Utilitarianism

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Utilitarianism is a modern form of the Hedonistic ethical theory which teaches that the end of human conduct is happiness, and that consequently the discriminating norm which distinguishes conduct into right and wrong is pleasure and pain. In the words of one of its most distinguished advocates, John Stuart Mill,

> 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 (*Utilitarianism*, ii, 1863).

Although the term Utilitarianism did not come into vogue until it had been adopted by Bentham, and until the essential tenets of the system had already been advocated by many English philosophers, it may be said that, with the important exception of Helvetius (*De l'esprit*, 1758), from whom Bentham seems to have borrowed, all the champions of this system have been English. The favour which it has enjoyed in English speculation may be ascribed in a great measure to the dominance of Locke's teaching, that all our ideas are derived exclusively from sense experience. This epistemological doctrine, hostile to all shades of intentionalism, finds its ethical complement in the theory that our moral ideas of right and wrong, our moral judgments, and conscience itself are derived originally from the experienced results of actions.

Tracing the stream of Utilitarian thought from its sources, we may start with Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), whose fundamental ethical axiom is that right conduct is that which promotes our own welfare; and the social code of morals depends for its justification on whether or not it serves the wellbeing of those who observe it. A Protestant divine, Richard Cumberland (*De legibus naturæ*, 1672), engaged in the refutation of Hobbes's doctrine, that morality depends on civil enactment, sought to show that the greatest happiness principle is a law of the Gospel and a law of nature: "The greatest possible benevolence of every rational agent towards all the rest constitutes the happiest state of each and all. Accordingly common good will be the supreme law." This view was further developed by some other theologians of whom the last and most conspicuous was Paley (*Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 1785), who reasoned that since God wills the happiness of all men it follows that if we would conform our conduct to God's will we must act so as to promote the common happiness; and virtue consists in doing good to all mankind in obedience to the will of God and for the sake of everlasting happiness. Moral obligation he conceived to be the pressure of the Divine will upon our wills urging us to right action. More in harmony with the spirit of the later Utilitarians was Hume, the slightest of whose preoccupations was to find any religious source or sanction of morality. In his *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) he carried out an extensive analysis of the various judgments which we

pass upon our own character and conduct and on those of others; and from this study drew the conclusion that virtue and personal merit consist in those qualities which are useful to ourselves and others. In the course of his speculation he encounters the question which is the irremovable stumbling block in the path of the Utilitarian theorist: How is the motive of self-interest to be reconciled with the motive of benevolence; if every man necessarily pursues his own happiness, how can the happiness of all be the end of conduct? Unlike the later thinkers of this school, Hume did not discuss or attempt systematically to solve the difficulty; he dismissed it by resting on the assumption that benevolence is the supreme virtue.

In Hartley (*Observations of Man*, 1748) we find the first methodical effort to justify the Utilitarian principle by means of the theory of association to which so large a part in the genesis of our moral judgments is assigned by subsequent speculators, especially those of the Evolutionist party. From sensations and the lower elementary or primary emotions, according to Hartley, result higher feelings and emotions, different in kind from the processes out of which they have arisen. The altruistic motives, sympathy and benevolence, are then accounted for. With Bentham arises the group of thinkers who have appropriated the name of Utilitarians as their distinctive badge. The leaders after Bentham were the two Mills, the two Austins, and Godwin, who are also known as the Philosophic Radicals. While the members of this party devoted considerable thought to the defence and development of theoretical Utilitarianism and made it the starting-point of their political activity, they became remarkable less as philosophic speculators than as active reformers of social and economic conditions and of legislation. The keynote of their doctrines and policy is struck by Bentham in the opening of his *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789):

> 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. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of cause and effect are linked to their throne. They govern us in all we do, every effort we can make to throw off their subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In a word man may pretend to abjure their empire; but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hand of reason and law.

Staunchly standing by the principle of unqualified egoism, Bentham rids himself of the task of reconciling self-interest and altruism:

> Dream not that men will move their little finger to serve you, unless their advantage in doing so is obvious to them. Men never did so and never will while human nature is made of its present materials. But they will desire to serve you when by so doing they can serve themselves, and the occasions on which they can serve themselves by serving you are multitudinous (*Deontology*, ii, 1834; posthumous work).

