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Utilitarianism

Introduction

Utilitarianism is the most important ethical theory to originate in the United Kingdom. While Kant developed his view that human beings were rational animals who, if allowed by circumstances, develop a moral society based on reason, far away in Edinburgh and London a completely different view of morality was created. Kant based his moral philosophy on what he regarded as a priori knowledge. In Britain, by contrast, this new moral philosophy was based on **a posteriori knowledge**, on the view that ideas are products of human experience. Utilitarianism was the most important ethical product of this **empirical** approach to knowledge.

Utilitarianism is the belief that the rightness of an action, rule or principle is to be judged by its presumed consequences. Utilitarians, in coming to a conclusion about the rightness of an action, rule or principle, are forced to answer two fundamental moral questions. These are **what is good?** and **what is right?** As John Broome puts it:

Utilitarianism contains a theory of good and a theory of right. It is characteristic of the utilitarian theory of right that rightness is derived from goodness.

Utilitarians base goodness and rightness on human experience. For them what is good is that which produces pleasure, happiness, contentment or welfare and what is right is that which maximizes one or more of these things. Utilitarians call the method for maximizing good the **principle of utility** and they use the term **optimific** to describe the achievement of this maximization.

Key terms

a posteriori knowledge – knowledge gained by logical deductions made from observation of the material world.

empiricism – the idea that knowledge can only be gained through logical analysis of the observation of sensory experiences of the material world.

optimific – the maximization of pleasure, happiness, welfare or whatever concept or concepts a particular utilitarian thinks is essential for human fulfilment and well-being.

Key term

consequentialism

– the idea that the consequences of an action solely determine whether it is the right thing to do.

Key note

The greatest good of the greatest number

Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) was an Ulster Protestant who studied at the University of Glasgow. There he read the works of Bishop George Berkeley. Hutcheson notes that Berkeley, in one of his more obscure works, argues that human experiences give rise to either pain or pleasure. Berkeley gives the illustration of a man putting his hand in front of a fire. The fire, at a distance, produces the pleasure of warmth and light. However, what was pleasure becomes pain as the hand draws closer to the source of the heat. Hutcheson notes that particular sensory experiences therefore create what he calls **simple ideas of approbation or condemnation**. Things that create pleasure you approve of whereas experiences that cause pain make you condemn them. Hutcheson goes on to argue that people prefer a happy and contented society to constant social change and financial turmoil. Hutcheson writes:

The highest moral approbation is the calm, stable, universal goodwill to all.

The maximization of happiness would lead to a calm and stable society. This Hutcheson calls:

The greatest good of the greatest number.

Modern utilitarians often disagree over what is good and what is right. These differences of opinion have resulted in four different strands of utilitarianism in contemporary society, three of which are examined in this chapter. They are:

1. **Act utilitarianism** (also called **extreme utilitarianism**).
2. **Rule utilitarianism** (also known as **restrictive utilitarianism**).
3. **Preference utilitarianism**.

Utilitarianism, in whatever form, is a **teleological ethical theory** as each action or rule is judged on whether its end (telos) result maximizes good. It is also **consequentialist** since the consequences of an action or rule is the sole criterion to judge whether it is right or wrong.

Key point

- *The highest moral approbation is the calm, stable, universal goodwill to all ... the greatest good of the greatest number.* (Francis Hutcheson)

Origins

Utilitarianism developed in the aftermath of the Wars of Religion (1562–98) in France, in the period that marked the birth of modern science. The experience of the English Civil Wars (1642–51) demonstrated, for many contemporaries, that human beings were often violent and immoral animals. As Thomas Hobbes wrote at the time:

The life of man is nasty, brutish and short.

Hobbes analysis of the human condition was bleak. Christians saw it as a threat to their understanding that man is made in the image of God. A growing number of non-believers saw it as an overly pessimistic view of human nature. In the century that followed the publication of Hobbes' *Leviathan* both Christians and non-believers tried to create a new moral system based not on the Bible, arguments over which had caused a century of religious wars, but on the laws of nature. Some of these were Christians who, following the ideas of Galileo Galilei and Sir Isaac Newton, believed that the laws of nature were products of the divine hand at work in the universe. Among this group, known today as the **theological utilitarians**, was the writer John Gay as well as William Paley, who developed the teleological argument for the existence of God. The others were a growing band of sceptical non-believers, known collectively as the **classical utilitarians**. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are the most important of these. Both groups, through observation, agreed that:

- in nature things and actions either cause pleasure or pain
- pleasure is good and pain is bad
- the utility (meaning usefulness) of an action or thing is to be judged solely on the basis of whether it maximizes pleasure (happiness)
- an action or thing should either directly or indirectly lead to the pleasure or happiness of the maximal number of people in society
- all human beings prefer pleasure to pain and this preference is built into nature's laws.

The two groups differed over the cause of this. The theological utilitarians argued that the human preference for happiness was a result of being made in God's image, since

God is all-good and all-loving. The classical utilitarians argued that nature itself placed human beings under two masters: pain and pleasure. Whether it was by God or by nature, both groups were agreed that it was through human sensory experiences that morality develops.

