

UTILITARIANISM: HISTORY, CONCEPTS AND ROLES

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Abstraksi

Utilitarianisme merupakan teori etika konsekuensialis yang membuat kita berpikir mengenai kebaikan terbesar untuk jumlah terbanyak, dan keburukan terkecil untuk jumlah terkecil. Kepentingan mayoritas dinilai lebih penting daripada kepentingan minoritas, karena utilitas yang memang harus dimaksimalkan. Dengan cara ini, ia dianggap berkesesuaian dengan demokrasi dan cocok untuk menentukan kebijakan publik. Diakui atau tidak, utilitarianisme menjadi teori etika yang paling sering digunakan dalam berbagai aspek dan tingkatan kehidupan. Sebab, ia dianggap bersifat internal, koheren, sederhana, menyeluruh dan dapat secara cepat memecahkan dilema. Namun, sering kali menjadi sangat sulit untuk memberi nilai kebaikan dan keburukan untuk banyak orang yang berbeda. Bagaimana menjalankan kepentingan publik ketika dalam waktu yang bersamaan harus menghormati dan melindungi otonomi seseorang? Artikel ini mencoba mengulas teori utilitarianisme, mulai dari sejarah, konsep sampai pengaruhnya dalam berbagai hal.

Kata kunci : teori utilitarianisme, moral, analisa kebijakan

A. Introduction

Utilitarianism is also known as consequentialism. Generally, in normative ethics, a tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) that an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness —not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it. Such a theory is in opposition to egoism, the view that a person should pursue his own self-interest, even at the

expense of others, and to any ethical theory that regards some acts or types of acts as right or wrong independently of their consequences. Utilitarianism also differs from ethical theories that make the right-ness or wrongness of an act dependent upon the motive of the agent; for, according to the Utilitarian, it is possible for the right thing to be done from a bad motive.

Utilitarian moral theories focus on actions rather than individuals. The primary concern of

such theories is which action is the right or moral one, and moral individuals are simply those people who perform moral actions. Thus the central feature of any Utilitarian theory is its acceptance of the principle of utility. This principle states that good actions, or doing the right thing, results when the person chooses to maximize utility or happiness. Utilitarian theories also agree that utility, or good, is measured in terms of pleasure while bad, or evil, is measured in terms of pain; claiming that the action with the best consequences, the most pleasure for the most individuals, maximizes utility. Thus, Utilitarian believe that the right action is the one that has the best results for the most individuals, and this belief is commonly known as achieving the "greatest happiness for the greatest number." Utilitarian use this principle to determine which action, of all the actions possible in those circumstances, is moral.

B. Historical Background

Once again, utilitarianism states that "an action is right if it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number". Although Mill was the one who perfected the theory, it is Bentham who was the theory's chief popularizer and an example that people followed.¹ According to Bentham the correct ethical standard is the principle of utility, which states that an action should only be done if it brings the maximum amount of happiness to those who are affected by that action.² This principle brings about the first concern with utilitarianism because how

¹ Ruth Borchard, *John Stuart Mill : The Man*, Watts, London, 1957, p. 12.

² Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles and Morals of Legislation*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p. 23.

can you fully decide which people would be affected? The principle of utility only refers to the individual actions by individuals, meaning if more happiness is produced by actions the better the world would be.³

In the other words, utilitarianism is also an effort to provide an answer to the practical question "What ought a man to do?" Its answer is that he ought to act so as to produce the best consequences possible. The ingredients of Utilitarianism are found in the history of thought long before Bentham.⁴

1. Antecedents of Utilitarianism among the Ancients

A hedonistic theory of the value of life is found in the early 5th century BC in the ethics of Aristippus of Cyrene, founder of the Cyrenaic school, and 100 years later in that of Epicurus, founder of an ethic of retirement, and their followers in ancient Greece. The seeds of ethical universalism are found in the doctrines of the rival ethical school of Stoicism and in Christianity.

2. Growth of Classical English Utilitarianism

³ Michael Martin, *A Utilitarian Kantian Principle*, *Philosophical Studies* (with H. Ruf), 21, 1970, p. 90-91. Also see Harry S. Silverstein, *A Defence of Cornman's Utilitarian Kantian Principle*, *Philosophical Studies* (Dordrecht u.a.) 23, 1975, p. 212-215.

⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, London, 2005, p. 1969-1975. Also see Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 28.