In the hands of Bentham and his disciples Utilitarianism dissociates morality from its religious basis and, incorporating Determinism with its other tenets, becomes pronouncedly Positivistic, and moral obligation is resolved into a prejudice or a feeling resulting from a long-continued association of disagreeable consequences attending some kinds of actions, and advantages following others. The word ought Bentham characterizes as an authoritative impostor, the talisman of arrogancy, indolence, and ignorance. It is the

condemnation of Utilitarianism that this estimate of duty is thoroughly consistent with the system; and no defender of the utility theory has been able, though some have tried, to indicate the claims of moral obligation on Positivistic Utilitarian grounds. Bentham drew up a curious scheme for computing the worth or weight to be assigned to all sorts of pleasures and pains, as a practical norm to determine in the concrete the moral value of any action. He assumes that all pleasures are alike in kind and differ only in quantity, that is in intensity, certainty, duration, etc. His psychological analysis, besides the original defect of making self-interest the sole motive of human action, contains many errors. Subsequent writers have abandoned it as worthless for the very good reason that to calculate, as its employment would demand, all the results of every action, and to strike a balance between the advantages and disadvantages attendant upon it, would require an intellect much more powerful than that with which man is endowed.

The classic expression of the system is John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, which endeavours to raise the Utilitarian ideal to a higher plane than that of the undisguised selfishness upon which Bentham rested it. As the foundation of his structure Mill asserts that every man necessarily acts in order to obtain his own happiness; but finding this ground logically insufficient to furnish a basis for an adequate criterion of conduct, and prompted by his own large sympathies, he quickly endeavours to substitute "the happiness of all concerned" for "the agent's own happiness". The argument over which he, the author of a formidable work on logic, endeavours to pass from the first to the second position, may serve as an example suitable to submit to the beginner in logic when he is engaged in the detection of sophisms. The argument, in brief, is that, as each one desires and pursues his own happiness, and the sum total of these individual ends makes up the general happiness, it follows that the general happiness is the one thing desirable by all and provides the Utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct. "As well might you argue", says Martineau, "that because of a hundred men each one's hunger is satisfied by his dinner, the hunger of all must be satisfied with the dinner of each." To escape some of the criticisms urged against the doctrine as stated by Bentham, who made no distinction in the various kinds of pleasure, Mill claimed that Utilitarianism notes that pleasures differ in quality as well as quantity; that in the judgment of those who have experience of different pleasures, some are preferable to others, that it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. Then he slips from "preferable" to "higher", thus surreptitiously introducing a moral classification among pleasures. The only legitimate grounds for attaching higher and lower moral values to various pleasures, is to estimate them according to the rank of the faculties or of the kinds of action to which they belong as results. But to do this is to assume some moral standard by which we can measure the right or wrong of action, independently of its pleasurable or painful consequences. To answer the objection that virtue is desired for its own sake, and men do right frequently without any calculation of the happiness to be derived from their action, Mill enlists the association theory; as the result of experience, actions that have been approved or condemned on account of their pleasurable or disagreeable consequences at length come to be looked upon by us as good or bad, without our actually adverting to their pleasant or painful result.

Since Mill's time the only writer who has introduced any modification into strictly Utilitarian thought is Sidgwick (*Methods of Ethics*, 1874), who acknowledges that the pleasure-and-pain standard is incapable of serving universally as the criterion of morality; but believes it to be valuable as an instrument for the correction of the received moral code. The general happiness principle he defends as the norm of conduct but he treats it rather as a primary than a demonstrable one. Although he vigorously denounced Utilitarianism, Herbert Spencer's ethical construction (*Data of Ethics*, 1879), which may be taken as the

type of the Evolutionist school, is fundamentally Utilitarian. True, instead of happiness he makes the increase of life, that is, a fuller and more intensive life, the end of human conduct, because it is the end of the entire cosmic activity of which human conduct is a part. But he holds pleasure and pain to be the standard which discriminates right from wrong so that in reality he looks upon the moral value of actions as entirely dependent upon their utility. His account of the genesis of our moral ideas, of conscience, and of our moral judgments is too lengthy and complicated to enter into here. Suffice it to say that in it he sets forth the influence of association with that of heredity as the source of our moral standards and judgments. Our sense of moral obligation is but a transitory feeling, generated by the confluence of our inherited racial experience of the results of action with another feeling that the remote present themselves to our consciousness as possessing more "authoritativeness" than the immediate results. The arguments urged against Hedonism in general are effective against Utilitarianism. Its own peculiar weakness lies in its failure to find a passage from egoism to altruism; its identification of self-interest and benevolence as a motive of conduct; and its claim that the ideas morally right and useful are identical at bottom.

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