

PHIL 167: Contemporary Political Philosophy
Fall 2005; David O. Brink
Handout #2: Benthamite Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was the founder of the utilitarian tradition in moral and political thought that takes “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” as the appropriate standard for both private conduct and institutional design and reform. He was also the leader of a group of utilitarians known as the **Philosophical Radicals** -- including John Austin (1790-1859), James Mill (1773-1836) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) -- who criticized existing political and legal institutions and proposed legislative reforms based on utilitarian principles. Utilitarianism assesses actions and institutions in terms of their effects on human happiness and enjoins us to perform actions and design institutions so that they promote – in one formulation, maximize -- human happiness. Utilitarianism was a progressive doctrine historically, because **it is universal in scope** – insisting that everyone’s happiness matters – and because **its conception of impartiality is egalitarian** – insisting that everyone’s happiness matters equally. The Radicals were responsible for significant progressive reforms in British political life that tended to combat a political tradition responsive to class and privilege, including the extension of the franchise, increased opportunities for higher education regardless of class background, and a greater concern with factory and worker health and safety. [For more information on Bentham, visit the website for the Bentham Project (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/index.htm>).]

HEDONISM AND UTILITARIANISM

Bentham begins his An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789) with a statement of psychological hedonism.

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure [I 1].

Bentham does not say why he accepts psychological hedonism; he seems to treat it as a given. Elsewhere, he articulates psychological egoism even more clearly.

On the occasion of every act he exercises, every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness [Constitutional Code Introduction, §2].

James Mill also treats psychological hedonism as axiomatic in his Essay on Government (1824). For instance, he claims

The desire, therefore, of that power which is necessary to render the persons and properties of human beings subservient to our pleasures, is the grand governing law of human nature [Essay iv].

Later, he describes this assumption in somewhat greater detail.

The positions ... with regard to human nature, and which we assume as foundations, are these: That the actions of men are governed by their wills, and their wills by their desires: That their desires are directed to pleasure and the relief from pain as ends, and to wealth and power as the principal means: That to the desire of these means there is no limit; and that the actions that flow from the unlimited desire are the constituents whereof bad Government is made. Reasoning correctly from these laws of nature, we shall presently

discover what opinion, with respect to the mixture of the different species of Government, it will be incumbent upon us to adopt [Essay v].

Bentham equates utility with value or happiness (I 3) and pleasure and utility, thereby endorsing a hedonistic conception of utility or happiness. He goes on to say that utility not only describes human motivation but sets the standard of right and wrong (I 1).

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question ... [I 2].

It remains to be determined whose happiness matters. One might imagine that it is the utility of the agent. This would be the ethical counterpart to psychological egoism. However, Bentham's answer, and the answer characteristic of utilitarianism, is the happiness of the community or the happiness of all (I 4-10). Bentham says that our account of right action, obligation, and duty ought to be governed by the principle of utility (I 9-10). This seems to imply that an action is right or obligatory just insofar as it promotes utility. But then the right or obligatory act would seem to be the one that promotes utility the most or maximizes utility. The natural way to understand this claim is as the claim that is sometimes called (hedonistic) act utilitarianism.

An agent should perform that action, of those available to her, that maximizes utility (pleasure).

It might help to understand Bentham's hedonism to see different commitments it makes. (1) Consequences Matter. It's a form of consequentialism, saying that individuals should perform actions with good consequences. (2) Which Consequences? It understands good consequences in terms of happiness or well-being. (3) Happiness for Whom? It is concerned with universal happiness, rather than the agent's own happiness. (4) Which Conception of Happiness? It understands happiness or utility in terms of pleasure. (5) How is Duty a Function of Happiness? Bentham's utilitarianism assesses actions in terms of their utility.

There appears to be a serious problem combining a utilitarian theory of morality and an egoist theory of human motivation. Bentham's psychological hedonism threatens to render his advocacy of hedonistic utilitarianism irrelevant.

Indeed, utilitarianism appears false and not just irrelevant if we also assume the **voluntarist** principle that ought implies can.

1. Psychological egoism is true.
2. What maximizes human happiness (pleasure) does not always maximize the agent's own (perceived) happiness (pleasure).
3. Ought implies can.
4. Hence, it cannot be the agent's obligation to maximize happiness (pleasure).

Bentham is not unaware of this tension. He addresses part of the problem in the political context in other writings, notably his Plan for Parliamentary Reform (1817). Here the problem is: How can we get self-interested rulers to rule in the interest of the governed, as they should? Bentham's answer is to make rulers democratically accountable to (all) those whom they govern, for this tends to make the interest of the governed and the interest of the governors coincide. Bentham's argument, elaborated by James Mill in his Essay on Government, is something like this.

1. Each person acts only to promote his own interests.
2. The proper object of government is the interest of the governed.
3. Hence, rulers will pursue the proper object of government iff their interests coincide with those of the governed.
4. A ruler's interest will coincide with those of the governed only if he is politically accountable to the governed.
5. Hence, rulers must be democratically accountable.

It was this reasoning that led Bentham and Mill to advocate democratic reforms that included extending the franchise to workers and peasant farmers.

This is an ingenious response. Unfortunately, it is inadequate. Even in the political context it only reduces the conflict between egoistic motivation and impartial utilitarian demands. Also notice that the coincidence Bentham seeks between the interest of the governed and the interest of the governors is artificial. Political accountability will not effectively curb political egoism if rulers are sufficiently good at deceiving the public. Finally, notice that Bentham's solution to the tension has no obvious counterpart in the case of private, rather than public or political, conduct. Perhaps we can make political leaders accountable to citizens. How do we make one citizen accountable to others?

Of course, the problem is the combination of psychological egoism (hedonism) and utilitarianism (hedonistic utilitarianism). Though neither doctrine is entirely unproblematic, psychological egoism (hedonism) is much more problematic. As we will see, John Stuart Mill is keen to distance himself from this aspect of Benthamite doctrine. Like Bishop Butler, Mill thinks that psychological egoism (hedonism) is ambiguous between a true but trivial thesis about the ownership of desire (an agent necessarily acts on his own desires) and a substantive but wildly implausible thesis about the content of desires (an agent necessarily acts so as to promote his own interests or pleasure). (See Mill, Utilitarianism iv 5-8; "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy"; note to James Mill, Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind ii 217-18; A System of Logic VI.ii.4.) Once psychological egoism (hedonism) is rejected, there is no special motivational problem for utilitarianism.

HEDONISM

In Chapter IV Bentham sets out his conception of pleasure and utility in more detail. First he sets out four aspects of pleasures, considered in themselves, that affect their value (IV 2-3).

1. intensity
2. duration
3. certainty or uncertainty
4. propinquity or remoteness

The first two dimensions of pleasurable are pretty straightforward. It's easy to see how a pleasure's intensity or duration might bear on its magnitude. All else being equal, a more intense pleasure is more pleasurable than a less intense pleasure. And, all else being equal, a longer lasting pleasure is more pleasurable than a more short lived pleasure.

The second two dimensions of pleasurable are more problematic. Certainty is a problematic dimension, because it seems to be a feature not of the pleasure itself, but of our cognitive relation to the pleasure. Whereas intensity and duration affect a pleasure's value, certainty seems to affect expected value. If so, certainty might be relevant to someone's attempt

to maximize expected value, but it seems irrelevant to what maximizes value. That's a matter of which pleasures do or will occur, not how certain we are that they will occur.

Propinquity – temporal proximity -- is also a puzzling dimension of pleurableness. Bentham implies that, all else being equal, a more remote pleasure is less valuable than a more proximate one. But that sort of temporal bias is hard to defend. Indeed, temporal bias is typically viewed as a paradigmatic form of irrationality. We condemn as irrational the person who knowingly prefers the smaller short-term good to the greater, later good. The one way in which the proximity of a pleasure may have rational significance is its bearing on the pleasure's certainty. For the more distant a pleasure, the more uncertain may be its occurrence. Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), a later British utilitarian, criticizes Bentham on precisely this score.

[P]roximity is a property [of pleasures and pains] which it is reasonable to disregard except in so far as it diminishes uncertainty. For my feelings a year hence should be just as important to me as my feelings next minute, if only I could make an equally sure forecast of them. Indeed this equal and impartial concern for all parts of one's conscious life is perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the rational – as opposed to the merely impulsive – pursuit of pleasure [Methods of Ethics 124n; cf. 111].

Later, Sidgwick rejects any pure time preference.

Hereafter as such is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now. It is not, of course, meant, that the good of the present may not reasonably be preferred to that of the future on account of its greater certainty: or again, that a week ten years hence may not be more important to us than a week now, through an increase in our means or capacities of happiness. All that the principle affirms is that the mere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another. The form in which it practically presents itself to most men is 'that a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good' (allowing for differences of certainty) ... [Methods 381].

If Sidgwick is right, then Bentham is wrong to say that propinquity is a distinct dimension of a pleasure's value. It has no intrinsic relevance. It's relevant only insofar as it affects a pleasure's certainty, and certainty affects not a pleasure's value, but its expected value.

These four dimensions are supposed to bear on the value of a pleasure itself. Bentham mentions three other considerations affecting the value of pleasures, not of pleasures considered individually and intrinsically, but of pleasures considered in relations to others (IV 3-4).

1. fecundity (= the tendency of a pleasure (pain) to be accompanied by more pleasures (pains))
2. purity (= the tendency of a pleasure (pain) not to be followed by a pain (pleasure))
3. extent (= the number of persons who experience the pleasure).

These three dimensions are reasonably straightforward.

But the whole taxonomy seems unnecessarily complex. Because the utilitarian asks us to maximize value, he has to be able to make sense of quantities or magnitudes of value or pleasure associated with different options, where pleasure increases the value of an option and pain decreases the value of the option. **Intensity**, **duration**, and **extent** would seem to be the only relevant variables. Each option is associated with various pleasures (and pains) both within a single life and across lives. For any given option we must find out how many pleasures it produces, whether those occur in a single life or in different lives. For every distinct pleasure, we must calculate its intensity and its duration. That would give us the total amount of pleasure

(and pain) associated with each option. Then we must do that option with greatest total (IV 5). If there are two (or more) options with the greatest total, we are free to select any of these.

Bentham does not assume that our estimates of what will maximize utility will always be reliable. Nor does he assume that we should always try to maximize utility (IV 6). Doing so is costly, and we may sometimes promote utility best by not trying to promote it. Nonetheless, utility, he thinks, is the standard of right conduct.

THE DEFENSE OF UTILITARIANISM

Why should we accept utilitarianism? Bentham's defense of utilitarianism is contained in Chapter I.

1. The words "right" and "ought" mean "promotes utility" (I 10).
2. First principles are incapable of proof (I 11).
3. Commonsense morality is imperfectly and inchoately utilitarian (I 12).
4. Attempts to refute utilitarianism necessarily presuppose it (I 13).
5. The alternative to utilitarianism is moral anarchy (I 14).

These defenses of utilitarianism are of uneven value. (3) is probably the most promising defense.

(1) Ordinary speakers can doubt that it is one's duty to promote utility (either because they think that some actions are categorically wrong, no matter what the consequences, or because they think that the distribution, and not just the sum, of happiness matters), which shows utilitarianism is not true by definition. (2) First principles cannot be derived from more ultimate principles (otherwise, they wouldn't be first principles), but they can be assessed by seeing how well their implications match or fit our considered judgments. (3) This is why it would be significant if utilitarianism did provide a rough match with our considered moral judgments. (4) Someone who objected that it was inexpedient to employ utilitarian reasoning would be presupposing utilitarianism. But the proponent of categorical moral rules or strict principles of distributive justice need not presuppose utilitarianism. (5) It's hard to see how utilitarianism enjoys any privileged position in relation to its rivals here. The opponent of utilitarianism seeks to substitute, not intuition, but some rival principle or principles. For any principle, agreement on that principle will, of course, reduce moral disagreement. Reduce, not eliminate, because people can still disagree about how best to interpret or apply the principle.