

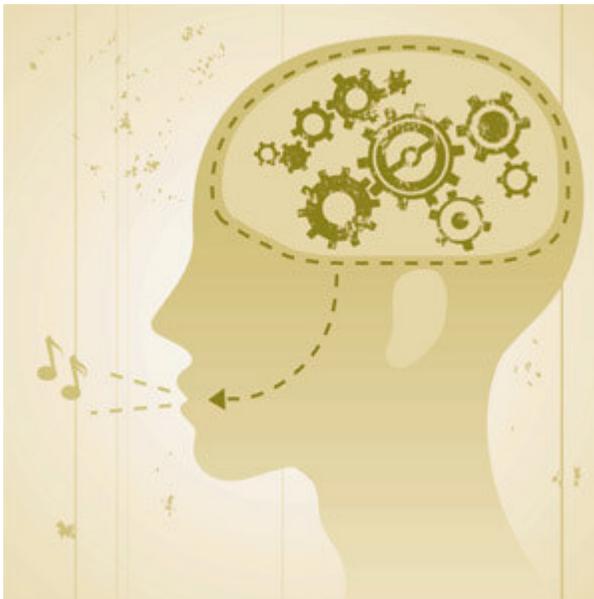
NEW BACKGROUNDER! Utilitarianism

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Written by Stephen Buckle

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Probably the most persuasive ethical theory in contemporary ethical debates is utilitarianism. This new MercatorNet backgrounder analyses its main features.



Utilitarianism is one of the most prominent of modern moral philosophies, and the most controversial. Its denial that moral rights are the basic currency of moral thinking – and the manifold consequences of this denial in a wide range of significant practical issues – is well known. What is not so well understood, however, is where utilitarianism came from, and why, under the more general rubric of "ethical consequentialism", it now enjoys such respect in academic meta-ethical debates. This paper aims to throw some light on these issues, and, by doing so, to identify utilitarianism's fundamental commitments – and to indicate why the academic

preoccupation with "ethical consequentialism" is a distraction from the main issue.

What is Utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism, as a distinct moral doctrine, is commonly traced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). His book, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, can be considered to have launched utilitarianism upon the (Anglophone) world. This conjunction of events brought Bentham considerable fame, since utilitarianism was thought to capture the progressive spirit of the Revolution. His reformist writings made him the godfather of a group called the Philosophic Radicals, who advocated a series of reforms based on utilitarian principles. Prominent amongst the Radicals was James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill.

Bentham's utilitarianism proclaimed that the worth of any action lay entirely in its usefulness (or utility) for human beings. Hence the doctrine's name. But the distinctive character of the doctrine depended on his further specification of what counted as useful: he claimed that *human happiness* was the measure, and further stipulated that happiness was not some abstruse philosophical ideal, but merely *pleasure*. His further stipulation that each person's pleasure counted for the same gave the doctrine the practical edge which has always been, for its

advocates, one of its primary attractions: it meant that alternative courses of action could be assessed for their moral worth simply by adding up their consequences in terms of the pleasure (+1) or pain (-1) imposed on those affected. The best course of action was simply the course of action that generated the highest score. Moral mathematics was born.

Utilitarianism thus construed can be divided into two component parts: its *form* and its *content*. The formal component is its model of reasoning, that is, its consequentialism: the conviction that alternative courses of action are to be measured purely by their consequences. This element has become the main focus of attention in recent years, and explains why "consequentialism" has become the preferred mode of self-description amongst philosophical sympathizers. But things were not always so. In the beginning, it was utilitarianism's content that was the more striking and (to its followers) more attractive component of the theory. The absence of any appeal to higher authorities or to metaphysical ideals made it appear the ideal theory for a new secular age.

The principal source of complaint from its sympathetic critics lay in the thought that the secularism achieved was too crude, psychologically speaking. The reduction of happiness – and, by extension, all human ideals – to the mere quantity of (physical) pleasure led John Stuart Mill to describe Bentham's position as moral philosophy reduced to the "principles which regulate trade". So Mill proposed a compromise view – indebted to the hierarchical moral psychology of Plato – in which pleasures could be divided into higher (intellectual) pleasures and lower (physical) pleasures, such that the higher always trump the lower. (He famously observed: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied".) But this proposal found little favour amongst his fellow-utilitarians, because it destroyed what most found so attractive about the new theory: its promise of mathematically-certain moral conclusions.

The pursuit of this promise – principally in the hands of twentieth-century economists – led to a significant change in the theory itself. The basic currency of utilitarianism, pleasure, allowed only very limited, and indeed misleadingly limited, quantification. Bentham had "solved" the problem by stipulating that everyone was to count for one. As a principle of basic human equality, this may be all very well. But as a principle of moral mathematics, it allowed only the crude measures: pleasure = +1, pain = -1. But pleasures and pains come in degrees, so, even if everyone is equal in *general* value, the intensities of their pleasures and pains, and therefore their *specific* values, need not be. So any serious attempt to measure the highest utility must fail. A different measure was therefore needed.