In the history of English philosophy, some historians have identified Bishop Richard Cumberland, a 17th-century moral philosopher, as the first to have a Utilitarian philosophy. A generation later, however, Francis Hutcheson, a British "moral sense" theorist, more clearly held a Utilitarian view. He not only analyzed that action as best that "procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers" but proposed a form of "moral arithmetic" for calculating the best consequences. The Skeptic David Hume, Scotland's foremost philosopher and historian, attempted to analyze the origin of the virtues in terms of their contribution to utility. Bentham himself said that he discovered the principle of utility in the 18th-century writings of various thinkers: of Joseph Priestley, a dissenting clergyman famous for his discovery of oxygen; of the Frenchman Claude-Adrien Helvétius, author of a philosophy of mere sensation; of Cesare Beccaria, an Italian legal theorist; and of Hume. Helvétius probably drew from Hume, and Beccaria from Helvétius.

Another strand of Utilitarian thought took the form of a theological ethics. John Gay, a biblical scholar and philosopher, held the will of God to be the criterion of virtue; but from God's goodness he inferred that God willed that men promote human happiness.

Bentham, who apparently believed that an individual in governing his own actions would always seek to maximize his own pleasure and minimize his own pain, found in pleasure and pain both the cause of human action and the basis for a normative criterion of action. The art of governing one's own actions Bentham called "private ethics." The happiness of the agent is the determining

factor; the happiness of others governs only to the extent that the agent is motivated by sympathy, benevolence, or interest in the good will and good opinion of others. For Bentham, the greatest happiness of the greatest number would play a role primarily in the art of legislation, in which the legislator would seek to maximize the happiness of the entire community by creating an identity of interests between each individual and his fellows. By laying down penalties for mischievous acts, the legislator would make it unprofitable for a man to harm his neighbor. Bentham's major philosophical work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), was designed as an introduction to a plan of a penal code.

With Bentham, Utilitarianism became the ideological foundation of a reform movement, later known as "philosophical radicalism," that would test all institutions and policies by the principle of utility. Bentham attracted as his disciples a number of younger (earlier 19th-century) men. They included David Ricardo, who gave classical form to the science of economics; John Stuart Mill's father, James Mill; and John Austin, a legal theorist. James Mill argued for re-representative government and universal male suffrage on Utilitarian grounds; he and other followers of Bentham were advocates of parliamentary reform in England in the early 19th

century. John Stuart Mill was a spokesman for women's suffrage, state-supported education for all, and other proposals that were considered radical in their day. He argued on Utilitarian grounds for freedom of speech and expression and for the noninterference of government or society in individual behaviour that did not harm anyone else.⁵ Mill's essay "Utilitarianism," published in *Fraser's Magazine* (1861), is an elegant defense of the general Utilitarian doctrine and perhaps remains the best introduction to the subject. In it Utilitarianism is viewed as an ethics for ordinary individual behaviour as well as for legislation.

3. Late 19th- and 20th-Century Utilitarianism

By the time Sidgwick wrote, Utilitarianism had become one of the foremost ethical theories of the day. His *Methods of Ethics* (1874), a comparative examination of egoism, the ethics of common sense, and Utilitarianism, contains the most careful discussion to be found of the implications of Utilitarianism as a principle of individual moral action.

The 20th century has seen the development of various modifications and complications of the Utilitarian theory. G.E. Moore argued for a set of ideals extending beyond hedonism by proposing that one imaginatively compare universes in which there are equal quantities of pleasure but different amounts of knowledge and other such combinations. He felt that he could not be indifferent toward such differences. The recognition of "act" Utilitarianism and "rule" Utilitarianism as explicit alternatives was stimulated by the

analysis of moral reasoning in "rule" Utilitarian terms by Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher of science and moralist, and by Patrick Nowell-Smith, a moralist of the Oxford linguistic school; by the interpretation of Mill as a "rule" Utilitarian by another Oxford Analyst, J.O. Urmson; and by the analysis by John Rawls, a Harvard moral philosopher, of the significance for Utilitarianism of two different conceptions of moral rules. "Act" Utilitarianism, on the other hand, has been defended by J.J.C. Smart, a British-Australian philosopher.