To think about

Is human nature 'nasty, brutish and short'?

Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), father of utilitarianism, was a non-believer and ordered in his will that his mortal remains should be stuffed and kept within the precincts of University College London, where they can be seen today. The face is a replica. He is wearing his favourite hat and sitting on his writing chair.



Jeremy Bentham is regarded as the father of classical utilitarianism. He was part of a movement that wanted radical change in British society without the excesses and violence of the French Revolution. Brought up in a strong Nonconformist religious environment, he became an opponent of both the established Church of England and of the Christian faith in general. Bentham called himself a **non-theist**. He, like his friend James Mill, rejected the term atheist, as it is impossible for any human being to know whether God exists or not. As a non-theist Bentham rejected morality based on divine authority. He believed that there is one single basis for ethics and that is nature. Nature replaced God as the sole higher authority to which human beings must turn in order to understand themselves, the world and moral life. Bentham, however, never

attempted to explain what he means by nature. He assumed that no explanation was required. Bentham developed from this view the idea that morality is the maximization of pleasure in society. He wrote:

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

Bentham believed that not only is humanity under these twin masters, but that every human should prefer pleasure to pain. Bentham gives no reason for this preference. He argues that it is *fundamental* and needs no evidence. However, he does explain that pleasure and pain are not just physical sensations; they are also the psychological state that comes from feeling pain or pleasure. It might be argued that some people prefer pain, whether physical or psychological. The answer to this is that such people do not see pain as pain but rather as pleasure. Thus a hermit might suffer hardship by living in a cave all his life, but he regards suffering as a stepping-stone to the pleasure of a heavenly reward. For the recluse, the physical pain is psychological pleasure. Bentham calls this the **principle of ascetics**, which he rejected. He believed that the religious person deludes himself by suffering in the hope of an uncertain destiny. The Christian God is not a benevolent deity who maximizes human happiness. Christians say that God is all-good and all-loving, Bentham argues, yet they live in constant fear of the Last Judgement and eternal damnation.

Key point

- *Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.* (Jeremy Bentham)

Bentham follows-up his view that human beings are under the mastery of pain and pleasure by arguing that what is good for the individual, is right for human society and for all **sentient** creatures. Three points should be noted:

1. **The principle of utility has a universal application.** Actions should therefore be calculated on the basis of what is good for the world and not what maximizes the happiness of a particular locality or class.
2. **Every human being counts and all are equal.** This is an **egalitarian** message.
3. **Sentient animals are equally under the same law of pain and pleasure** and have to be taken into account when actions to maximize pleasure are examined.

Utilitarian theory was not enough for Bentham. He believed that theories are worthless unless they have practical application. This was one of the many reasons why he had earlier rejected the views of Immanuel Kant. It was also the main reason for his rejection of what he termed the **principle of sympathy**. A person who is sympathetic towards, for example, the plight of the homeless is not a good person since sympathy will not provide homes for these people. Being moral is not being sympathetic. Morality demands the maximization of good by action to get the homeless off the streets, which will be beneficial to the whole community.

Key terms

principle of ascetics – the Christian belief that self-sacrifice is beneficial to human beings, as it brings them closer to God and to their heavenly reward. Hermits and monks live an ascetic life.

sentient – thinking being; able to perceive and feel things.

egalitarian – belief that all human beings are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

Key term

hedonic calculus

– Bentham states that there are seven basic tests for calculating whether an action will maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

Bentham's application of his moral theory led to the construction of a method. All actions are to be calculated in terms of the **maximization of happiness** and the **minimization of pain**. This method is known as the **hedonic calculus** or **felicific calculus**. Bentham states that there are seven basic tests for calculating whether an action will maximize pleasure and minimize pain. They are **PRICED F**:

1. **Purity** of the sensation, meaning that it is not followed by sensations of pain.
2. **Remoteness** or nearness of the sensation.
3. **Intensity** of the sensation.
4. **Certainty** of the sensation.
5. **Extent** of the sensation, meaning the number of people affected.
6. **Duration** of the sensation.
7. **Fecundity** of the sensation, meaning the chance it will produce other pleasurable experiences.

Bentham uses the word **sensation** instead of experience or action. He means by this that pain and pleasure are products of the senses: sight, hearing, feeling, taste and smell. It is for each person to sit down and calculate whether a particular action will maximize pleasure, not only for the individual involved but also for society. Thus the hedonic calculus is the litmus test for all practical decisions.

To think about

What do we mean by 'happiness'? Can it be defined? How can you test happiness?

Key note

Playing push-pin, reading poetry and seeing ghosts

One of the most interesting differences between Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill is over the question of pleasure. Bentham believes that all pleasures are of equal value, while Mill distinguishes higher and lower order pleasures. This disagreement is fundamental to every aspect of life. Bentham, for example, regarded reading poetry and playing music as less important than playing the child's game of push-pin. Why? A child's game can be played by anyone. Poetry and music are understood by a few. The utilitarian principle of 'the greatest good of the greatest number' means that a child's game is much more useful (utilitarian) than the arts of poetry or music. Additionally, poetry is for Bentham a lie. It does not present the world as it is and therefore causes pain to many. Bentham writes:

Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few. The game of push-pin is always innocent: it were well could the same be always asserted of poetry. Indeed, between poetry and truth there is natural opposition: false morals and fictitious nature.