The new measure proposed dispensed with the theory's prior focus on subjective satisfactions (i.e. on happiness or pleasure). It replaced this hidden standard with a thoroughly public one: preference-satisfaction, or, in cruder terms, getting what

you want. The advantage of this change is entirely to do with quantifiability: while it is impossible to measure the degree of happiness or pleasure achieved by a certain action or policy, it is perfectly possible to measure the extent to which preferences have been satisfied. If Person A wants a new Mercedes every year, whereas Person B wants good hospitals, it will be obvious to all whether, or to what extent, a given action or social policy delivers them the objects of their desire. It will even be possible to measure various alternative social policies by the number of preferences each can be predicted to satisfy. The dream of moral mathematics can thus be saved; so the economists, and, following them, the utilitarian philosophers, came to advocate *the greatest level of preference-satisfaction* as the practically-rational – and thus the moral – standard by which possible actions or social policies are to be judged. This theory is known as "preference utilitarianism", to distinguish it from the original, hedonic, theory. (Perhaps the best-known version of preference utilitarianism is Peter Singer's ethical theory.)

Consequentialism and the form of practical reasoning

"Consequentialism" is the name for the formal part of the utilitarian doctrine: the view that all practical reasoning is in terms of consequences, such that the best course of action is necessarily that course of action that produces the best consequences. It is distinct from utilitarianism in that it resists stipulating what those consequences are. As such, it can be thought of as an all-embracing doctrine about what decisions or actions must be like to be practically rational – and so is commonly adjudged by philosophers to provide a sophisticated background test for all practical decision-making.

Since consequentialism does not tell anyone what to do – it cannot, because it resists telling us *which* consequences count – it is not itself an ethical theory. But it is plainly not neutral with respect to ethical theory, since it rules out – as *irrational* – any variety of ethical thinking that fails to fit the consequentialist pattern. Consequentialism thus seems to provide powerful background support for utilitarianism, by removing all non-consequentialist theories from serious consideration. Given that most traditional ethical doctrines are not obviously fitted to the consequentialist mould, the upshot is that traditional ethical values – the source of criticisms of utilitarian doctrines – can be set aside as mere prejudice obstructing the implementation of progressive moral opinion. Consequentialist practical rationality thus sweeps the field clean for utilitarianism's triumph.

Consequentialism and rational choice theory

In this light, it is plainly important to examine the credentials of the consequentialist theory of practical rationality. In brief, it can be described as the view that rational choice consists in choosing some good outcome; that it is more rational to choose the best amongst alternative possible goods; and so rational choice and action is to be defined in terms of *maximizing* good outcomes. Ethics

then plugs into this basic framework by specifying in what terms the good outcomes are to be understood, i.e. in terms of happiness or desire-satisfaction or character-development or even some variety of ideal-attainment. Ethically good action will therefore be the attempt to maximize the specified good outcome.

Rationality is thus defined purely in terms of the maximizing tendency, and not at all in terms of the actual values pursued: the rational choice conception is *neutral* with respect to actual values. This is commonly taken to be the *strength* of this conception of rationality: its neutrality is attributed to its *degree of abstraction* and so also of *explanatory power*. This is, however, only half true. For varieties of choice and action that uncontroversially fit into this pattern, the abstraction and so explanatory power of this conception of rationality is undeniable. But it is certainly not the case that ethics uncontroversially fits the pattern: as mentioned above, traditional ethics is not purely consequentialist, and so needs to be redefined in order to fit. Traditional norms or duties have to be reconceived as desires (and perhaps also, as an intermediate step, as values). Such reconception is plainly not a neutral process, so why should it be accepted?

In order to explain this, a thoroughly non-neutral commitment of modern rational choice theory needs to be brought to the fore: its conception of reason as a calculative capacity in the service of *given* values. The calculative aspect lies in the fact that rationality on this model essentially amounts to adding up the quantity of goodness of each alternative, in order to choose the highest scoring alternative. The givenness of the values is plain from the fact that the model accords them no theoretical attention whatsoever. Reason is thus conceived as a service industry, a method applicable to one's values in order to assist in their attainment: the values themselves are not open to rational assessment. Why not? The standard rationale for this view is that values are not subject to rational assessment because values are *subjective*. They come into the world through human desires, and do so because they are in fact *nothing more than* human desires. (And, it is usually added, since humans are all different and desire different things, values are wholly personal – what each person desires.)

