

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a popular topic on all specifications.

Sarah K. Tyler examines the famous ethical theory from a range of perspectives.

'utilitarianism is a standard for judging public action'

Bentham equated utility with happiness, pleasure or avoidance of pain

In his article, 'Utility and the Good', Robert E. Goodin claims: 'Utilitarianism of whatever stripe is, first and foremost, a standard for judging public action.' Although the theory may arguably be of some value when making moral decisions of a personal nature, it is in the public arena that it comes into its own.

When Jeremy Bentham adapted the utilitarian thought of his predecessors into the ethical theory we are most familiar with today, its value in the public sphere was potentially one of its most attractive features. Eighteenth-century England was experiencing radical social changes that were to leave it forever transformed. The Industrial Revolution had brought thousands of working families to the towns from the country, but rather than finding the streets paved with gold, they faced appalling working and living conditions, and discovered that they had exchanged the rural tyranny of landowners for the urban oppression of the factory owners. Homelessness, poverty, overcrowding, alcoholism, child labour, slum prisons and prostitution abounded, while the minority of wealthy industrialists and entrepreneurs enjoyed the fruits of their employees' labours. The concern for the majority, which classical act utilitarianism encouraged, met the needs of the working classes, and the philanthropic and social reforms which gradually began to take place reflected this: Elizabeth Fry's prison reform, the abolition of slavery and the Factory Acts are just a few obvious examples.

The principle of utility

However, the features of utilitarianism that made it so appealing go beyond the influence it had on social policy. The principle of utility based on happiness and consequentialism itself had long

been advocated as the better way of approaching human morality. In his *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), David Hume analysed the ways in which we make judgements about character and conduct, drawing the conclusion that virtue consists in those qualities which are most useful to ourselves and others. This is what we mean by utility in its most general sense — that which is most useful. But we need to ask, 'Useful for what?'

Like Hume and Hobbes before him, Bentham equated utility with happiness, pleasure or avoidance of pain. In his *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) he wrote: 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as what we shall do.'

The hedonic calculus

Associated with this idea, is the famous hedonic or felicific calculus — a quantitative means of establishing which action would lead to the greater balance of pleasure over pain. The calculus identifies that every option has a value determined by the properties it possesses. The property favoured by the utilitarian is how far an action will enable humans (and possibly animals) to experience happiness or pleasure, and the best action is established by adding up the values of the possible alternatives. If two options present themselves, and one offers a 50% chance of producing happiness and the other 30%, logic dictates that the former is chosen. A gamble is required since there is no guarantee that the outcome will yield that 50%, or even 25%, of happiness, but, unlike the deontologist, the utilitarian is a consequentialist and will argue that it is best to make that choice, and take that risk.

Hedonistic utilitarianism is frequently criticised on the grounds that it allows any number of horrifically immoral acts to be justified in the cause of maximising the pleasure of the majority. Philip Pettit writes: 'So long as they promised the best consequences...It would forbid absolutely nothing: not rape, not torture, not even murder.' However, this is perhaps a misjudgement of the theory. Pettit observes that it would only surely be in 'horrendous circumstances' that such a charge would be legitimate, circumstances under which there would be little doubt that although a moral dilemma did exist, the situation was sufficiently unusual to justify an unusual act: the torture of an individual to prevent hundreds from dying in a terrorist explosion, for example.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill, a protégé of Bentham and of his father James Mill, who had been brought up on utilitarian principles, observed that the pleasure which Bentham's utilitarianism could be claimed to support failed to recognise the deeper levels of human experience: 'If [Bentham] thought at all of any of the deeper feelings of human nature, it was but as idiosyncrasies of taste.' Mill argued that some ideals — justice, truth and love, for example — were good whether or not people desired them or were made happy by them. He argued that once the physical needs of humans were met, they would prefer what he called a higher pleasure over a lower one. Individuals needed to be 'competently acquainted' with both levels of pleasure, and thereby in a position to make an informed judgement, but armed with this knowledge, they would surely choose quality of happiness over quantity. Hence, the hedonic calculus failed to recognise what was truly important to human wellbeing.

The difficulties of judging a moral action on the basis of the happiness it yields are increased once we take into account the highly subjective nature of happiness. Mill maintained that happiness is 'much too complex and indefinite' to be the measure of the moral worth of an action. Neither is it necessary, as Bentham inferred, to apply a calculus. Rather, Mill suggested, humans have worked out through trial and error those actions which lead best to human happiness, and which they promote through moral rules, that he termed

secondary principles: 'Do not lie', 'Protect the weak', 'Keep your promises'. Furthermore, the happiness different people derive from different actions cannot reasonably be compared, and yet the ideals which Mill favoured are universally desirable even if they do not immediately rank alongside more physical pleasures. In a world in which we had the choice of gourmet dinners but no justice, or free tickets to Premiership football games but no compassion, surely most rational people would choose the latter in each case.

A consequentialist approach

Utilitarianism rests on a consequentialist or teleological approach to ethical decision making. A consequentialist approach to ethical decision making works on the principle that once the individual or society has identified those qualities which it deems to be valuable, it should set about promoting them. This is an instrumental approach — an action is good in so far as it promotes the value you have decided is good. It is in direct contrast to non-consequential approaches to ethics which advocate the intrinsic values of certain principles or actions that should be honoured even if they aren't promoted. For example, we normally consider it important to honour the principle of the sanctity of life, be it on religious or non-religious grounds. There are occasions when it is impossible to promote it consistently, say, in times of war, but the non-consequentialist would argue that it must still be recognised as valuable.

For the consequentialist, honouring of principles which have no direct utilitarian value is pointless. It is rational to do what promotes those values we have identified as good, and irrational, or at least counter-intuitive, to honour those which prevent them from being realised. However, the problem of calculating the consequences of an action which promotes those values must still be taken into consideration. Bentham recognised this himself, claiming that the aim of the calculus was to identify that which has the 'tendency' to maximise happiness — a reasonable level of expectation of happiness is all that is required.

But even this is difficult to ascertain. The consequences of some actions lie so far in the future that it would be utterly impossible to foresee them. The events that take place between making the original

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