

Garvey, James The Twenty Greatest Philosophy Books

14 Utilitarianism *New York: Continuum Publishing, 2006.*
John Stuart Mill (1806-73)

Utilitarianism is the view that the moral rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the consequences of the act for human happiness. You can find expressions of the view in Priestly and Locke, but its most famous defenders are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Reasonable people can disagree about whose treatment is best, and you might be annoyed to see that Mill's book, not Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, gets star billing here. Mill, you might think, is only reworking and correcting Bentham's earlier insights. A case could be made, though, for the claim that Mill takes the view further, and his account does have more meat on the bones than the version appearing in Bentham's book. If it makes you feel any better, we will consider Bentham's treatment in some detail first.

It is hard, anyway, to have anything but genuine affection for someone like Bentham, and leaving him out of a consideration of Mill is not just an intellectual error; it feels wrong. Bentham is just too remarkable to ignore. In addition to his work in philosophy and legal theory, he designed portable houses, heating systems and refrigeration units, counterfeit-proof bank notes, plans for the freezing of peas, and the infamous Panopticon, a prison designed to keep inmates under the constant surveillance of only a few guards. He coined a stupefying number of words too - 'maximize', 'minimize', 'rationale', 'demoralize', 'unilateral', 'detachable', 'exhaustive' and 'international' among them. We can look away from 'catastachrestic physiurgics', which, sadly, never caught on. He also made arrangements to have his body stuffed, mounted and put on display, allegedly to serve as a visual inspiration to his followers after his departure from this earth. The autoicon, as it is called, is still on view in a corner of University College London. His followers, the Philosophical Radicals, proposed changes to the law on the treatment of animals, homosexuality, suffrage, property, taxation and

much else, changing lives for the better because of his principles. Bentham was clearly excellent in many respects. How could someone like this possibly be left out of an account of the nature of happiness?

The greatest happiness principle

Bentham's large contribution to philosophy is his attempt to place rationality at the heart of morality and legislation. The punishments recommended by the law of his day seemed grounded not in rational principle, but in falsehoods and fictions. In particular, the severity of a given punishment seemed to be a function of nothing more than the offence the crime caused in the hearts of lawmakers. Further, he argues that the words 'ought', 'right' and 'wrong' have no clear meaning, certainly no clear and rational expression in law. He cuts through the absurdities and prejudices underpinning legal complexity and the confusions of moral language with a single principle: the principle of utility or the greatest happiness principle.

He says very clearly what he means by the principle: it 'approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the part whose interest is in question'. The principle, and the conception of happiness on which it depends, is based on human nature. Human beings, Bentham argues, are governed by two masters: pleasure and pain. Increasing an individual human's happiness is nothing less than increasing the balance of pleasure over pain in her life. Increasing human happiness in a society, therefore, is a matter of increasing the general balance of pleasure over pain in the community. Morality falls out of all of this just as quickly. Any action which conforms to the principle of utility, which augments the overall balance of pleasure over pain, ought to be done: it is morally right.

The hedonistic calculus

You might already be wondering how pleasures and pains are to be balanced or weighed up. If alternative courses of action present themselves to me, how on earth do I decide which augments the happiness on the part of those whose interest is in question? How much pleasure results from donating some money to charity as compared to spending the money on a festive lunch for me and a few friends? Pleasures and pains just do not seem like the sorts of things which admit of quantification. Is the pleasure attending our full stomachs worth less than the elimination of a little pain in Africa? Bentham's answer is to propose a decision procedure called 'the hedonistic calculus'. Not only are pleasure and pain quantifiable, but he formulates a system for their quantification.

The following factors, he argues, should figure into the calculation: the intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity and extent of the pleasure or pain. You then consider the persons whose interests seem most affected, and reflect on the immediate pleasures or pains which result, as well as the pleasures and pains which quickly follow. Bentham, slide-rule in hand, says that you must then, '[s]um up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole . . .'

Even this short sketch of Bentham's views suggests some difficulties. We will focus on a few which Mill addresses in *Utilitarianism*, and we will also have a look at his disastrous proof of Bentham's principle.

Mill considers the objection that the doctrine of utilitarianism is somehow degrading, not worth the name 'moral theory', because it is a species of hedonism. Hedonism comes in many flavours, but all versions share the claim that pleasure is good, if not the supreme good. Certainly Mill's characterization of utilitarianism fits the mould: '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 . . .' As Bentham argued before him, then, Mill maintains that actions are right just insofar as they produce pleasure. This is hedonism, if anything is. You can wonder, as some of Bentham's detractors did, how the desire for pleasure could inform morality. Isn't morality in the business of teaching us to choose what is right, not simply what feels good? We were going to choose what feels good anyway, if left to our own devices, and what is needed from a moral code is something which helps us occasionally to look beyond pleasure towards something higher, more exalted – something noble. Isn't the utilitarian suggesting a beastly life of maximized pleasure, a life fit for a pig but not a human being?