The model of reason built into rational choice theory is thus a version of the "Humean" (or instrumental) theory of reason: reason *serves* desire, and does so by calculating how desires are most efficiently satisfied. Reason cannot therefore judge between alternative desires; and, given that values and desires are equated, reason cannot judge between alternative values. This theory of reason amounts to a reinterpretation of human nature: specifically, of the idea that the human being is the rational being. Traditionally, this meant that the human being is a being who acts in the light of rationally-acquired knowledge of the world, including knowledge of objective goods. In the Humean reinterpretation, it means only that the human being is a being which calculates how to satisfy its desires: it is an animal distinguishable from other animals only by its greater capacity to figure out how to get what it wants. To see what is lost in this reconception, it is only necessary to observe that it implies no difference in dignity between animal

and human life. So the idea that there is a distinctive dignity to human beings turns out to be unjustified on this conception.

Form and content issues: a summary

One central task of an examination of consequentialist modes of ethical thinking must therefore be to examine the *form* of rationality built into such thinking: the Humean model of practical rationality. This will require a direct assessment of the basics of modern rational choice theory: its conception of rationality (and implicit conception of human nature); and its equation of norms (or duties) and values and desires.

Utilitarianism adds to this form a distinctive content. So examination of the specifically utilitarian brands of consequentialism requires assessing the distinctive *content* of utilitarian values: of the ethical value of a hedonic conception of happiness ("classical" utilitarianism), and, especially, of the ethical value of the mere fact of getting what one wants (preference utilitarianism). The impact of these values on practical ethical questions then needs to be identified and assessed. This will include, among other things, their impact on such commonly-employed notions as the meaning and dignity and quality of a human life.

Concluding remarks

At bottom, utilitarian moral theory is a consequence of the empiricist revolution in modern philosophy. Empiricism denied innate knowledge and restricted what could be known to human experience. But it did more than that. It implicitly denied that human beings were the truth-seeking rational beings that the ancient and medieval worlds had taken them to be. Hume's dethroning of reason has to be seen in this light.

At the same time, however, modern empiricism accepted Aristotle's view that experience can deliver only *useful* knowledge. So a reason that only serves passion is a calculative capacity concerning only which of the available alternative actions is the *most useful*. Any idea of moral truth, or even of value other than usefulness, has simply been set aside. In consequence, all that is needed to generate specific utilitarian theories is to settle on a *criterion of usefulness*. Bentham's hedonic standard and the economists' preference-satisfaction standard are the two most widely-accepted criteria, and so the most influential theories. It is plain that both implicitly rule out the distinctive concerns of a rational being, as traditionally understood, and so both fit the Humean recasting of the human being.

The "ethical consequentialism" that so preoccupies the academic moral philosophers, with its attempt to legislate for acceptable moral positions by reference merely to (its account of) the form of practical reasoning, is thus a

distorting lens through which to comprehend human morality. This apparently formal category in fact predisposes filling out ethical theory according to the narrowed content imposed by empiricism's restriction to the useful, and so is not the neutral category it purports to be. In the end, then, the fundamental division between utilitarianism and its traditional rivals will not be settled by the formalist preoccupations of so much contemporary meta-ethics. What is fundamentally at issue is the nature of the human being.

*Philosopher **Stephen Buckle** teaches at the Australian Catholic University.*

Notes

(1) The view was certainly in the wind elsewhere (a point often neglected in Anglophone philosophical writings), and Bentham's claim to originality is not beyond dispute. Karl Marx, for example, claimed that Bentham "simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with wit and ingenuity in the eighteenth century". (Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1976), I, 758n.) Marx here thinks of Bentham as a nineteenth-century figure, since it was in the early nineteenth century that his influence was at its height.

(2) See, for example, James E. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism: Social Science and the Critique of Religion in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

(3) John Stuart Mill, "Bentham", in John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 156.

(4) John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 57.

(5) The fact that getting what you want might not make you happy is a residual embarrassment to the theory, about which philosophers occasionally fret. The economists, for their part, have ignored happiness as a goal, despite its popularity as a measure of a successful life. Why? Several possibilities suggest themselves: because it is not measurable and so not to be accepted as a scientific concept; or because they have *assumed* that getting what you want *equals* happiness; or even because they have *defined* happiness in terms of preference-satisfaction. In short, they have swept the problem under the carpet.

(6) See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I. 1 (many editions); and cf. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), e.g. I. i. 5: "We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use for us".

(7) The point, and its limiting effects on human life, are central concerns in a famous 19th-century examination of the utilitarian spirit, Ivan Turgenev's novel

Fathers and Sons (1861). See, in particular, Bazarov's remark that "we base our conduct on what we recognize as useful"; *Fathers and Sons* (Harmondsworth: Penguin (1975), 123.

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