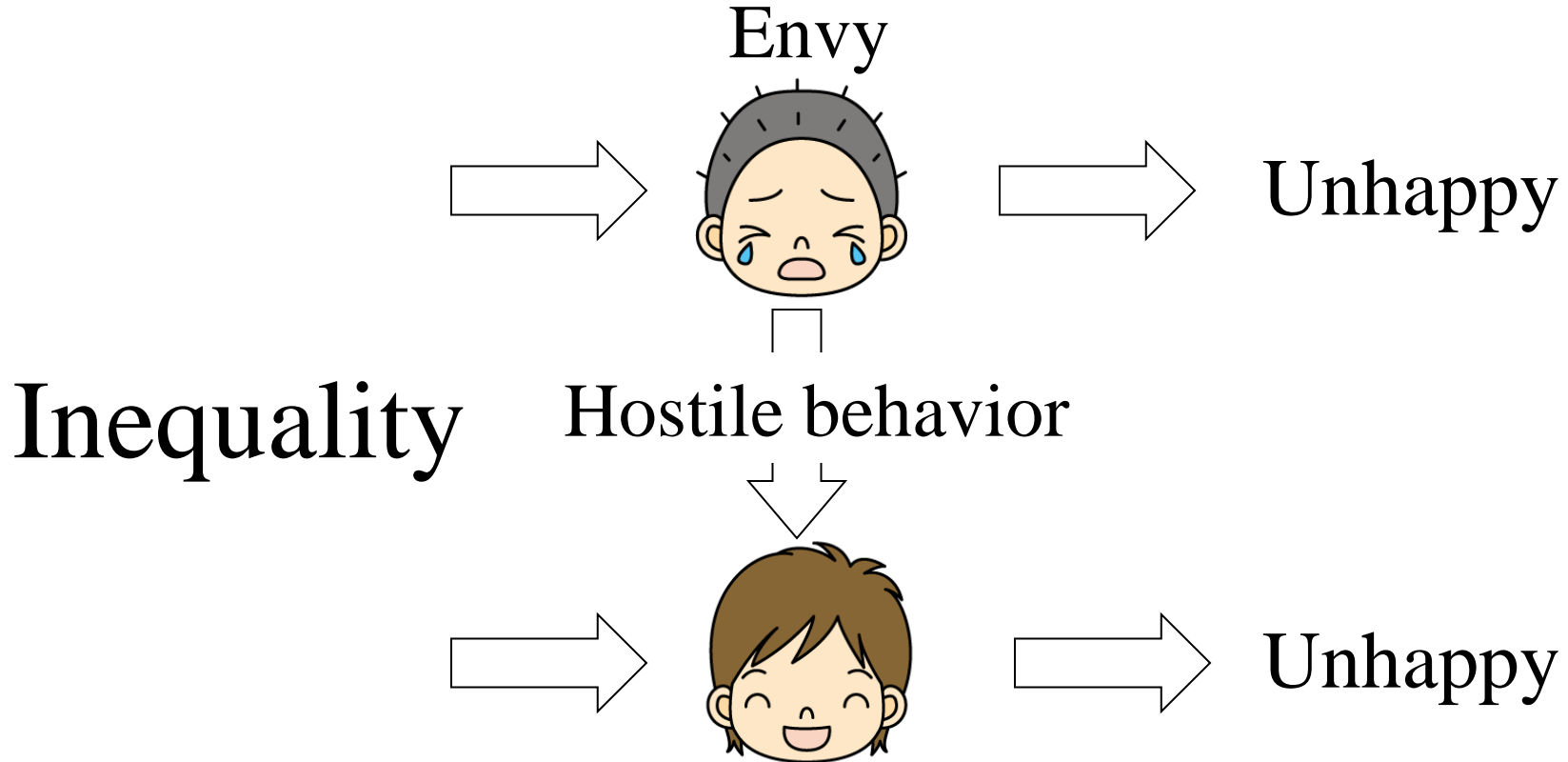
Preserving inequalities



Happiness

>

Envy is a disagreeable state of mind and leads people to do disagreeable things

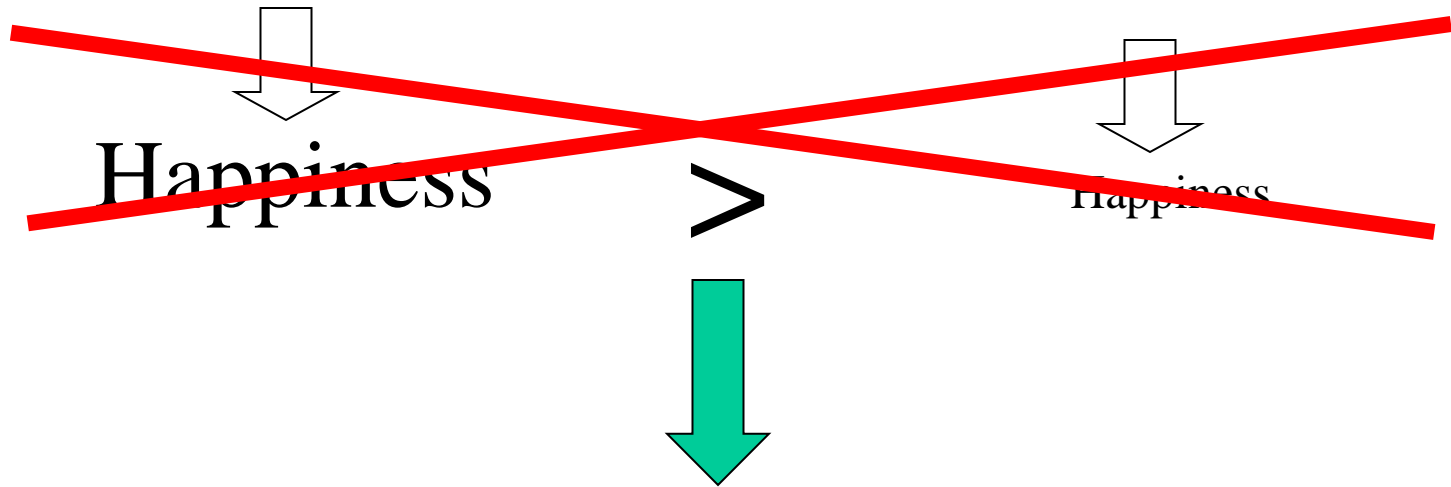


Utilitarianism requires that extreme inequalities should be reduced in order to remove the envy of poor people.

Based on these two arguments, we can say that:

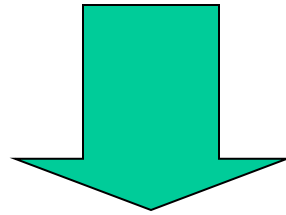
A system of extreme
economic inequalities

Any alternative



Utilitarianism condemns such a system.

Utilitarianism never condones slavery or some other system of extreme economic inequalities.

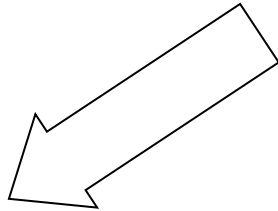


Rawls's criticism against utilitarianism is incorrect.

5. A flaw in Rawls's theory

Needs of citizens

- Basic rights
 - Wealth
- (‘Primary Goods’)



Citizens  Development of two moral powers
(Rawls 2001, 57)

Two moral powers

1. The capacity to understand, to apply and to act from two principles of justice
 2. The capacity to have, to revise and rationally to pursue a conception of good (an end of life)