The quality of pleasure

The response Mill gives is perhaps his largest and most interesting departure from Bentham's views. He points out that it is not the utilitarian whose conception of pleasure and happiness is degrading. Instead, the objection itself depends on a degrading representation of human nature and the pleasures of which we are capable. The objection supposes that the sort of pleasure human beings can enjoy is nothing more than base or beastly pleasures. This is to overlook the quality of pleasures, to fail to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. Bentham got himself into trouble by suggesting that poetry is no more valuable than the simple-minded game of Pushpin from the point of view of calculating pleasure. Mill argues that the quantity of pleasure is not the only factor which must figure in our reflections on what is right: the quality of the pleasure matters too. Certainly we are capable of experiencing beastly pleasures, but pleasures of a higher quality are possible as well. The objection, and perhaps Bentham's earlier formulation of utilitarianism, misses this distinction.

How can you tell whether one pleasure is qualitatively better than another? Mill claims that someone who has experienced both higher and lower pleasures will generally prefer the former, no matter what quantities are involved. For example, if you have experienced both

backrubs and Bach, you will have a marked preference for Bach. Mill, apparently standing atop a stump, points out that

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question.

Not only is there a marked difference between the two sorts of pleasures, but the higher ones are also of such a quality that no quantity of the lower can match them.

Well, on some mornings, I just don't know. Pigs look fairly happy, and, if we are supposed to maximize happiness, shouldn't the utilitarian urge us to join the swine in the filthy mud and submerge ourselves in beastly pleasures? Such pleasures are easier to come by and, anyway, why take the risk of dissatisfaction associated with trying to live the elevated life of the aesthete? Mill's answer seems to be that once you have had and fully appreciated both kinds of pleasure, you will prefer higher to lower ones. But if the right thing to do is to maximize pleasure, this alleged preference is beside the point. Even if everyone in fact prefers higher pleasures, doesn't the principle of utility counsel that we should aim for whatever pleasure we can get? Would it not therefore be better to be a pig satisfied?

It might be that this reaction misses part of the point of utilitarianism, namely the claim that it is not just my pleasures which should concern me, but the happiness of everyone affected by my actions. We should not be thinking in terms of our own little pig sties, but of the happiness of the community itself. Mill hints that a few miserable intellectuals are a small price to pay for a culture in which it is possible to experience higher pleasures. But the claim that individuals must be concerned with the happiness of everyone suggests another set of difficulties.

Further objections to the view

The level of disinterestedness required to be a good utilitarian might be too much for anyone to achieve. Is it really possible for me to

forget the fact that some of the people affected by my actions are near and dear to me, friends and family and lovers? Can an individual really sum up pleasures and pains, without a thought for who is feeling those pleasures and pains? Utilitarianism seems to be telling us to be more than a little cold and unsympathizing in our calculations. If morality leads us anywhere, you might think, it should lead us in the opposite direction.

In reply to the first charge – that utilitarianism expects too much of us, that we simply cannot achieve the level of disinterestedness it recommends – Mill argues that the motives underpinning moral choice can in practice be as varied as you like; what matters are the consequences. A person might rescue a drowning baby because she believes in the general sanctity of human life or because she hopes for a reward. What matters is that she undertook the action, that the right consequences were brought about, not her motives or the level of interest she in fact had in the child. Whether she jumped in to save her own baby or someone else's baby is beside the point: what matters is that the baby is rescued. Our being interested in each other's welfare is compatible with the view that the consequences, not the motives, matter in the moral evaluation of action. After all, it is happiness for all that we are after. The focus for purposes of moral evaluation might be on consequences, but our focus in acting can sometimes be elsewhere.

In reply to the second complaint – that utilitarianism chills our feelings towards individuals, makes us consider just the consequences of actions and not the people who act – Mill argues that other things besides the consequences of actions can and do matter to us. Some people have good or bad characters, some are brave or wise or benevolent, and all of this is a part of our estimation of them as persons, but not our estimation of the moral worth of their actions. Utilitarianism, again, is compatible with this part of our moral lives. There is no inconsistency in saying that facts about more than the consequences of action matter to us.

The disastrous proof

Following a consideration of these and other objections, Mill formulates what he calls a 'proof' of the principle of utility, and philosophers have wondered about its status ever since. It is not entirely clear what Mill is up to in this part of the book. Just what is he trying to prove? You might think of him as arguing as follows. Utilitarianism holds that pleasure has a particular sort of value: it is the pleasure caused by an act which renders that act morally good. What proof do we have that pleasure has this special value, a value with a moral consequence? Why think pleasure is something we ought to pursue as an end, even as the supreme end? Mill writes: 'The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so.'