C. Basic Concepts

Utilitarian moral theories focus on actions rather than individuals. The primary concern of such theories is which action is the right or moral one, and moral individuals are simply those people who perform moral actions. Thus the central feature of any Utilitarian theory is its acceptance of the principle of utility. This principle states that good actions, or doing the right thing, results when the person chooses to maximize utility or happiness. Utilitarian theories also agree that utility, or good, is measured in terms of pleasure while bad, or evil, is measured in terms of pain; claiming that the action with the best consequences, the most pleasure for the most individuals, maximizes utility. Thus, Utilitarians believe that the right action is the one that has the best results for the most

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Himmelfarb (ed.), Penguin Classics, London, 1974, p. 46.

individuals, and this belief is commonly known as achieving the "greatest good for the greatest number." Utilitarian use this principle to determine which action, of all the actions possible in those circumstances, is moral.⁶

Utilitarian theories also generally insist that all individuals count equally when determining the consequences of any given action. In other words, the calculation of pleasure and pain must take into account each individual that is affected and weigh the consequences to each of these individuals - no one's pleasure or pain, including the agent's own, counts for more than any other's. Because of this insistence on counting all individuals equally, most Utilitarian theories require self-sacrifice for the moral person. Inevitably, moral actions will sometimes require an agent to do something that will cause pain to, or even the death of, the moral agent. For example, if I can use the money that I saved to buy another pair of shoes to buy food for ten starving people, the moral thing to do is buy the food. The pleasure of the ten people who are prevented from starving is much greater than the pleasure I will receive from owning another pair of shoes. Additionally, if I can save several lives by risking my own life, then the moral thing to do is to risk my life. This feature of Utilitarian theories is one that has caused several people to reject them. Those rejecting the theory for this reason claim that a moral person is required to give up too much. In spite of this objection, most Utilitarian theories endorse the view that all individuals' pleasure and pain must count equally. The usual reason

given in support of this principle is that there is no morally justified method of distinguishing between the pleasures and pains of one individual and any other; the pleasures and pains of each individual are equally significant when determining the moral action.

Utilitarian theory is often claim-ed to be supported by the evidence readily available to us in the world. Utilitarian appeal to the scientific fact that, at some basic level, all animals are naturally attracted to pleasure and avoid pain.⁷ They explain that it is widely known that, using a system of rewards and punishments, animal behaviorists have been able to encourage or alter behavior in animals. Thus, science is claimed to provide evidence for the view that pleasure is in an individual's interest while pain violates their interest. Since morality is concerned with promoting the interests of individuals, Utilitarian believe that science supports their theory's claim that promoting pleasure is the goal of moral behavior.

In the notion of consequences the Utilitarian includes all of the good and bad produced by the act, whether arising after the act has been performed or during its performance. If the difference in the consequences of alternative acts is not great, some Utilitarian do not regard the choice between them as

⁶ Sterling Harwood, "Eleven Objection to Utilitarianism", in Louis P. Pojman (ed.), *Moral Philosophy : A Reader*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, IN, 2003, p. 23.

⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Simon & Schuster, London, 1995, p. 13-17.

a moral issue. According to Mill, acts should be classified as morally right or wrong only if the consequences are of such significance that a person would wish to see the agent compelled, not merely persuaded and exhorted, to act in the preferred manner.⁸

In assessing the consequences of actions, Utilitarianism relies upon some theory of intrinsic value: something is held to be good in itself, apart from further consequences, and all other values are believed to derive their worth from their relation to this intrinsic good as a means to an end. Bentham and Mill were hedonists; *i.e.*, they analyzed happiness as a balance of pleasure over pain and believed that these feelings alone are of intrinsic value and disvalue. Utilitarian also assume that it is possible to compare the intrinsic values produced by two alternative actions and to estimate which would have better consequences. Bentham believed that a hedonic calculus is theoretically possible. A moralist, he maintained, could sum up the units of pleasure and the units of pain for everyone likely to be affected, immediately and in the future, and could take the balance as a measure of the overall good or evil tendency of an action. Such precise measurement as Bentham envisioned is perhaps not essential, but it is nonetheless necessary for the Utilitarian to make some interpersonal comparisons of the values of the effects of alternative courses of action.⁹

1. Methodologies

As a normative system providing a standard by which an individual ought to act and by which the existing practices of society, including its moral code, ought to be evaluated and improved, Utilitarianism cannot be verified or confirmed in the way in which a descriptive theory can; but it is not regarded by its exponents as simply arbitrary.¹⁰ Bentham believed that only in terms of a Utilitarian interpretation do words such as "ought," "right," and "wrong" have meaning and that whenever anyone attempts to combat the principle of utility, he does so with reasons drawn from the principle itself.¹¹ Bentham and Mill both believed that human actions are motivated entirely by pleasure and pain; and Mill saw that motivation as a basis for the argument that, since happiness is the sole end of human action, the promotion of happiness is the test by which to judge all human conduct.

