

Lecture III: Moving on from Bentham: Quantity and Quality

Bentham and the invention of utilitarianism

Who invented the word 'utilitarianism' is obscure; Mill said he put it into wide circulation, but that he had found it in a novel – John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*. The question is really *what* it involved; the label is often applied synonymously with consequentialism: Moore is sometimes called an 'ideal utilitarian' because he thought ethics was about maximising the amount of 'good' in the universe, but the description is awkward. The only general characterisation is (something like) 'an ethical theory that estimates the rightness and wrongness of actions and the goodness and badness of character by reference to their tendency to produce a maximum of happiness or a minimum of misery among all those affected.' It need not be a wholly secular theory, though its criteria of goodness are so. Mill's friend, John Austin, for instance, was a utilitarian, but thought that moral *obligation* was a matter of divine law even though God decided His legislation on utilitarian grounds. The central figure of the utilitarian tradition is Jeremy Bentham. His *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* is the crucial text. Bentham's project is important to understand: the reform of English *law* primarily and *administration* secondarily; his interest in politics was derivative and aroused by the difficulty of getting his ideas across to government. The key theme is the need for two things: one an adequate system of *classification* and the other an irresistible *standard* of evaluation. The first is connected to the second in the sense that Bentham is always interested in: *what sort of effects* a kind of action will generally have, and the answer is relevant only because what we want to know is *what impact on general utility* will a kind of action have. From there, we can start to calculate what sort of incentives – rewards and punishments – we need to impose. In *PML*, Bentham defines the principle of utility (1,II) and – alarmingly for Mill – says that *To prove the rectitude of this principle is at once unnecessary and impossible*. (1,XI). Like Mill, he thinks people are utilitarians without knowing it; more aggressively than Mill, but in the same way, he tries to dissolve prejudices against it (1,XIV), and devotes a chapter (2) to combatting all principles 'adverse to utility.'

The felicific calculus (PML, 4)

Bentham is famous for the so-called ‘felicific calculus,’ which is to say the means of calculating the ‘value’ – positive or negative – of an action. To see the point of it, we need to get back to first base. Nature places us under the dominion of utility; we are moved to act by the prospect of happiness/pleasure and aversion to misery/pain. This isn’t – as it is in Hobbes – built on any particular physiological-cum-psychological theory; it is a brute, deep fact about human beings that utility decides what we do and what we ought to do. In Bentham, pleasure is (almost always) treated quantitatively; values are a matter of *how much* happiness or misery is produced; and the calculus tells us how to estimate that. The details are fascinating, but it is the enterprise that is important: Bentham wants, for instance, to set certainty against quantity – the familiar $p(v)$ of modern utility theory – so that we can equate a certain but smaller amount of pleasure with a larger but less certain amount (think of betting on the horses.) The calculus is based on four intrinsic properties: intensity, duration, certainty/uncertainty, propinquity/remoteness; two other crucial properties are fecundity and purity – whether it will produce more of the same and whether it will not produce more of the opposite; finally, adding in numbers of people yields *extent*, which is to say how many people are affected by the action. Bentham observes that it is true both that we don’t make these calculations – adding all the individual pleasures, subtracting all the individual pains, and ending up with an exact statement of the pay-off from an action, and that we do something very like it whenever we are thinking of buying and selling a bit of property or a valuable object of any sort. There is no time today to explore Bentham’s views on the kinds of pleasure to be considered, but it is worth seeing what they are, if only to understand Mill’s sense that Bentham has much too *thin* a view of human nature.

Mill’s introduction of considerations of quality as well as quantity

Mill rebelled against the ‘Benthamism’ in which he had been brought up. In consequence, he wrote some very unkind essays attacking Bentham’s work, most notable the essay entitled *Bentham*, to which he wrote a companion piece on *Coleridge* some years later. What Mill rebelled against was the psychological thinness of Bentham’s theory and his over-simplification of human life. (Bentham can be defended in all sorts of ways, but not here and now.) One of Bentham’s most famous remarks was ‘quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry.’ This is in Bentham a necessary truth, but no matter. Mill wanted to say that the pleasure got from pushpin was altogether less adequate than the pleasure got from poetry; a man whose pleasures centred on pushpin was a worse man than a man whose pleasures

centred on great literature; and so on down the line. Saying this means that Mill has introduced his famous distinction between quantity and quality; less of a 'better' pleasure may be better than more of a 'worse' pleasure. There are three obvious difficulties. First, how can a utilitarian introduce 'better' pleasures into a theory that allegedly rests on utility? Second, is the contrast between quality and quantity *absolute* – so that any amount of a sufficiently high-quality pleasure is better than any amount of a low-quality pleasure, or is it a matter of degree? Thirdly, what sort of evidence does the distinction rest on?

First: there is a logical puzzle. If utility is the measure of goodness, then *it* provides the metric by which the goodness and badness of whatever it is is assessed. It seems to make no sense to introduce another metric. Or else, quality must be reducible to quantity, since happiness is supposed to be the standard and more is better than less, full stop. Mill says both that high quality pleasures do, generally, win on a quantitative measure **and** that they win on a qualitative measure. Notice that this is not in itself a point about **moral** excellence; it is about good and bad pleasures, including those of taste, and is about the general theory of value, not about moral judgment narrowly speaking. (Imagine two painters; both kill someone in order to secure the money to get paint; one is Rembrandt and one – you can decide; Rembrandt-pleasure is better than x-pleasure, but Mill is quite clear that both would and should be hanged.)

Second, if there is a way of comparing less of better versus more of worse, we have the problem of knowing whether enough of worse outweighs the better.

Lastly, there is the puzzle of *knowing* which way to jump; you might think that enough fans of *Oasis* outweigh Wagner, but on what is the judgment based? This is where Mill appeals to the distinction between contented pigs and discontented humans and contented fools and discontented Socrates.

Socrates and the fool

Mill contrasts the pig and the human and Socrates and the fool. It is worth remembering that the pig is important because Carlyle among others – others here including the critics of Epicurus, since around 300bc – had attacked utilitarianism as 'pig philosophy.' Mill's response is glacial and damning: if people were pigs, the argument would have some force; but people aren't, and the question is what happiness *humans* will pursue.