- (Rawls 2001, 18—19)

Needs of citizens

- Basic rights
- Wealth


Citizens → Development of two moral powers

- Violating the basic rights of citizens
- Not aiding poor citizens

→ Wrong

The basic rights and wealth are needs of citizens, who have these two moral powers and can develop such powers with these goods.

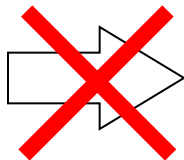
How about those with such severe disabilities that cannot have and develop the two moral powers?

→ They cannot develop their two moral powers, even if ‘primary goods’ are distributed to them.

~~Needs?~~

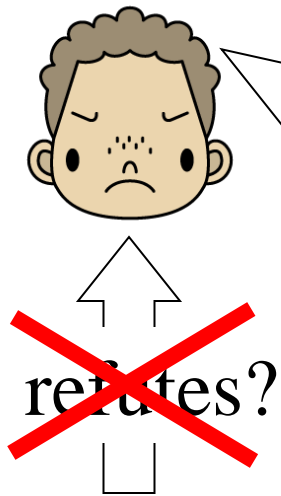
- 
- Basic rights
 - Wealth

Disabled
people

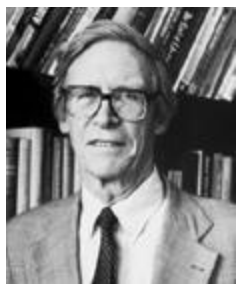


Development of two moral powers

(cf. Nussbaum 2006, ch. 2; Stein 2006, 116—117)



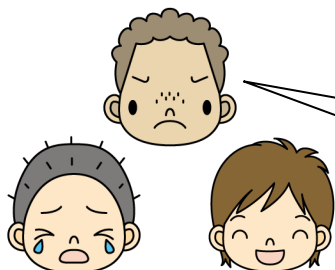
Violating the basic rights of the disabled or not aiding the disabled poor is not wrong, because the basic rights and wealth are not needs of disabled people.



