

Critique of bentham's utilitarianism



Over time, the actions of mankind have been the victim of two vague labels, right and wrong. The criteria for these labels are not clearly defined, but they still seem to be the standard by which the actions of man are judged. There are some people that abide by a deontological view when it comes to judging the nature of actions; the deontological view holds that it is a person's intention that makes an action right or wrong. On the other hand there is the teleological view which holds that it is the result of an action is what makes that act right or wrong. In this essay I will be dealing with utilitarianism, a philosophical principle that holds a teleological view when it comes the nature of actions. To solely discuss utilitarianism is much too broad of topic and must be broken down, so I will discuss specifically quantitative utilitarianism as presented by Jeremy Bentham. In this essay I will present the argument of Bentham supporting his respective form of utilitarianism and I will give my critique of this argument along the way.

Before the main discussion of the Bentham's utilitarianism gets underway, lets first establish what utilitarianism is. As stated in the introduction, utilitarianism is a teleological philosophy that is primarily concerned with the results of an action when determining the nature of that act. Utilitarianism operates primarily under the greater happiness principal, in other words, utilitarians believe that one should only act in such a way that the results of that act should produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest for the greatest number of people. It is due to this view that utilitarianism is often criticized for being too hedonistic because it places the moral value of an act only on how much that act effects happiness. The teleological nature of utilitarianism also can serve as a problem because it pays no attention to the intention an action and can make acts of an immoral nature justifiably right. I will use the example that a professor of mine used in which a man tries to snatch an old lady's purse and in his struggle to do so he pulls her out of the way of a speeding vehicle thus saving her life. This act, although it started with mischievous intent, ended with a life being saved and surely produced the greatest amount of happiness for the old lady. In the utilitarian eye this act is morally acceptable and right due to the fact that happiness was produced.

Jeremy Bentham was a utilitarian philosopher with his own version of this particular of this teleological view called "Quantitative Utilitarianism". Bentham's utilitarianism argument starts by giving his principle of utility which judges all actions based on its tendency to promote or diminish happiness of whoever is involved, be it a community or an individual. According to Bentham, an action is right if, it increases happiness and decreases suffering and is wrong it does not. Also included in his view of utilitarianism is a way to calculate the general tendency of any act and its affect on a community. The calculation is based on the seven circumstances of the act, which are: its intensity, its duration, its certainty or uncertainty, its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity (tendency to be followed by sensations of like kind), its purity (tendency not to be followed by sensations of unlike kind), and its

extent (number of people affected). With these circumstances in order, one can start to calculate the nature of the act and according to Bentham after the completion of the process, one can make an accurate assessment of the true nature of the act. Here is where my critique of Bentham's "Quantitative Utilitarianism" comes into the picture. I will present Bentham's process in his own words and then offer my observation as to where he went wrong. The community is a fictitious body composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were members. The interest of the community then is, what?-the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it....To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as follows. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the first interest.
2. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first interests.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain.
4. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain and the impurity of the first pleasure.
5. Sum 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, with respect to the interests of that individual person; if on the side of pain, the bad tendency of it upon the whole.
6. Take an account of the number of persons whose interests are concerned and repeat the process for each. Sum up the numbers expressive to the degrees of good tendency...do this again in regard to whom the tendency is bad upon the whole. Take the balance, which, if on the side of pleasure, will give the good general tendency; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency

Maybe it is my mentality, but a number of things in the preceding passage were and still remain unclear to me. The first thing that I will take up issue with is Bentham's perspective about the interests of the community. The interest of the community is said to be a sum of the total interests of its several members. It is never specified what how exactly this total is acquired or even if the members of the community would agree on whatever is considered the community's interest. If the members would agree then that means that everyone in the community had the same interest to begin with. If the members would not agree, then how can you go about adding up their conflicting interests? These interests, when attempting to get a total seem like they would cancel each other out which wouldn't make for much of sum total. Things of this nature (individual interests) are so relative that it would be impossible as well as pointless to even try to place any kind of concrete value, which brings up another point. What kind of value are these individual and community interests supposed to have? In order to add things up they must have some sort of value. Because of Bentham's failure to offer some sort of method for combining individuals' interests and since he failed to offer some sort of concrete value for these abstract things, his perspective on the interest of the community remains unclear to me.

The second issue that I am going to take up lies in Bentham's method of calculating the general tendency of an act that affects a community's interest. For starters, the process itself is too arduous. There are too many things that need to be done in order to come to the final conclusion and on top of that, the process instructs you to repeat however many times necessary. Secondly, the terms fecundity and purity seem like the same thing. I can not see the difference between taking into account the chance of something being followed by something else of same nature and taking into account the chance of something not being followed by something of opposite nature. If I am trying to estimate the chances a pleasurable sensation has of being followed by another pleasurable sensation, is that not the same as trying to estimate the chances a pleasurable sensation has of not being followed by a painful sensation. In both scenarios I am trying to see if the original pleasurable sensation will be followed by another pleasurable sensation. Thirdly, the problem of again rises about value. In the first case, the value for interests went unspecified, now in this case it is the value of pleasure and pain. Throughout Bentham's explaining of how to calculate how an act affects a community's interest, he once again fails to give some kind of value for pleasure and pain. We are instructed to take every pleasure and every pain into account and then sum up all the values in order to get a balance, but there is no value. Bentham also repeats the mistake of treating abstract concepts as concrete concepts. Just like individual interests, pleasure and pain are relative. The ways that pleasure and pain affect people vary and what is pleasurable for one person may not be pleasurable for another. Another problem with this method has to do with the end product of the account process. Bentham says that after all of the values of pleasure and pain are summed up, if the balance is on the side of pleasure the act as a whole has a good tendency, as the same for pain. But what if there is no side that the balance lay on? Hypothetically speaking, if there were a community of 200 people and after all of the values of pleasure and pain were added up and the results were split down the middle, what tendency would the act have? In order to even start to answer this there would have to be some sort of value for the pleasure and pain. The values would also have to differ in order to get a definite end result, certain pains and

pleasures would have to weigh more than others, but that's \"Qualitative Utilitarianism\". As for Bentham and \"Quantitative Utilitarianism\" this is all I have to say, it's all that I could muster.

In conclusion, Bentham's essay does read well. He is very precise in keeping his argument consistent. If there were some kind of way to give things like pleasure and pain definite values, then his quantitative method would be that which all other methods would go by. But things of that nature vary too much and too often to even try to try.