

Analysis: An introduction to ethical concepts

The greatest happiness

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All the social services, health provision and care included, involve considerable problems in terms of the allocation of resources. These problems may apply at both a very general and a highly specific level. At the general level major allocative problems arise over the provision of financial resources between the various social services: for example, between medicine and education. *Within* medicine these allocative problems will occur in the context of the distribution of money between the different and competing forms of health provision: for example, between geriatric care and more sophisticated facilities for treating cardiac cases. At the most specific level problems may arise over the allocation of a scarce and possibly life-saving resource between two or more individuals when that resource can be utilized by only one person: for example, a donated organ. In a situation of scarcity, and such a situation is endemic, men are forced to allocate, reckon and distribute but how? Is there a justifiable moral principle which could guide those making decisions in such contexts and free the decision from arbitrary choice, chance or prejudice? One central candidate for this role is the principle of utility, or 'the greatest happiness' principle. The principle of utility is held by some to provide a determinate, scientific and calculable answer to all allocative problems. In a situation of choice between alternatives it enjoins acceptance of the course of action which will maximize the net balance of happiness or satisfaction.

The principle of utility and Jeremy Bentham

The principle of 'the greatest happiness' or, more usually, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', is the central principle of utilitarian moral philosophy. Indeed, the principle of the greatest happiness is usually referred to as the 'principle of utility', and it is within the framework of utilitarian moral thinking that the principle is best expounded.

Utilitarian moral philosophy was first systematically developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and some understanding of the background of utilitarian philosophy in the hands of Bentham can

help to show the force and power of the theory as well as to explain what it is. Bentham worked in the fields of moral, legal and social philosophy at a very crucial period in the history of man's moral development: in the thick of the twin developments of industrialization and urbanization. Bentham was very concerned with what he saw as the decisive effects on morality and social life generally of these momentous technological and demographic developments. The rise of industrial society with its urban basis had led to a crisis in moral authority. The traditional morality of the small village was bound to lose its authority in the urban world - it could not easily confront the moral problems generated by these new social relationships. In the village community men had encountered one another in very clearly defined, hierarchically ordered sets of social roles, and these social relationships encapsulated a tradition of moral experience and behaviour and gave a certain predictability and unity to moral interactions. Men met as members of a community, not as strangers engaged in anonymous interactions. In modern commercial society, on the other hand, 'Who are you and with whom do I deal?' is the central question addressed by one man to another. Social changes have destroyed traditional morality and the normal range of predictable moral expectations. To provide a scientific moral system which could fill this vacuum in moral experience was Bentham's central aim.

An empirical theory of human nature

A moral theory which attempted to do this had to have very minimal theoretical commitments, and Bentham's view: it could not trade off religious or traditional morality since the new moral system was supposed to fill the void caused by the decline in the authority of precisely these systems. The only possible basis for an agreed morality in the modern predicament was, for Bentham, an empirical theory of human nature. Men have to be taken as they are found to be, and moral values must take into account men as they are with their existing capacities and powers. An account of morality, if it is to have any hold in the modern era, must not trade off some transcendental or traditional view of man and his powers since *these* are in dispute, but must be rooted in what man is empirically known to be like. In Bentham's view the central characteristic of human nature is that men seek pleasure/happiness.

and seek to avoid pain/unhappiness. When a particular individual performs an intentional, purposive act it is always done with the same motive – to produce a preponderant amount of pleasure over pain or happiness over unhappiness. Bentham regarded this as a true psychological account of the springs of human motivation, and he had highly ingenious ways of dealing with obvious counter-examples to his theory, such as altruistic actions and masochist cases. If human nature is as a matter of fact like this, then, Bentham argues, morality has to take account of this fact. That is to say, we have to give an account of our basic moral values and our moral vocabulary in such a way as to incorporate these facts about human motives. There is no point in having a set of moral values and principles which exhort men to do what we know empirically they are psychologically incapable of doing. If I ought to do x , then I must be able to do it, and if I am only able intentionally to follow courses of action which I expect to maximize pleasure over pain, then what I ought to do has to be defined in terms of this. Consequently, Bentham identified what is good with pleasure or happiness (the terms are interchangeable for Bentham) and what is evil or bad with what will tend to promote pain. At a personal level, when I ask myself, ‘Ought I to do A or B?’ the answer is given by my trying to calculate which course of action will promote the greater amount of pleasure over pain or happiness over unhappiness; on a social or a public level the question, ‘What ought we, as a society, to do out of social policy alternatives A and B?’ is answered by calculating which course of action will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number. At both the personal and the social level moral problems and allocative problems are held by Bentham to be capable of definitive resolution without the introduction of disputed religious or traditional moral principles. Benthamite utilitarianism, therefore, claims to fill the void left by the decline in traditional moralities by rooting our moral conceptions in discoverable facts about human nature and by generating from this empirical basis for moral values a rational, calculable, publicly accessible, scientific decision procedure for ethics: that is, by calculating the likely relative consequences of an action in terms of its pleasure/happiness maximizing propensities. Bentham called this procedure the ‘felicific calculus’ and he certainly thought that in some way it was possible to quantify pleasure and happiness and thus work out empirically verifiable answers to questions of both a private and a personal sort which involved references to values.