Rawls

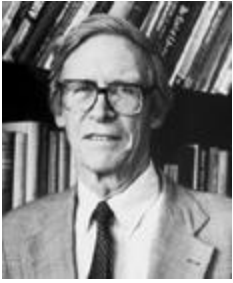
condones

- Laws that permit us to violate the basic rights of disabled
- Public institutions that will not aid the disabled poor



We

These institutions are unjust!



“I take it as obvious, and accepted by common sense, that we have a duty towards all human beings, however seriously handicapped” (Rawls 2001, 176n).

→ Common sense says that we should not violate the basic rights of the disabled and should aid the disabled poor.

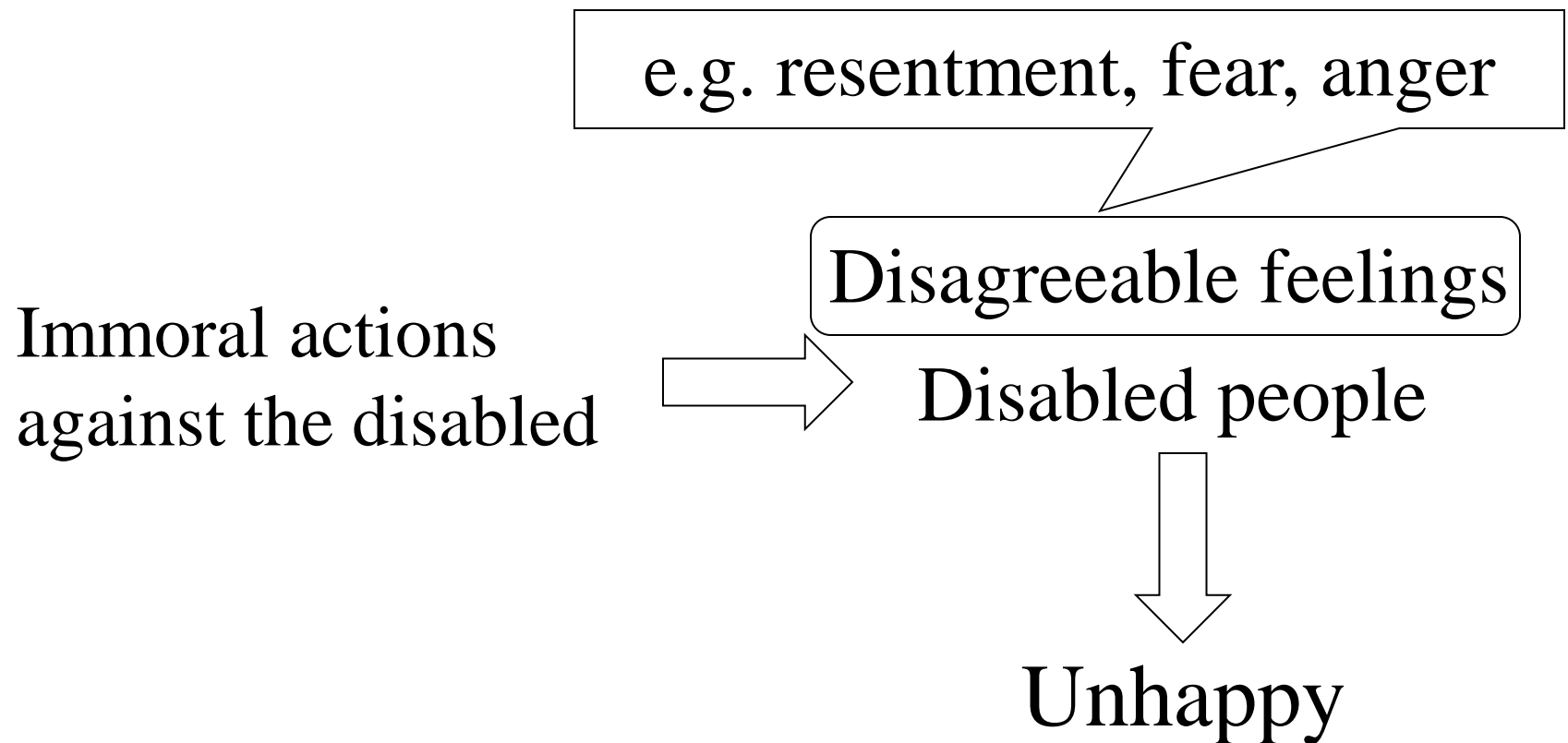


However...

