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The Greatest Happiness Principle

An Examination of Utilitarianism

Lanny Ebenstein



The Greatest Happiness Principle

First published in 1991, *The Greatest Happiness Principle* traces the history of the theory of utility, starting with the Bible, and running through Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. It goes on to discuss the utilitarian theories of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in detail, commenting on the latter's view of the Christianity of his day and his optimal socialist society. The book argues that the key theory of utility is fundamentally concerned with happiness, stating that happiness has largely been left out of discussions of utility. It also goes on to argue that utility can be used as a moral theory, ultimately posing the question, what is happiness?



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HAPPINESS
PRINCIPLE

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Alan O. Ebenstein

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To THOMAS S. SCHROCK,
Teacher and Friend



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Preface

Although of ancient origins, the theory of utility in modern times rose on the intellectual firmament in the late 1700s, and burst on it in the 1800s. Primarily and predominantly through the work of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, but also through that of Henry Sidgwick, utilitarianism for a time enlightened the fields of morality and politics. The theory of utility was sufficiently well-known to allow Sidgwick to write in his 1874 *The Methods of Ethics*: "The term utilitarianism is, at the present day, in common use, and is supposed to designate a doctrine or method with which we are all familiar."¹

Utilitarianism has seen, however, lesser days in the twentieth century. In this century it has become bogged down in the questions of teleologism vs. deontologism, act utilitarianism vs. rule utilitarianism, total utility vs. average utility, empirical hedonism vs. ethical hedonism, and consequentialism, among others. To the extent that these types of questions have dominated the discussion of the theory, it has faded from view. The important question, therefore, now facing utilitarianism is whether its sun has indeed set, or whether it has been but temporarily eclipsed, and will reappear to cast its light on ethical and empirical subjects.

Utilitarianism, in its classic form, is simple: maximization of happiness is the *summum bonum*; individuals act according to pleasure and pain. The purpose of this book is to examine the classical theory of utility as expounded by its principal English-speaking proponents and opponent, as well as to more briefly note some of the theory's history and discuss various issues connected with it.

Several individuals assisted in the writing of *The Greatest Happiness Principle: An Examination of Utilitarianism*, which served as the author's Ph.D. dissertation at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1988. Dr. Frederick Rosen gave valuable assistance in the original writing of the chapter on Bentham. Mr. John Charvet was the author's acting supervisor for a time, and reviewed an early paper on Bentham and Mill. Professor Maurice W. Cranston was the author's supervisor, and provided advice on all aspects of the dissertation, and much personal encouragement.

¹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 411.



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INTRODUCTION

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

The Declaration of Independence

Introduction

There are four great issues involved in the theory of utility as a moral theory: 1) what is its object, 2) does the theory enjoin men to consider only the consequences of actions, with little (if any) regard to actions themselves, 3) is the theory maximalist, in that it directs us to maximize "the good" -- whatever this may turn out to be, and 4) recognizing that the goal of the theory of utility is happiness, what, exactly, is happiness? As an empirical theory, there is one issue facing the theory of utility: is its psychological explanation of the motive behind all human actions, that we act according to our calculations of the happiness and unhappiness that actions bring to us personally, true; and its corollary, is this empirical theory consistent with the theory of utility as a moral theory?

My purpose here is to trace the history of the theory of utility, starting with the Bible, and running through Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus; to discuss the utilitarian theories of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in great detail, commenting also on the latter's view of the Christianity of his day and his optimal, socialist society; to consider the non-utilitarian theory of John Rawls; and to offer views on a new theory of utility. In the appendices, I discuss the utility and justice, Henry Sidgwick's utilitarian contributions, various utilitarian writers, glimpses of a utilitarian future, free will and determinism, teleologism and deontologism and consequentialism and non-consequentialism, and why happiness.

Reading much modern utilitarian literature (for and against), one would think that the central concern of the theory of utility is consequences. This is far from the case. What the theory of utility is concerned with, in its classic variant, is happiness. This is its key issue, not whether actions should be performed for their consequences or themselves. So far has this latter issue taken over the theory of utility, in fact, that discussions of happiness are almost non-existent in many contemporary expositions or criticisms of the theory of utility. This dearth of discussion is a real shame, because the essential definition of utility as inerradically relating to happiness is crystal-clear (or at least was, to the theory's founders),

and because discussions of happiness are more interesting and worthwhile, or so it seems to me, than those relating exclusively to means and ends.

