Utilitarianism: Bentham and Mill

Dr. Desh Raj Sirswal
Assistant Professor (Philosophy),
P.G. Govt. College for Girls,
Sector-11, Chandigarh
http://drsirswal.webs.com
Utilitarianism

I think I'm going to become a utilitarian!

You mean, like, utilitarianism? As in the idea that morality is based on those actions which bring about the most overall good consequences?

Yeah, sure. Whatever. I'm mostly in it for the sweet utility belt you get to wear!

Utilitarians get to wear utility belts? I guess that makes sense. Does that mean Batman's a utilitarian?

Don't be a fool, George. Batman is a ninja.

With each passing day, I learn a new way in which ninjas are similar to utilitarians.

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Introduction

• **Utilitarianism** is a theory in normative ethics holding that the proper course of action is the one that maximizes overall happiness. It is now generally taken to be a form of consequentialism, although when Anscombe first introduced that term it was to distinguish between "old-fashioned Utilitarianism" and consequentialism.

• According to utilitarianism the moral worth of an action is determined only by its resulting outcome although there is debate over how much consideration should be given to actual consequences, foreseen consequences and intended consequences. Two influential contributors to this theory are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In *A Fragment on Government* Bentham says ‘it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong’ and describes this as a fundamental axiom. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* he talks of ‘the principle of utility’ but later prefers “the greatest happiness principle”.

• Utilitarianism has often been considered the natural ethic of a democracy operating by simple majority without protection of individual rights.
The History of Utilitarianism-I

- Utilitarianism is one of the most powerful and persuasive approaches to normative ethics in the history of philosophy. Though not fully articulated until the 19th century, proto-utilitarian positions can be discerned throughout the history of ethical theory.

- Though there are many varieties of the view discussed, utilitarianism is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good. There are many ways to spell out this general claim. One thing to note is that the theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced. What distinguishes utilitarianism from egoism has to do with the scope of the relevant consequences. On the utilitarian view one ought to maximize the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good.
The Classical Utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, identified the good with pleasure, so, like Epicurus, were hedonists about value. They also held that we ought to maximize the good, that is, bring about ‘the greatest amount of good for the greatest number’.

- Utilitarianism is also distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality. Everyone's happiness counts the same. When one maximizes the good, it is the good impartially considered. My good counts for no more than anyone else's good. Further, the reason I have to promote the overall good is the same reason anyone else has to so promote the good. It is not peculiar to me.

- All of these features of this approach to moral evaluation and/or moral decision-making have proven to be somewhat controversial and subsequent controversies have led to changes in the Classical version of the theory.
Early Utilitarianism

• The importance of happiness as an end for humans has long been recognized. Forms of hedonism were put forward by Aristippus and Epicurus; Aristotle argued that eudaimonia is the highest human good and Augustine wrote that "all men agree in desiring the last end, which is happiness." Happiness was also explored in depth by Aquinas. However, utilitarianism as a distinct ethical position only emerged in the eighteenth century.
Jeremy Bentham

- Jeremy Bentham (15 February 1748 – 6 June 1832) was an English philosopher, jurist and social reformer. He is regarded as the founder of modern utilitarianism.
Classical Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham

- Bentham's book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* was printed in 1780 but not published until 1789. Bentham's work opens with a statement of the principle of utility,

- “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... 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: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.
Method of Calculating

In Chapter IV Bentham introduces a method of calculating the value of pleasures and pains, which has come to be known as the hedonic calculus. Bentham says that the value of a pleasure or pain, considered by itself, can be measured according to its intensity, duration, certainty/uncertainty and propinquity/remoteness. In addition, it is necessary to consider “the tendency of any act by which it is produced” and, therefore, to take account of the act’s fecundity, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind and its purity, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind. Finally, it is necessary to consider the extent, or the number of people affected by the action.
Hedonic Calculus

- The felicific calculus could, in principle at least, determine the moral status of any considered act. The algorithm is also known as the utility calculus, the hedonistic calculus and the hedonic calculus.

- Variables, or vectors, of the pleasures and pains included in this calculation, which Bentham called "elements" or "dimensions", were:
  - Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
  - Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
  - Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
  - Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
  - Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
  - Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
  - Extent: How many people will be affected?
John Stuart Mill

• **John Stuart Mill** (20 May 1806 – 8 May 1873) was a British philosopher, political economist and civil servant. He was an influential contributor to social theory, political theory, and political economy. He has been called "the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century".

• Mill's conception of liberty justified the freedom of the individual in opposition to unlimited state control. He was a proponent of utilitarianism, an ethical theory developed by Jeremy Bentham.
Higher and Lower Pleasures

Mill was brought up as a Benthamite with the explicit intention that would carry on the cause of utilitarianism. Mill's book *Utilitarianism* first appeared as a series of three articles published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1861 and was reprinted as a single book in 1863. Mill rejects a purely quantitative measurement of utility and says,

“It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.”

Mill notes that, contrary to what its critics might say, there is “no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect... a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.” However, he accepts that this is usually because the intellectual pleasures are thought to have circumstantial advantages, i.e. “greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, &c.” Instead, Mill will argue that some pleasures are intrinsically better than others.
Mill's 'Proof' of the Principle of Utility

- In Chapter Four of *Utilitarianism* Mill considers what proof can be given for the Principle of Utility. He says: “The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it... In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it... No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness... we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”

- It is usual to say that Mill is committing a number of fallacies. He is accused of committing the naturalistic fallacy, because he is trying to deduce what people ought to do from what they do in fact do; the fallacy of equivocation, because he moves from the fact that something is desirable(1), i.e. is capable of being desired, to the claim that it is desirable(2), i.e. that it ought to be desired; and the fallacy of composition, because the fact that people desire their own happiness does not imply that the aggregate of all persons will desire the general happiness.
Conclusion

In this unit we studied about utilitarianism and its main theories. Our concentration was on Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. They are the most important figure in utilitarianism.

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