His theory cannot provide any justification for this ‘common sense’.

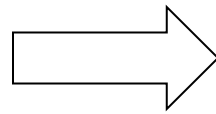
6. An advantage of utilitarianism

Utilitarianism can provide justifications for this ‘common sense’.



Immoral actions against the disabled make non-disabled people unhappy.

Immoral actions
against the disabled

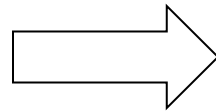


Disagreeable feelings

Families and intimates
of disabled people

They are potentially disabled.

Immoral actions
against the disabled



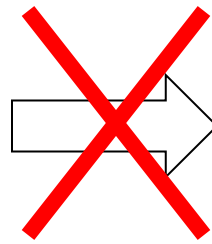
Those who are not
families and intimates
of disabled people

Anxious about being a potential
victim of such actions

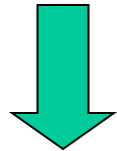
Immoral actions against the disabled tend to increase the unhappiness of both disabled and non-disabled people



- Violating the basic rights of the disabled
- Not aiding the disabled poor



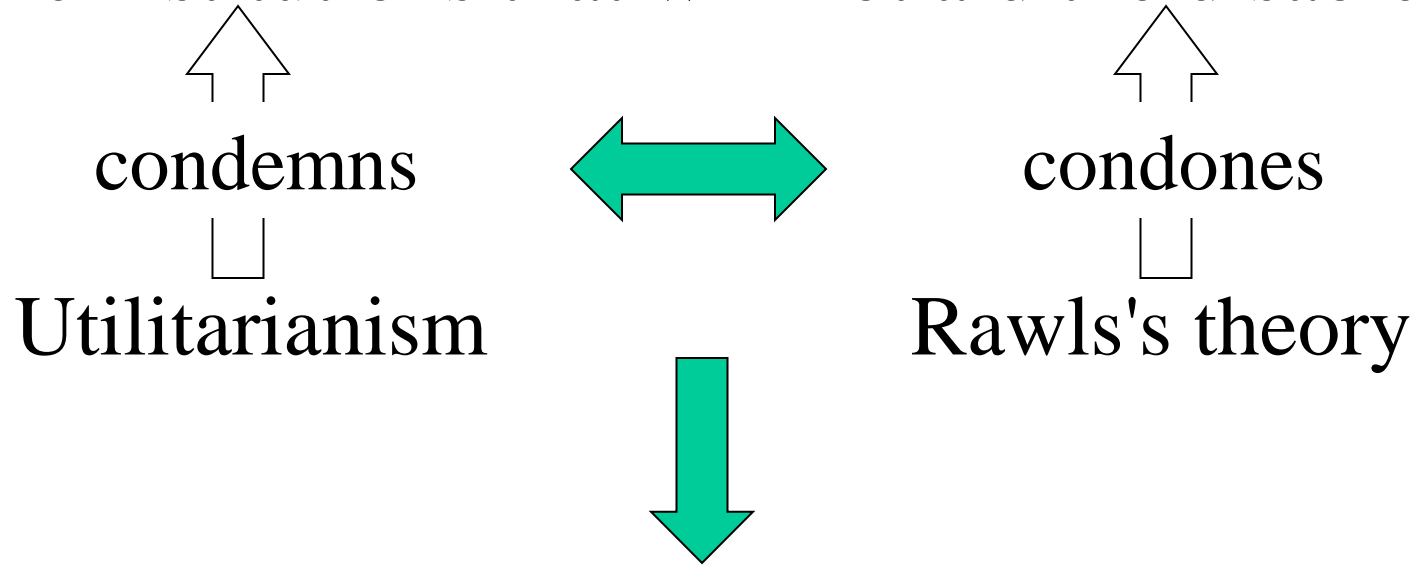
The greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness



Wrong

In this way, utilitarianism can provide good reasons why immoral actions against the disabled are impermissible.

- Laws that permit us to violate the basic rights of disabled
- Public institutions that will not aid the disabled poor

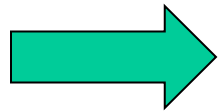


There is an advantage of utilitarianism against Rawls's theory on this point.

Conclusion

The argument so far demonstrates that:

1. Rawls's criticism against utilitarianism is incorrect: utilitarianism never condones slavery or some other system of extreme economic inequalities.
2. Rawls's theory cannot provide good reasons why immoral action against the disabled are impermissible; on the contrary, utilitarianism can provide such reasons.



We can conclude that utilitarianism provides a more reliable standard by which to evaluate social and political institutions than does Rawls's theory.

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