Regarding consequences, a discussion of this topic is unquestionably a part of the theory of utility, although, as has just been stated, far too much attention has been paid to these, and not enough, recently, to happiness. The subject of consequences, despite the attention it has received, is a non-started. Obviously, actions are performed both for themselves and their consequences, with more stress laid on one of these components in some actions than in others (going on a picnic is an action likely to be done for itself; saving for retirement is more likely to be done for its consequences). Moreover and essentially, future consequences very often determine what present actions are. Consider, for example, the non-frivolous case of an attempt to kill Hitler during World War II: should such an attempt be considered as murder, a grave moral wrong, or as salvation, a way of saving millions of lives, a great moral right? Future consequences (or, at least, intended future consequences in terms of ascribing personal liability or credit for actions) affect what present actions should be considered. All attempts to rigidly split existing occurrences and their consequences are doomed to failure. Again, though, the central concern of the theory of utility is happiness.

Rawls' predominant criticism of the theory of utility is that it is teleological or maximalist, that it directs people to produce the maximum of the good, which it defines as happiness (or, in Rawls' terms, "the satisfaction of rational desire"¹). This criticism, despite the prominence that Rawls gives to it, appears unsustainable to me. Assuming that the good, whatever it is considered to be -- happiness, justice, virtue, truth, some combination of these, etc. -- is capable of being considered in maximalist and minimalist terms, what should the correct end of ethics be: to minimize the good or consider it

irrelevant?*" It may, of course be very difficult to measure the good, especially in such interpersonal intangibles as happiness; however, as Bentham argues, we have to do the best we systematically can when measuring happiness (or, for that matter, every other definition of the good), rather than being paralyzed in our actions.

The final great issue, identified here, involving the theory of utility as a moral theory, after what the object of the theory is, what the importance to the theory that consequences are, and the theory's maximalist edict, is, what exactly is happiness (recognizing that this is the goal of the theory of utility)? This question strikes, or should strike, at the root of the theory and discussions of it.

In Chapters I, II, III, the roles of happiness in the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus are considered. This discussion breaks genuinely new utilitarian ground, and shows an otherwise unsuspected thread running through much of our intellectual heritage. In chapters IV and V, Bentham's and Mill's Theories of Utility, respectively, the contributions of these two leaders in utilitarian thought are portrayed. One premise here is that little of value has been written on the theory of utility in this century. With all due respect to twentieth century proponents, opponents, and commentators on the subject, such as R. M. Hare, J. J. C. Smart, Bernard Williams, David Lyons, J. O. Urmson, and even such philosophical greats as George Edward Moore and F. H. Bradley, their writings simply do not capture the pith, nor convey the meaning of the theory of utility, as well or as clearly as Bentham's and Mill's works do. The great exception to this dearth of significant contributions to the theory of utility in the twentieth century would,

*Rawls does not consider the issue of maximalization to be related to that of consequences. In *A Theory of Justice*, he states: "All ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account in judging rightness. One which did not would simply be irrational, crazy," and "one conception of justice is preferable to another when its broader consequences are more desirable."²

of course, appear to be the work of Rawls; however, as shall be seen, *A Theory of Justice* is worthy of notice to the theory of utility almost exclusively for negative reasons. The answers to most of the questions of most latter commentators can be found in Bentham and Mill. To the extent that they are not, it is usually because later commentators are barking up the wrong tree. The most may be learned about the theory of utility through a return to its seminal sources. After this, the theory may be proceeded to being viewed afresh.

The fundamental contributions of Bentham and Mill to ethical thought are three: 1) the insistence that any complete ethical theory be capable of being carried out, 2) the reassertion that happiness is the correct end of life, combined with the redefinition of happiness, and 3) moving the locus of moral justification from external acts to internal feelings. Each of these contributions was a breakthrough, and each will receive considerable amplification in the course of this dissertation. For now, it is appropriate to comment briefly on each one of these.

One of the great criticisms which has been made of Bentham's and Mill's ethical theories is that they postulate too low a conception of the moral equation -- that all that individuals should care about is their own pleasures and pains. This criticism is off the mark for at least two reasons. Firstly, the criticism is *prima facie* incorrect because both Bentham and Mill, especially Bentham, are quite careful to distinguish between how men do act, and how they should. Neither Bentham nor Mill holds that men should (in a moral sense) care only about themselves; rather, each man's theory of utility quite explicitly enjoins that each should produce the greatest amount of happiness possible, for others as well as one's self. Secondly, though, this criticism misses the target because both Bentham and Mill, in the premise of the question, are being blamed for trying to provide a workable ethic and for trying to explain how that ethic works. What other ethical system, apart from the theory of utility, has tried to show how, and explain why, it is practicable within the bounds of human nature? Furthermore, if it is important that this is done in regard to the theory of utility, then should it not be important for

other ethical systems to do this also? Finally, to the extent that no attempt is made to demonstrate how other ethical systems can be put into operation, or they are incapable of so being, how good or complete can these other ethical systems be considered to be? While Bentham's and Mill's reconciliation of Is and Should may not fully be agreed with, we should at least give them credit for identifying and trying to resolve this issue.