Utilitarianism as a moral weapon today

As it stands, utilitarianism appears to be a very powerful moral weapon, providing decision procedures of an empirical sort to settle apparently

intractable questions involving references to values. For example, if as a society, we have to try to settle whether we ought to spend more resources on education or medicine, the answer cannot be given by experts but by a procedure which will take every person’s preferences into account, and seek to ascertain which course of action is most likely to produce the most satisfaction to the majority, that is, which will maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number. There can be no expert answer to this kind of question. Each person for Bentham is the best judge of what course of action is likely to maximize his own satisfaction or happiness, and the only possible procedure is to sum all the preferences of all the people. Certainly we do not at present have the institutional machinery to do this, but Bentham would argue that institutions, such as referenda, can be developed and indeed ought to be, as the only way of rationally solving disputes about social policy, the allocation of resources, and so forth, at a public level. Certainly some notion of the general welfare of the majority is employed by politicians and others making this kind of decision, and the Benthamite is merely arguing that this intuitive notion should be ‘fleshed out’ by getting people’s actual preferences revealed more and more in decision-making processes.

At a more specific level within the health services questions over the provision of resources between different forms of care and treatment, for example, between geriatric care and care for the mentally ill on the one hand and more sophisticated cardiac treatment or plastic surgery on the other, are to be settled for the utilitarian by trying to calculate which form of allocation would produce the greatest happiness or the greatest net satisfaction. Similarly with life-or-death decisions over the recipient of a donated organ the same principle would be invoked by the utilitarian and a calculation according to the principle would have to take into account such factors as the number of dependants a recipient had, his or her likely economic value to the community generally, and other non-clinical factors such as these.

Objections to the Benthamite formulation

The obvious initial objection to the Benthamite formulation of the utilitarian position is that although it claims to make moral decision making a rational and calculable thing it does so on a false empirical basis, namely, that Bentham’s psychological theory about human motivation and pleasure and pain is in fact false. On this kind of view it would be argued that although Bentham wanted to root moral values in empirical facts about human nature, his theory of human nature is false, that is, human beings often act in ways that contradict Bentham’s hypothesis. As it stands, this is really quite a powerful argument, but there is a way of

detaching utilitarianism from Bentham's own hedonistic assumptions. Bentham certainly argues that in each intentional action the end is the same, namely, the pursuit of happiness, and this is fairly obviously false, but what we can do is to identify the happiness of a person with the class of ends that he in fact pursues, whatever these may happen to be. In this way the principle of the greatest happiness would be an injunction not to promote a specific kind of quality or object of desire, namely happiness, but rather it would come down to saying that we should always act in such a way as to give as many people as possible as much as possible of whatever it is that they want. As such utilitarianism, or the 'greatest happiness' principle, can still retain a certain amount of power. Just as my welfare, wellbeing, happiness or satisfaction is based upon my desires being satisfied, so the argument might go, the welfare of the society, its happiness or wellbeing, should consist in nothing more than the attempt to fulfil the maximum numbers of desires of the individuals who belong to the society. Since the principle of the individual is to try to satisfy his desires, promote his welfare or happiness, so the principle of society should be to try to advance the satisfactions of the desires of those who belong to the society: a society is best arranged when its institutions maximize the net balance of satisfaction. Such a view of utilitarianism seems on the face of it quite plausible, and does still seem to provide a decision procedure for settling disputes about what society ought to do on an empirical basis, namely, the satisfaction of the desires and preferences of those who belong to the society.

Justice within the utilitarian system

However, one very major problem remains – that of justice. Utilitarianism is a maximizing criterion. It merely states that the net balance of satisfaction ought to be maximized; it does not say really anything about the distribution of satisfaction. It could be that in order to maximize the satisfactions of the majority a number of citizens in a minority might have to suffer severe deprivation. We do have some intuitive sense that resources should be allocated not merely to maximize the satisfactions of the majority but also in a way that secures social justice, perhaps in the sense that resources should be allocated to meet the needs of those who are deprived or in need even if such a distribution does not necessarily maximize the satisfactions of the majority. Of course, to recognize the claims of 'need' and 'social justice' is to bring again to social decision making highly elusive moral notions. The simplicity of utilitarianism rests upon its single principle 'the greatest happiness' which has an empirical basis, but its very simplicity may mean that it leads on occasion to distorted results in morally (very) complex cases.

Suggestions for further reading

- Warnock, M (editor) (1962). *Utilitarianism*. Collins Fontana, London.
- Rescher, N (1966). *Distributive justice*. Bobbs-Merrill, New York.
- Smart, J C C, and Williams, B (1973). *Utilitarianism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, London.
- Rawls, J (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford.