**UTILITARIANISM**

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**The Basis of Classical or Hedonistic Utilitarianism**

We must make clear at the outset that all moral philosophies, and indeed moral theologies,

stand in direct relation to their historical setting in life. Nowhere is this more true than

with the development of utilitarian thought, and it is a point not often enough made. In

addition, the system of ethics known as Utilitarianism did not necessarily start with

Jeremy Benthan (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), neither did it end with

their deaths and the subsequent criticisms of their thought. It is, in truth, an evolving

philosophy with many stages and developments. However, as it is impossible to deal

with all of these here, I shall limit my discussion to the views associated with Bentham

and Mill, best known as Classical Utilitarianism or Hedonistic Utilitarianism, rather than

some of the later forms such as Desire or Welfare Utilitarianism.

The basis of this Classical Utilitarian thought is not religious - it does not stem from a

theistic belief (belief in a god). It is empirical (based upon human experience) and natural

(based upon what comes naturally), that we, as humans, desire pleasure and seek to avoid

pain, hence its title 'hedonistic utilitarianism' (hedonism is the doctrine that the pursuit of

pleasure is good). Bentham's version of this theory can also be deemed 'psychologically

motivated', that is from his analysis of the human psyche (the preference for pleasure to

pain), he came to conclusions about how we should act. Thus his theory is often also

described as 'psychological hedonism', the doctrine that human action is all about striving

for pleasure. This might seem all rather complicated but, on the contrary, one of the

attractions of utilitarian thought is its basic simplicity. In his *Introduction to the*

*Principles of Morals and Legislation* (written in 1789), Bentham expressed it thus:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain

and pleasure. It is for them to point out what we ought to do as well as to

determine what we should do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong,

on the other the chain of causes and effects are fastened to their throne.

The doctrine of the pursuit of pleasure was certainly not a new thing. It is commonly

associated with the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC). But Epicurus himself was

aware that many so-called 'pleasures' often lead to pain and he, certainly, did not seek a

life of luxuries. His own ideas may have had an origin in Aristotle (384-322 BC) who

saw happiness as the Supreme Good and thus as the true object of life but argued that this

could only be obtained through a life of 'moderation'. In fact, it is fair to say that

happiness (Greek = *eudaimonia*) is, along with virtue (*arete*), the main object of all

Greek ethics.

**Utility**

But why utility? Utility means 'usefulness' (Latin *utilis* = useful). Bentham was

concerned to promote an ethic that was 'useful' (he may have borrowed the term itself

from David Hume). He found it in his appeal to the pain and pleasure theory mentioned

above – an action is most useful if it avoids pain and promotes pleasure. Equating

pleasure with happiness, Bentham expressed the principle of 'usefulness' in the following

way:

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves

of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency it appears to have to

augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question …

An action may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility… when the

tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it

has to diminish it.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863), expressed this as follows:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest

Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to

promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By

happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain,

and the privation of pleasure.

We can see from these two statements that Utilitarianism is also quite clearly a

teleological philosophy, that is it is concerned with the 'consequence of an action' (Greek

*telos* = end) rather than the original motives. What matters is how much happiness or

pleasure can be assessed as the consequence of doing the action in question. But, to this

we must add something more. For Bentham and Mill, it was necessary that happiness or

pleasure be seen in the widest and fullest sense. In Bentham's famous phrase: ' it is the

greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong'.

Thus, there are three main areas that need careful examination: first, the notion of the

greatest number, second, the notion of the greatest amount, and, third, the idea that the

rightness of an ethical action can be judged according to its results (consequences).

**The Greatest Number**

Jeremy Bentham lived in the age of the emergence of the great democracies. He

witnessed the birth of America (1776- the American revolution) and the rising up of the

new France (1789- the French Revolution). But, Bentham himself did not start off as a

democrat, originally thinking that an 'enlightened monarchy' would be the best vehicle of

change in society, but became convinced when his own suggestions for a new kind of

prison (known as the Panopticon) were not accepted by the British government.

The nineteenth century itself was a time of rapid population growth, urbanisation,

industry, unemployment and social deprivation. It saw the end of many old and

established orders, especially the influence and centrality of the churches which were

being cast aside as new societies were growing on secular values. There were other

philosophies of the day which saw solutions in terms of 'classes' and not 'individuals' (e.g.

Marxism). Likewise for Bentham it was the community that mattered, the happiness of

the community.

Thus, for those with education anyway, Bentham's age was rapidly becoming one for the

democrat, the philanthropist and humanist. There were many great figures. Bentham

himself wanted to be the most 'effectively benevolent man who had ever lived', a selfish

but not altogether ignoble aim. At the same time, he was convinced of his on rightness,

believing that no sensible person could disagree with him. John Stuart Mill, however

although still very much a utilitarian, did disagree over certain important aspects of

Bentham's theory, especially over the emphasis on the greatest number. The problems

with judging goodness in such terms may seem obvious to us today – what if the greatest

number in any community favours actions that cause immense harm to certain individuals

or the persecution of minority groups? But, as I have said above, we must understand

Bentham in his own time.