The second fundamental contribution of Bentham and Mill to ethical thought was their reassertion that happiness is the correct aim of life, combined with their redefinition of happiness. Bentham was not the first writer to build a system of morals on happiness. What he did, though, more than any other writer before him, was to carry the system through to its logical conclusions. Bentham's and Mill's essential message is that happiness, or (to them) the state in which pleasures exceed pains, is good, and the only good. They sought to free men from a dark age which not only often declared that happiness was irrelevant, but that it was bad. They sufficiently redirected moral discussion so that happiness, expressed in one way or another, has never been far from the forefront in ethical discussions and government actions. Moreover, Bentham and Mill sought to redefine happiness. They did not accept conventions of their day which called many pleasures, pains; and pains, pleasures. If happiness is all that matters, then it is of the utmost importance exactly how happiness is defined. Mill's and Bentham's redirection of ethical thought, combined with their belief that in measuring happiness, each one's happiness is of equal worth, leads us to see that their ideal of ultimate improvement for humanity is a world in which everyone is joyful.

The third, and final, fundamental contribution of Bentham and Mill to ethical thought was their switch of the locus of moral justification from external acts to internal feelings. While this point will require much clarification, it is adequate for now to call attention to it, and to comment that Bentham and Mill believed that internal feelings are all that ultimately matter (these are, after all, what pleasures and pains are). External actions, Bentham and Mill thought, are only important insofar as the internal feelings which

they cause are. Furthermore, Bentham and especially Mill thought that mental happiness states, such as friendship and morality, are a type of internal feeling of the highest sort.

The attempt will be made in chapter IV to explicate Bentham's theory of utility as revealed in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (with reference to other work) and to demonstrate that it is a more subtle and valuable doctrine than that which it is usually considered to be. Bentham's theories are still current. As Ronald Dworkin writes in *Taking Rights Seriously* (referring to the prevailing, as opposed to his liberal theory of law), "Both parts of the ruling theory [of law] derive from the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham."³ The major allegations which have historically been made against Bentham (in addition to that he is a moral infant, who believes we should care only about our own pleasures and pains) are: 1) that he does not discriminate between different pleasures and pains, and 2) that his conception of pleasure and pain is that of a Philistine's. These charges are rebutted, and Bentham's ethical theory, and theories of pleasure and pain, (presenting, for the first time, the two components -- intensity and duration -- of which Bentham thinks that pleasures and pains are composed) are explained. Bentham is also shown to have a more sympathetic conception of man than is usually considered, and not to rely over-excessively on calculation. It is essential to separate Bentham's ethical and empirical theories.

Mill's theory of utility is the best known variant of the theory. Since the publication of his essay *Utilitarianism* in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1861, his ideas have certainly impacted the ethical world. If they have not always carried the day, then they have at least established an intellectual framework within which ethical arguments have often been argued. Mill's theory of utility is at once more noble and, perhaps, less realistic than Bentham's -- more noble, because Mill has a greater vision of man's potential; less realistic, because it may be argued that Mill's vision of man exceeds our reach.

The crux of the theory of utility is this: men should promote the happiness of others, they do promote their own happiness. How are these two positions to be reconciled? The answer, Mill believes, is

that mankind are able to learn a more exalted view of pleasure -- that the happiness of each is solely found in the happiness of all. Mill attempts to cut the Gordian knot of Is and Should by stating that, ultimately, there should be no difference between the two.