Mill, on the other hand, regarded reading poetry as one of the higher-order pleasures. Push-pin was a trivial game that was lower order. Mill had a good reason for his high regard for poetry. At the age of 20 he had a mental breakdown while reading the poems of William Wordsworth. It was a sort of conversion experience that showed him the error of his strict Benthamite upbringing. The romantic poet opened up a new picture of reality, of beauty and of the wonder of the natural world. It was a perception that changed Mill's life.

Bentham's world was down to earth. His joys were his daily run, extended walks and growing prize cucumbers. The uncertainty of life made him anxious. Bentham was afraid of ghosts from his childhood to the day he died. He often hid under the bedclothes out of fear. His world was narrow. Mill found nothing to fear from life. He saw no ghosts but only the sheer scale and variety of creation. Bentham was a pessimist about the world; human beings had to be controlled for the common good. Mill was the eternal optimist; human beings should be free to do what they liked as long as they did not interfere with the freedom of others.

Bentham's ideas are not without their problems:

1. He views **all pleasures as being of equal value**. It follows that the happiness of a person clubbing on a Thursday night is the same as that of a carer doing unpaid social work for the elderly. Bentham maintains that both get pleasure from what they do. They are either happy or they are not. Their activities either give pleasure or not. For him it is impossible to speak of higher or lower pleasures.

To think about

Are all pleasures of equal value?

2. Bentham rejects the idea of **human rights** or, as they were called in his day, **natural rights**. He describes human rights as '**nonsense upon stilts**'. Rights lead to conflict and not harmony. It would be wrong to allow the rights of an individual or group to frustrate actions that might lead to the general happiness of society.

Is it better to be a happy pig or an unhappy philosopher?



This famous quote is an attack on Bentham's simple hedonism but it is also an assault on all those who look to lower pleasures as the source of happiness. These fools, as Mill sees it, are in all classes of society, from the rich banker interested only in making money to the impoverished poor, who spend life creating ever-larger families. All are

fools because they live in a world in which there is '*the absence of high feelings... the absence of interest*'. These though are the minority of the human race.

Mill's positive view of human nature creates a problem. How is it possible for human being to be determined teleologically and yet, at the same time, utterly to be free to choose higher or lower order pleasures? Mill's understanding of human psychology points towards a determinism, based on the pursuit of happiness, which contrasts with his views on individual freedom and autonomy. His solution to this problem is a form of **weak determinism**, which conflicts with the natural determinism of the followers of Bentham.

To think about

Are so-called lower order pleasures worthy only of swine?

Human beings are determined by the desire for happiness but they are free to choose their individual path or to reject it. A few will not. Most will prefer a life of real happiness while a few will not. Life is an experiment. Each human being should be free to take part in that experiment.

Mill spent much of his adult life freeing himself from the straitjacket, as he saw it, of Bentham's ideas. Mill's utilitarianism is individualistic. It contains human rights and it is based on principles rather than on the hedonic calculus. However, Mill's utilitarianism has been criticised on a number of levels. The main criticisms are:

1. Mill's psychological approach is a product of nineteenth-century attitudes about human nature, which are discredited today. Mill has a very optimistic view of human nature and believes in individual autonomy. These views are in marked contrast to

the biological determinism of human behaviour among contemporary psychologists. Richard Dawkins is one critic of Mill's limited determinism.

2. Mill is guilty of the naturalistic fallacy.
3. Mill's higher and lower order pleasures are meaningless terms. People either get pleasure from something or they do not.
4. The idea that higher order pleasures lead to human progress, the teleology of happiness, is weak. Progress can be made as much by lower order pleasures as by higher order pleasures.
5. There is an arrogance in Mill's ideas of higher and lower order pleasures that suggests that, while Mill believes in liberty, he believes that freedom is best served by following his ideas. His comments that lower order pleasures are *worthy of swine* points to intellectual arrogance.
6. Mill rejects the simplicity of Bentham's ethical theory but then produces a view of utilitarianism that is too complex. Many consider that Mill is a rule utilitarian but this is only partially true. There are always exceptions to any rule. Mill cites the Golden Rule of Christian thought (Do to others, what you would have them to do to you) as a rule, but there are exceptions. Mill rejects, for example, the right of a person to self-harm or to harm another consenting adult. A human being cannot become a slave to another person even if that person wishes to do so. Liberty is a right but only up to a point. There are always exceptions.
7. The complexity of Mill's utilitarianism means that the morality or otherwise of various issues cannot be easily or quickly resolved. Mill regards this as releasing human beings from the simplicity of the hedonic calculus. Critics argue that it prevents people from judging the merits of particular projects or structures, which demand rapid solutions. The simplicity of Bentham's calculus is replaced by, what Mill calls, **the plurality of causes and the intermingling of effects**. The original purpose of utilitarianism, namely, to answer questions about what is good and right in a particular situation is no longer possible. The litmus tests of the hedonic calculus are replaced by muddy water.