One of the leading Utilitarians of the late 19th century, a Cambridge philosopher, Henry Sidgwick, rejected their theories of motivation as well as Bentham's theory of the meaning of moral terms and sought to support Utilitarianism by showing that it follows from systematic reflection on the morality of "common sense." Most of the requirements of

⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Op. Cit., p. 1975-1980.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1980-1986.

¹⁰ David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 75-89.

¹¹ Jeremy Bentham, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64-65.

commonsense morality, he argued, could be based upon Utilitarian considerations. In addition, he reasoned that Utilitarianism could solve the difficulties and perplexities that arise from the vagueness and inconsistencies of commonsense doctrines.

Most opponents of Utilitarianism have held that it has implications contrary to their moral intuitions—that considerations of utility, for example, might sometimes sanction the breaking of a promise. Much of the defense of Utilitarian ethics has consisted in answering these objections, either by showing that Utilitarianism does not have the implications that they claim it has or by arguing against the moral intuitions of its opponents. Some Utilitarians, however, have sought to modify the Utilitarian theory to account for the objections.

2. Criticisms

One such criticism is that, although the widespread practice of lying and stealing would have bad consequences, resulting in a loss of trustworthiness and security, it is not certain that an occasional lie to avoid embarrassment or an occasional theft from a rich man would not have good consequences, and thus be permissible or even required by Utilitarianism. But the Utilitarian readily answers that the widespread practice of such acts would result in a loss of trustworthiness and security. To meet the objection to not permitting an occasional lie or theft, some philosophers have defended a modification labelled "rule" Utilitarianism. It permits a particular act on a particular occasion to be adjudged right or wrong according to whether it is in accordance with or in violation of a useful rule; and a

rule is judged useful or not by the consequences of its general practice. Mill has sometimes been interpreted as a "rule" Utilitarian, whereas Bentham and Sidgwick were "act" Utilitarians.

Another objection, often posed against the hedonistic value theory held by Bentham, holds that the value of life is more than a balance of pleasure over pain. Mill, in contrast to Bentham, discerned differences in the quality of pleasures that made some intrinsically preferable to others independently of intensity and duration (the quantitative dimensions recognized by Bentham). Some philosophers in the Utilitarian tradition have recognized certain wholly nonhedonistic values without losing their Utilitarian credentials. A British philosopher, G.E. Moore, a pioneer of 20th-century Analysis, regarded many kinds of consciousness—including love, knowledge, and the experience of beauty—as intrinsically valuable independently of pleasure, a position labelled "ideal" Utilitarianism. Even in limiting the recognition of intrinsic value and disvalue to happiness and unhappiness, some philosophers have argued that those feelings cannot adequately be further broken down into terms of pleasure and pain and have thus preferred to defend the theory in terms of maximizing happiness and minimizing unhappiness. It is important to note, however, that even for the hedonistic Utilitarians,

pleasure and pain are not thought of in purely sensual terms; pleasure and pain for them can be components of experiences of all sorts. Their claim is that, if an experience is neither pleasurable nor painful, then it is a matter of indifference and has no intrinsic value.

Another objection to Utilitarianism is that the prevention or elimination of suffering should take precedence over any alternative act that would only increase the happiness of someone already happy. Some recent Utilitarians have modified their theory to require this focus or even to limit moral obligation to the prevention or elimination of suffering—a view labeled “negative” Utilitarianism.

D. Strengths And Weaknesses

There is a statement that states utilitarianism is “*the best of theories and the worst of theories.*” It describes an important aspect of decisions about right and wrong: evaluating the consequences. But it misses an essential part of morality, the principle of justice. In ignoring *who* is affected and trying to numerically consider all the consequences for everyone, it ignores *how the goods of society are distributed*, which is justice. But Rule Utilitarianism partly overcomes this defect. Utilitarianism also has *technical* difficulties, and it may not provide any real guidance. How does one know the consequences of her actions in the long run? And isn't the attempt to *objectively quantify* the consequences affected by subjective factors, like one's needs and desires? Basically, utilitarianism is most appropriate for policy decisions, as long as a strong notion of fundamental

human rights guarantees that it will not violate rights of small minorities.¹²

1. Strengths

Generally, the strengths of utilitarianism are:

- a. Utilitarianism has many simple and basic values, such as : a secular morality, based on human nature, a common sense approach, egalitarianism, focus on human wellbeing, only outcome counts and a decision procedure.
- b. Cost-benefit analysis is a utilitarian approach that is widely used in public policy analysis and decision making.
- c. Utilitarianism is an absolute principle with a potential answer to every situation.
- d. Utilitarianism is not merely a formal system but seems to get to the substance of morality with a core of promoting human happiness and reducing unhappiness.

2. Weaknesses

Meanwhile, the weaknesses of utilitarianism are:

- a. how much can we quantify?

¹² Sterling Harwood (ed.), *Business as Ethical and Business as Usual*, Wadsworth Publishing Co., Indianapolis, IN, 1996, p. 136-156. Also see James Cornman, et al., *Philosophical Problems and Arguments : An Introduction*, 4th edition, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, IN, 1992, p. 95-120.

- Pleasure and preference satisfaction are easier to quantify than happiness or ideals
- There are two distinct issues. First, can everything be quantified? Some would maintain that some of the most important things in life (love, family, etc.) cannot easily be quantified, while other things (productivity, material goods) may get emphasized precisely because they are quantifiable. In this case, the danger is if it can't be counted, it doesn't count. Second, are quantified goods necessarily commensurable? In this case, are a fine dinner and a good night's sleep commensurable?, and can one be traded or substituted for the other?

b. who is responsible?

- Utilitarianism suggests that we are responsible for all the consequences of our choices.
- The problem is that sometimes we can foresee consequences of other people's actions that are taken in response to our own acts. Are we responsible for those actions, even though we don't choose them or approve of them?
- Imagine a terrorist situation where the terrorists say that they will kill their hostages if we do not meet their demands. We refuse to meet their demands. Are we responsible for what happens to the hostages?

c. What are the motives?

- Utilitarianism is concerned almost exclusively about consequences, not motives or intentions.
- Our gut tells that why a person does something makes a moral difference, even in cases where the outcome is exactly the same.

d. Is ethics a matter of moral luck?

- By concentrating exclusively on consequences, utilitarianism makes the moral worth of our actions a matter of luck. We must await the final consequences before we find out if our action was good or bad.
- This seems to make the moral life a matter of chance, which runs counter to our basic moral intuitions. We can imagine actions with good intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended bad consequences. But, we can also imagine actions with bad intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended good consequences.

e. who does the calculating?

- Historically, this was an issue for the British in

India. The British felt they wanted to do what was best for India, but that they were the ones to judge what that was.

- Typically, the count differs depending on who does the counting. For example, in Vietnam, Americans could never understand how much independence counted for the Vietnamese.

f. who is included (and who isn't)?

- When we consider the issue of consequences, we must ask who is included within that circle, such as : those in our own group (group egoism), those in our own country (nationalism), those who share our skin color (racism), all human beings (humanism or speciesism?), and all sentient beings?
- Minorities can be poorly served by utilitarian ethics.

According to these strengths and weaknesses, the critique of utilitarianism forms a crucial subplot in the complex analysis of social justice that John Rawls develops in his first book, *A Theory of Justice*.¹³ The weaknesses of utilitarianism indicate the need for an alternative theory, and at many stages of the argument the test for the adequacy of the new theory that Rawls elaborates is whether it can be demonstrated to be superior to the utilitarian rival. The account of social justice shifts in the transition to Rawls's second great book, *Political Liberalism*.

The account of what is wrong with utilitarianism undergoes revision as

¹³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1971, p. 64-72.

well. In this essay I examine both the initial critique of utilitarianism and its transformation in Rawls's later writings. To anticipate my conclusion: Rawls's pro-proposal that we should maximise rather than maximize leads to an interesting standoff. The argument for maximise is not compelling, but straight additive maximization of the utilitarian sort is revealed to be merely one possible function among many, any of which (for all we know) correct morality might instruct us to maximize. Rawls further urges that utilitarianism goes astray in taking the maximand, the thing to be maximized, to be utility rather than primary social goods. The argument for primary social goods is not compelling, but it does not follow that utility alone is to be maximized. The espousal of the ideal of legitimacy in *Political Liberalism* does not affect these conclusions, and the arguments advanced to support that ideal are either diversionary or question-begging with respect to the debate between utilitarianism and Rawlsian justice as fairness.

E. The Roles Of Utilitarianism Theory

1. Effects of Utilitarianism in Several Fields

The influence of Utilitarianism has been widespread, permeating the intellectual life of the last two centuries. Its

significance in law, politics, and economics is especially notable.¹⁴ The Utilitarian theory of the justification of punishment stands in opposition to the "retributive" theory, according to which punishment is intended to make the criminal "pay" for his crime. According to the Utilitarian, the rationale of punishment is entirely to prevent further crime by either reforming the criminal or protecting society from him and to deter others from crime through fear of punishment.

In its political philosophy Utilitarianism bases the authority of government and the sanctity of individual rights upon their utility, thus providing an alternative to theories of natural law, natural rights, or social contract. What kind of government is best thus becomes a question of what kind of government has the best consequences—an assessment that requires factual premises regarding human nature and behavior.

Generally, Utilitarian have supported democracy as a way of making the interest of government coincide with the general interest; they have argued for the greatest individual liberty compatible with an equal liberty for others on the ground that each individual is generally the best judge of his own welfare; and they have believed in the possibility and the desirability of progressive social change through peaceful political processes.¹⁵

With different factual assumptions, however, Utilitarian arguments can lead to different conclusions. If the inquirer assumes that a strong government is required to check man's basically selfish

interests and that any change may threaten the stability of the political order, he may be led by Utilitarian arguments to an authoritarian or conservative position. On the other hand, William Godwin, an early 19th-century political philosopher, assumed the basic goodness of human nature and argued that the greatest happiness would follow from a radical alteration of society in the direction of anarchistic Communism.

Classical economics received some of its most important statements from Utilitarian writers, especially Ricardo and John Stuart Mill. Ironically, its theory of economic value was framed primarily in terms of the cost of labor in production rather than in terms of the use value, or utility, of commodities. Later developments more clearly reflected the Utilitarian philosophy. William Jevons, one of the founders of the marginal utility school of analysis, derived many of his ideas from Bentham; and "welfare economics," while substituting comparative preferences for comparative utilities, reflected the basic spirit of the Utilitarian philosophy. In economic policy, the early Utilitarian had tended to oppose governmental interference in trade and industry on the assumption that the economy would regulate itself for the greatest welfare if left alone; later Utilitarian, however, lost confidence in the social efficiency of

¹⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Op. Cit., p. 1986-1988.

¹⁵ Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle : Ethics and Sociobiology*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1981, p. 123.

private enterprise and were willing to see government power and administration used to correct its abuses.

As a movement for the reform of social institutions, 19th-century Utilitarianism was remarkably successful in the long run. Most of their recommendations have since been implemented unless abandoned by the reformers themselves; and, equally important, Utilitarian arguments are now commonly employed to advocate institutional or policy changes.

2. Utilitarianism Theory in Policy Analysis

Utilitarian theory is often claimed to be supported by the evidence readily available to us in the world. Utilitarians appeal to the scientific fact that, at some basic level, all animals are naturally attracted to pleasure and avoid pain. They explain that it is widely known that, using a system of rewards and punishments, animal behaviorists have been able to encourage or alter behavior in animals. Thus, science is claimed to provide evidence for the view that pleasure is in an individual's interest while pain violates their interest. Since morality is concerned with promoting the interests of individuals, Utilitarians believe that science supports their theory's claim that promoting pleasure is the goal of moral behavior. The explanation also affects points of view in policy analysis.¹⁶

The Hedonic Calculus : About Pleasures and Pains

¹⁶ William H. Shaw, *Contemporary Ethics : Taking Account of Utilitarianism*, Blackwell Publishers Inc., Oxford, 1999, p. 31-35. Also see L. Wayne Summer, *Abortion : A Third Way*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2004, p. 97-102.

Disagreements over how to measure pleasure and pain are part of the early history of Utilitarian theory. Jeremy Bentham devised a complicated means of determining which action contained more pleasure versus pain, and he called this *the hedonic calculus*. For Bentham, pleasures and pains were assigned numbers based on the following criteria: intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity (nearness in time) or remoteness, fecundity (chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind) or purity (chance it has of being followed by sensations of the opposite kind), and its extent (the number of people who are affected by it). An agent was supposed to use these criteria to assign numbers to each available action. Then the agent would "sum up" these numbers to determine which action had the greatest balance of pleasure (good) over pain (evil). This action was the moral one under these circumstances. Bentham firmly believed that this calculation was an objective one and the hedonic calculus could be used by any individual to arrive at the same answer. This, for Bentham, made morality a science. Since this method of calculation was primarily focused on the amount of pleasure and pain, theories that tend toward Bentham's view are often called *Quantitative Utilitarianism*.

However, several critics have pointed out that Bentham's

method of assigning numbers to pleasures and pains does not work as simply as he believed it would. One objection points out that there is no objective method of determining the numbers for each of the criteria mentioned by Bentham. For example, we cannot expect everyone to agree that a particular action must be assigned the number 4 for its intensity of a pleasure. No external measure (outside of the individuals affected by the action) can be taken as objective evidence that the number 4 is the one that accurately applies because people will typically disagree when judging how intense someone else's pleasure or pain is, especially since they cannot experience those feelings themselves. Additionally, no internal measure (reported by the person experiencing the feeling) can be taken as objective evidence that the number 4 is the one that accurately applies.

There are two primary reasons for this. *First*, letting each individual assign a number to their own pleasure will not be objective because some people have experienced very little pleasure in their lives. Consequently, such a person would assign a 4 to a very minor pleasure while another person who had experienced many pleasures may assign a lower number to the same feeling. *Secondly*, the person trying to calculate which behavior is the moral must determine the likely consequences of these actions for all individuals involved, including those who are remote or not even born yet. Thus, relying on a view that claims we must allow each person to assign a number to their own pleasure or pain undermines the theory - we can no longer use Utilitarianism in the manner in which it was intended because we cannot possibly interview each indi-

vidual, especially those who are not born yet, to assign a number to their pleasures and pains. Consequently, criticisms of Bentham's method of calculating pleasures and pains have proved to be problematic for any version of Utilitarianism that is modeled after this one. A Utilitarian must still show how an objective quantitative calculation of pleasure and pain is possible.

John Stuart Mill was the first Utilitarian to point out that Bentham's method of measuring pleasures and pains was problematic. One of Mill's objections was that Bentham did not distinguish between kinds of pleasures or qualities of pleasure. Instead of accepting Bentham's view that amounts of pleasure were all that mattered, Mill pointed out that some pleasures are more valuable, "higher," than others ("lower"). According to Mill, it was rational to prefer smaller amounts of these "higher" pleasures because they were much more satisfying. Mill believed that intellectual pleasures were more valuable than purely physical pleasures. Intellectual pleasures both exercised a person's reason and also tended to have a greater impact on the person's life. Thus, under ordinary circumstances, it is more pleasurable to read a book on political theory than to have a wonderful meal. Although both activities are pleasurable, re-reading the book will stimulate thought and could alter the perceptions of political organizations and cause

them to behave and think differently for the rest of their lives. The pleasure of the meal is short lived and much more limited in its impact. Since Mill's emphasis is on the quality or kind of pleasure that is experienced, any Utilitarian theory that accepts this view is known as *Qualitative Utilitarianism*.

Those theorists accepting a version of Qualitative Utilitarianism have not resolved the problems involved in the hedonic calculus. Once we accept that different kinds of pleasures should be weighted differently, we must come up with some method of determining which pleasures are most important and how we are to measure them against the others. Consequently, the calculations are even more complicated than before. Mill was not able to adequately answer this question. Instead, he simply pointed out that we do, in fact, conduct calculations of this type when we are trying to figure out what we should do. However, this response is not enough to complete a moral theory, and any Utilitarian must wrestle with this difficult problem. An adequate Utilitarian theory must both determine whether we have to distinguish between kinds of pleasures and also provide some practical method of calculating pleasures and pains.

Whether Each Action Must be Judged Independently

The second major disagreement among Utilitarian is whether each action is so unique that it must be judged independently from all other actions or whether rules for moral behavior can be developed over time. Those theories which claim that each action is unique are known as *Act Utilitarianism*. According to these theories, since the circumstances surro-

ounding each action are different from any other action, consequences must be calculated for every action. What this means is that each time an agent wants to decide what, morally, to do, a new calculation must be conducted. Thus, Act Utilitarianism requires people to regularly calculate the consequences of their behavior.

Theories which claim that, over time, we can develop general rules or principles for moral behavior are known as *Rule Utilitarianism*. According to these theories, there are types of actions which, over the long run, will maximize utility. In other words, performing certain actions, like telling the truth, on a regular basis does result in the greatest good for the greatest number. Rule Utilitarian believe that we can determine which actions will regularly maximize utility and establish these actions as general principles or rules of conduct. Thus, acting morally would be, at least in part, a matter of following well established rules of conduct. If Rule Utilitarianism is correct, then an agent does not have to calculate each action independently of all others. Consequently, Utilitarian calculations would be less time consuming and easier. In spite of this time advantage, an adequate Rule Utilitarian theory has the difficult task of determining which rules will maximize utility and providing the evidence for this. Currently, there are both Act and Rule Utilitarian. Even though these

two versions require very different calculations of moral behavior, neither version of Utilitarianism has provided enough proof to reject the alternative approach.