Mill seems to argue that pleasure really is desired by everyone, so it is, therefore, desirable. But does this make pleasure valuable in the way required of a moral system? All Mill has shown, if he has shown anything, is that pleasure is in fact desired, but this cannot be enough to get him to the conclusion that pleasure ought to be desired. Talking about facts will only tell us what is so, not what ought to be so. It looks like his conclusion needs an 'ought' in it, but only manages an 'is'.

The argument looks a lot worse if you reflect further on Mill's talk of desirability. He says that the only things visible are things seen; the only things audible are things heard. Similarly, he seems to argue that the only things desirable are things desired – and what everyone desires is pleasure. So pleasure is desirable. Does the analogy work? Visible things are not just things seen, but things which can be seen. Audible things are things which can be heard. Certainly what people desire is whatever can be desired. But saying that pleasure can be desired is not the same thing as saying pleasure is desirable. Mill is only entitled to the lesser claim (pleasure can be desired), and he

needs the stronger one (pleasure is desirable) for his argument to work.

Is it, anyway, even true that people desire pleasure first and foremost? Mill's argument presupposes that when I desire something, what I desire is the pleasure which attends getting that something. When I desire a beer, what I really desire is the pleasure which comes along with having a beer. But sometimes, or so it can seem, what I really want is a beer, not the pleasure I get from drinking it. If you talk yourself into the view that pleasure is really only a secondary thing, you can start thinking that what we desire is a very mixed and complex bag and that pleasure and pain only figure into our psychology from time to time. This would be bad for utilitarianism, holding as it does that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are, as Bentham puts it, our two masters.

Justice

There is a final worry which is much harder for utilitarians to deal with, and it has something to do with justice. Suppose our community is suffering from a great deal of pain in the form of insecurity. Perhaps a string of violent murders has been committed, and no one among us feels safe enough to sleep or go out at night. There is a lot more pain than pleasure in our many lives. Maybe our law enforcement officials do a little hedonistic calculus, and come to the conclusion that stitching up an innocent scapegoat will calm our fears. Maybe it will put the real criminal off. Anyway, punishing someone they know is innocent will only cause comparatively little pain in the form of a single ruined life. If they handle it well, no one will ever find out. Maybe they can pick someone who annoys the rest of us: putting him away would do a lot of good. Perhaps, on reflection, killing him by painless injection would remove whatever pain his suffering in prison might add to the ledger. The rest of us can get on with racking up our pleasures. Does utilitarianism not only condone what looks like a monstrously immoral act, but also recommend it, call it morally right?

There is a hard bullet to bite here. Some maintain that the scapegoat is a good idea. If our moral intuitions suggest otherwise, so much the worse for them. Utilitarianism's insight has to do with what matters to us, the consequences of action for human happiness, not something as wishy-washy as lofty intentions. But unless the intentions and the consequences match up some of the time, you might conclude that the happiness secured is somehow undeserved.

15 Thus Spoke Zarathustra Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

Nietzsche occupies the strange position on the Venn Diagram of Philosophers at the intersection of the areas picking out those who are German, unconventional, influential, outrageous, difficult and incredibly readable. He is all of these things, but it is the fact that he is an excellent stylist which explains a large part of Nietzsche's continuing attraction. No one would change a word of it, but the prose can get in the way of the philosophy, readable though it is. Nietzsche does not always give an argument for his conclusions, nor does he put those conclusions in the clearest possible language. He seems to have a penchant for shocking turns of phrase, and this too can get in the way of coming to an understanding of him. His writing is also open to many interpretations, and this is a consequence he no doubt had in mind. All of this is at least partly explained by Nietzsche's view that our fascination with truth is a kind of illness which is itself in need of investigation. There are no facts on Nietzsche's view. Instead there are as many interpretations as there are creative people, and the right thing to do is to try out as many interpretations as possible as a kind of experiment.

His conclusions are, anyway, almost always provocative, and Nietzsche claims that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* contains the whole of his philosophy – all of his conclusions, or perhaps interpretations, such as they are. Nietzsche ranges widely in the book, as you might expect, but we will focus on just the largest parts of it: his attack on Christianity, the will to power, the Superman, and the doctrine of eternal return. This is a lot to manage in a short space, but the ideas are interconnected, and it is hard to understand just a part of it without some grip on the rest.

The book begins with Zarathustra, a kind of prophet, in meditation at the top of a mountain. He has spent ten years in seclusion and reflection, with only his eagle, a symbol of pride, and his serpent, a symbol of wisdom, for company. He decides to come down from the