In chapter V, Mill's theory of utility is shown as a more coherent and forceful teaching than what it is usually given credit for being. Further, that many commentators have not perceived the breadth of scope and richness of Mill's theory as a whole. The attempt is made here to demonstrate that because of misperception (and Mill's sometimes inadequate presentation in *Utilitarianism*), attacks on his theory may often be against ramparts which are in actuality well guarded. One of my endeavors, in this chapter, is to fill in some of the gaps in vision which Mill's presentation of his theory allows. This chapter begins with a presentation of Mill's largely disguised criticism of the Christianity of his day in *On Liberty*, and concludes with a description of the socialist system Mill believed would lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

One of the major arguments of chapter V is that what Mill roughly means by quality and quantity of pleasures Bentham designated by intensity and duration. Heretofore, Mill's conception of qualities in pleasure has been roughly criticized:

A consistent utilitarian can scarcely hold the difference of *quality* in pleasure in any sense: for if they differ otherwise than in what, speaking largely, may be called *quantity*, they are not mutually comparable. [John Grote, *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy*]⁴

another position which Mill maintains in opposition to Bentham: the recognition of differences of quality in pleasures distinct from and overriding differences of quantity. [Henry Sidwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*]⁵

Are pleasures, *as* pleasures, distinguishable by anything else than quality? [F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*]⁶

Mill also recognizes qualitative differences. Thus at one stroke, Mill destroys the whole basis of the felicific calculus. [R. P. Anschultz, *The Philosophy of J. S. Mill*]⁷

What, on a utilitarian view, can a *better* pleasure be other than a *greater* one? If it is better because nobler, then we have introduced nobility as an independent value -- unless we can return to quantities of pleasure by an indirect route, and claim that we maximize happiness in quantitative terms by encouraging as many people as possible to aim at "higher" pleasures. [Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill*]⁸

The argument here, if correct, is a significant contribution to Mill scholarship.

John Rawls is the great modern expositor of the theory of utility. Although Rawls is against the theory, he clearly considers its maximalist directive to be the dominant modern mind-set (knowingly or otherwise) and contrary to justice. In chapter VI, effort is expended rebutting Rawls' theory of justice on its own, non-utilitarian, premises. Additionally, it is argued that the theory of utility would be chosen by the correct application of Rawls' premises.

A Theory of Justice is deep and vast. To attempt to challenge it in a single chapter is a daunting task. Nonetheless, this task is attempted, both because of the considerable importance of *A Theory of Justice* to utilitarian thinking and because of its highly questionable positions when it is closely read. Rawls' fundamental position is that, in society, some may not have their advantages cut for the greater gains of others. "It may be expedient," Rawls writes, "but it is not just that some should have less in order that others may prosper."⁹ Does Rawls really mean this? After all, in any circumstance other than that of universal plenty, it is the essential function of society to determine who gets less and who gets more, and some receiving less in order that others (hopefully, a greater number) receive more is an irremediable part of life. How, therefore, can Rawls make this his central tenant? Furthermore, the principle by which Rawls applies this position is the "difference principle."¹⁰ This holds that a loss to a less fortunate person can never be compensated for by a gain to a more fortunate person. Once again, does Rawls really mean this? Are there no circumstances where a loss to the less-advantaged, no matter how tiny, cannot be

compensated by a greater gain to more-advantaged people? While Rawls states at one point in *A Theory of Justice* that cases such as the preceding cannot exist, ¹¹ this is to beg the question, for it is precisely in the cases where moral or ethical systems produce different answers that they can be compared, and one system pronounced superior or inferior to another. Furthermore, when carefully examined, Rawls' positions on basic liberties, the family, eugenics, and redress approach the amazing. While, again, it can hardly be believed that Rawls means what he writes, if he realizes what he writes, this is no exculpation.

Chapter VII, "A New Theory of Utility" is isogetic. In it, I give my view of the justification of happiness as the moral end as it is an inner state, not an external attribute.

Appendix A, "Utility and Justice," and the other appendices are ancillary to the chapters of the thesis. In appendix A, I consider four notions of justice -- natural justice, justice as desert, justice as morality, and justice as equality. I try to show that the theory of utility is compatible with each of these conceptions.

Henry Sidgwick wrote when the theory of utility was at its greatest popular extent. Sidgwick raises some questions in utilitarian thought, namely -- average utility versus total utility, the distribution of happiness, and the rights of future generations -- which are not considered in depth by Bentham or Mill. In Appendix B, these subjects are discussed. Appendix C continues the thread started in the first three chapters by, very briefly, considering utilitarian writings of various philosophers, including twentieth century ones.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 25.
2. *Ibid.*, 30, 6.
3. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London : Duckworth , 1984), vii.

4. John Grote, *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy* (Cambridge : Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1870), 52.
5. Henry Sidwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, with an additional chapter by Alban G. Widgey (London : MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1954), 247.
6. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1924), 116.
7. R. P. Anschultz, *The Philosophy of J. S. Mill* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1969), 18.
8. Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 110-111.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
10. *Ibid.*, 76.
11. *Ibid.*, 157-158.

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