Nevertheless, in the 1820's Bentham himself had expressed some doubts about the words

the greatest number in that they might lead to the impression that the happiness of the

majority was all that mattered. He therefore felt the need to point out that a minority

could be so oppressed by a majority that the unhappiness of the former might be even

greater than the happiness of the latter. In such a case, the overall happiness of the

community would suffer.

As indicated, Mill felt it necessary to come to terms with the full problems of this term.

To talk to the greatest number was admirable at a superficial level, but it took only a

minor examination to reveal that, in such a world, the individual was likely not only to be

lost among the crowd but never likely to be allowed to develop. Thus, Mill sought to

rescue the individual from Bentham's community.

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a

civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either

physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant.

The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that

which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is,

of right absolute. Over himself, over his own body or mind, the individual is sovereign.

This famous passage still lies at the heart of so much discussion of the questions of State

censorship and the relationship between the individual and society. For Mill, a State

cannot prevent an individual doing something which only harms him/herself. When other

people are involved, then the State can be involved; otherwise, the individual is sovereign.

In response to this it can be said that, just as Bentham's majority rule is potentially

harmful to the individual, Mill's sovereignty of the individual could be harmful to the

overall happiness of the greatest number. It could be said that I as an individual have the

right to snort cocaine – if I wish to harm myself so be it – but where do I get my cocaine

from? Surely others are affected in its means of production, transportation and selling?

If I can get it, so indeed can others who might not be so strong-willed as myself; how can

we protect the weak and allow me my pleasure? The indication is strongly that most

actions affect others, we do not stand alone, we live in communities. Even so, this is not

to say that Bentham was right and we have to recognise the dangers, both intrinsic and

universal.

**The Greatest Amount of Happiness**

On the matter of how we measure happiness or pleasure, we again find disagreement

between Bentham and Mill. For Bentham, happiness was quantitative – an action's

goodness depended entirely upon the amount of happiness produced. It did not mater

whether that action was simple or intellectual, menial or artistic, 'push-pin' or poetry:

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences

of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnishes more pleasure, it is more

valuable than either.

As what mattered was the amount of happiness, and as more people probably played

push-pin (a simple child's game) than read poetry, then push-pin was of greater utility

value than poetry. Today we might say that football creates more pleasure than Vivaldi,

that reading the Sun is of greater value that reading the Independent – in each case more

people do the former than the latter, so the amount of happiness is bound to be relative to

the number of people involved. In order to aid the calculation of the greatest amount,

Bentham suggested a 'hedonic calculus' in which pleasure and pain were to be measured

according to seven criteria: intensity (how deep is the pleasure or pain?), duration (how

long will it last?), certainty (will it definitely happen or not?), remoteness (is it in the near

or distant future?), richness or fecundity (will it produce similar or other pleasures?),

purity (is it likely to produce sensations of the opposite type), and, extent (how many

people will be affected?).

In his classic essay on Utilitarianism (1863), Mill admitted that 'pleasure, and freedom

from pain, are the only things desirable as ends' (consequences) but went on to

distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. In comparing the human capacity for

pleasure with that of an animal, he argued that 'some kinds of pleasures are more

desirable than others' (following Epicurus) and that, if someone has had experience of

both (that is animal and human), he will invariably never be satisfied with the former.

From this he argued that no intelligent person, if he has had experience of the pleasures

of a dunce or fool, would likewise be satisfied with those. Even though the intelligent

person might require more to keep him happy than the fool, he will not swap places.

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be

Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

How would we react to soma or to the electrode treatment? We might try it now and

again but would we want it in perpetuity, would we want it forced on us? We would have

happy faces, we would be experiencing pleasure with no bad effects, but is this really

pleasure? Pleasure is simply not quantifiable, nor is it measurable in this way. Perhaps

in fact we need pain in order to measure pleasure, so the continued existence of pain is as

important as the existence of pleasure.

**Consequences – The End Justifies the Means**

The Bolshevik revolutionary leader Lenin is reported to have said if the end does not

justify the means, nothing does… The dangers of an ethical system that relies solely upon

consequences are numerous and are particularly well demonstrated by a well-readable

and moving account of post-revolutionary Eastern European philosophy found in Arthur

Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940). Here, the former revolutionary Rubashov is under

arrest for having some doubts about the value of the end justices the means. In a

passionate response to his inquisitor, he unfolds the horror of the policy that he himself

had once helped carry out:

… in the interests of a just distribution of land we deliberately let die of starvation

about five million farmers and their families in one year. So consequent were we

in the liberation of human beings from the shackles of industrial exploitation that

we sent about ten million people to do forced labour in the Arctic regions and

jungles of the East, under conditions similar to those of antique galley slaves…

Acting consequentially in the interests of the coming generations, we have laid

such terrible privations on the present one that its average length of life is

shortened by a quarter …

This is, of course, taking the policy to an extreme but extremes are sometimes useful in

helping to reveal the dangers of a theory. An end justifies the means doctrine can be used

to justify all kinds of atrocities in the present, a good end (e.g. one that promotes the

happiness of the greatest number) would forbid nothing 'absolutely', even rape, torture

and murder. But neither Bentham nor Mill would have advocated such extremes. These

examples refer to what are called 'exceptional circumstances' – only in exceptional

circumstances would torture be justified, e.g., if it prevents a bomb exploding in a

crowded shopping area. But, even so, can it be justified? You can probably see the

dangers: present people become expendable figures and statistics in the grand calculation.