Calculations of Pleasures and Pains

The disagreement over who is to count as an individual when these calculations are made is much more recent than the above disagreements.¹⁷ Originally, Utilitarian theories assumed that only the pain and pleasure of human beings mattered when an agent was determining which action was the moral one. However, since all animals experience pleasure and pain, it was a natural extension of this theory to insist that non-human animals be considered individuals who count equally to humans.

Peter Singer, one of the first philosophers to support this view, was a major figure in the history of the Animal Rights movement. Philosophically, Singer argued that there is no morally relevant means of determining that human pleasure and pain was more significant than non-human pleasure and pain. Singer pointed out that, in some cases, certain non-humans are capable of more intense pleasures and pains than some humans. For example, an adult gorilla with a child will experience more pain over the death of its child than a newborn infant will experience over the death of a sibling. Consequently, Singer claims that only a prejudice, which he called *speciesism*, akin to racism and sexism can justify a preference for human pleasure over all non-human pleasures. Based on this view, Singer and some later Utilitarians extend

the maximization of utility from simply people to all animals. More recent versions of Utilitarianism have further extended the scope of those beings that count in moral calculations to include all sentient beings, such as plants and any other thing (sometimes the earth itself) that has the ability to feel any type of pleasure or pain.

Needless to say, the calculations for determining moral behavior in these later versions of Utilitarianism are much more complex and farther reaching. When humans are not the only thing that matters, the moral action that results from Utilitarian calculations in specific circumstances can be significantly different. For example, consider the case in which someone wants to build a new home on land they own and must determine whether clear cutting a portion of forest, in order to build, is moral. In those Utilitarian theories that only count human pleasures and pains, the moral action is, typically, to build the house. Since the person owns the land and will receive pleasure from the new home, the only other consideration is whether the neighbors will be negatively affected.

However, in the versions of Utilitarianism in which humans' pleasures and pains are equal to non-humans', and especially in those that count plants and other beings, the pleasure and pain calculation may determine that clear cutting the forest is immoral. The

¹⁷ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 23-34.

number of animals (plants, soil organisms, etc.) that will experience pain and even death could easily outweigh the human being's pleasure in having a new home. Thus, determining who counts as individuals when using Utilitarian calculations is crucial to the results of such calculations. Additionally, if behaving morally does require considering all animals or sentient beings rather than simply humans, many common social practices are immoral. In fact, Utilitarians like Singer are typically vegetarians because they argue that a human being does not need to eat other animals to survive and the pain caused to those other animals (their death) outweighs any pleasure that may result to the human who eats them. As a result, this issue is one of the most important ones in Utilitarianism today. Utilitarian theories are not likely to come to a consensus on this issue in the near future, and theorists will continue to discuss which individuals must be included in calculations of the moral action.

E. Conclusion

As an abstract ethical doctrine, Utilitarianism has established itself as one of the small number of live options that must be taken into account and either refuted or accepted by any philosopher taking a position in normative ethics. In contemporary discussion it has been divorced from adventitious involvements with the analysis of ethical language and

with the psychological theory with which it was presented by Bentham. Utilitarianism now appears in various modified and complicated formulations. Bentham's ideal of a hedonic calculus is usually considered a practical if not a theoretical impossibility. Present-day philosophers have noticed further problems in the Utilitarian procedures. One of them, for example, is with the process of identifying the consequences of an act—a process that raises conceptual as well as practical problems as to what are to be counted as consequences, even without precisely quantifying the value of those consequences. The question may arise whether the outcome of an election is a consequence of each and every vote cast for the winning candidate if he receives more than the number necessary for election; and in estimating the value of the consequences, one may ask whether the entire value or only a part of the value of the outcome of the election is to be assigned to each vote. There is also difficulty in the procedure of comparing alternative acts. If one act requires a longer period of time for its performance than another, one may ask whether they can be considered alternatives. Even what is to count as an act is not a matter of philosophical consensus.

These problems, however, are common to almost all normative ethical theories since most of them recognize the

consequences—including the hedonic—of an act as being relevant ethical considerations. The central insight of Utilitarianism, that one ought to promote happiness and prevent unhappiness whenever possible, seems undeniable. The critical question, however, is whether the whole of normative ethics can be analyzed in terms of this simple formula.

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