There are additional problems. Even if we agree that the consequences alone matter, how

do we calculate these consequences? Without a crystal ball, future predictions become

assumptions and assumptions are often based upon past experience (which cannot take

into account new experiences of the future) and often upon pure guesswork. Put all this

together with the problems stated above of calculating 'happiness' or 'pleasure' and we are

faced with a need to rethink utilitarian principles.

**Conclusions – The Avoidance of Suffering**

This short study has tried to emphasise the three major tenets of Classical Utilitarianism,

along with some of the problems in their adoption. However, despite these and other

problems, the perseverance of utilitarian philosophy serves to show its lasting value.

There is much that Bentham and Mill said and did that was ahead of their time and ought

certainly to be studied, as should their influence on law and economics. The continual

reworking of their ideas in moral philosophy (look at Henry Sidgwick, 1874, David

Lyons, 1965, and R. M. Hare, 1981) are a further testimony to their value. It is indeed

significant that one of the most important recent contributions to modern moral thinking,

the Warnock Report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology (1984), adopted largely

utilitarian guidelines. However, my own preference is to adopt what could be called a

negative utilitarian approach. Happiness or pleasure are impossible to quantify, but pain

and suffering are not. We may not necessarily know what will make someone happy but

we can have a good idea as to what will make them suffer, certainly in the physical sense.

We may have enormous difficulties in deciding what is right or good but we can come to

more immediate agreement over what is evil or bad.

Thus, the usefulness (utility) of Classical utilitarianism may lie in assessing what action

will cause the least amount of suffering. Here, the suffering of the present must not be

put aside for the benefit of the future – all must count. The principle of utility becomes

‘an action is wrong if it creates suffering’. To this may well be added: if two or more

actions are all likely to create suffering, we can only choose the one that will bring about

the least. In addition, for this philosophy to be fully 'useful' it must take on board the

serious problem about consequences, it must couple its concern for end results with a

concern for what is desirable in the present; it must couple its concern for numbers with

a concern for individual human beings. Mill certainly realised this as did Koestler's

former revolutionary, Rubashov, quoted above. In this form, I suggest that Classical Utilitarianism is a most useful, if not the most useful, way of approaching the major

moral issues of today. It is certainly extremely useful for any student wishing to 'get into'

a particular moral argument. As a basis for essays and analyses on the ethics of war,

medicine, the environment and poverty, it is invaluable. By considering the utilitarian

position, especially that of the 'elimination of pain and suffering', it is possible to get

behind a question. Will gene therapy lead to more or less suffering? Will the legalisation

of voluntary euthanasia lead to more or less suffering? Will the legalisation of cannabis

lead to more or less suffering? Will the decriminalisation of 'hard porn' lead to more or

less suffering? Do sanctions on Iraq lead to more or less suffering…? Thus by starting

with this basic utilitarian principle of reduction of suffering, and by applying the facts to

this principle, particular moral judgements emerge for discussion and the debate deepens

as moral theory and practical ethics engage. Try it.

**Sources and texts quoted or referred to:**

Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, edited by J.

H. Burnes and H. L. A. Hart (London: Athlone Press, 1970)

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, and *On Liberty*, edited by Geraint Williams (Everyman

Library, 1993)

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1985)

J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (C.U.P., 1973)

Mary Warnock, *A Question of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985)

**Also**

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1984)

David Lyons, *Forms and Limits Of Utilitarianism* (O.U.P., 1965).

R. M. Hare, *Essays in Philosophical Methods* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

**Suggested Reading (non-fiction)**

For fairly specific study of the background and main ideas of Classical Utilitarianism, I

suggest:

John Dinwiddy, *Bentham* (O.U.P.,1989)

William Thomas, *Mill* (O.U.P., 1985)

Anthony Quinton*, Utilitarian Ethics* (Duckworth, 1989)

J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams (above).

In addition, there are a number of general introductions to Ethics in which can be found

chapters on Utilitarianism. The best of these are:

Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch, *The Puzzle of Ethics*, chapters 6 and 7 (Collins, Fount,

1994)

Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, chapters 12 and 17 (Routledge & Kegan

Paul, 1966)

Richard Norman, *The Moral Philosophers*, chapter 7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).

Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, chapters 19 and 20 (Blackwell, 1991) – The

work of Peter Singer himself, on a variety of fields from Famine Relief and Animal

Rights to Abortion and Embryo Research, is an excellent example of utilitarian principles

in action.

**Suggested Reading (fiction)**

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World.*