

Utilitarianism: The Search for an Overriding Value

I INTRODUCTION

In [Chapter 3](#) I emphasised the distinction between value judgements, normative propositions and positive propositions. In principle, positive propositions can be confirmed or refuted by facts. But value judgements cannot, though the value judgements that people hold are often influenced by them. But if they are not based on factual evidence, on what are they based? This chapter discusses what is one of the most widespread and compelling moral theories that might form the basis for value judgements, namely Utilitarianism.

Of course, most people do not consciously and explicitly link their views on personal or policy problems to any ethical theory at all. Hardly anybody ever says to himself ‘I am in favour of giving equal weight to the interests of future generations because I am a “utilitarian”’, or ‘I give money to poor people because I am a “prioritarian”’. Most people have never heard of ‘Utilitarianism’ or ‘prioritarianism’ or any other ethical theories, but this does not stop their making normative judgements all the time. These judgements may be the product of careful reflection, or intuition, or habit, or a desire to go along with the herd (as with ‘political correctness’). And although, in practice, the moral codes that influence the conduct of people in their daily lives are micro-rules of ‘moral’ conduct in individual situations, such as within a family or a neighbourhood or a firm, they may reflect broader – if unconscious – acceptance of certain higher-level rules of moral behaviour. Exceptionally, at best, appeals to

these rules may be made whenever there is some conflict of values, or when one is trying to justify the morality of one's conduct. Nevertheless, although most people arrive at their value judgements in an intuitive and unsystematic way, philosophers have tried throughout the ages to examine whether there are any underlying ethical theories to which one could reasonably appeal as justification for these value judgements.

One of the most appealing moral theories that have emerged from these endeavours has been Utilitarianism. But before giving a brief sketch of the main features of Utilitarianism that are relevant for our purposes it may be helpful to situate its place in the wider area of moral theory.

2 THE 'RIGHT' OR THE 'GOOD'

Within each of the main classes of ethical theory there are many variations, and the classes tend to overlap or merge into one another at some points. And no serious class of ethical theory would pretend that it could cover every conceivable situation that may arise any more than a body of laws can cater for every conceivable contingency. If it did there would be a lot less need for judges and lawyers. Nevertheless, for purposes of simplification, and at the cost of some violence to the subtleties and variations within each class of ethical theory, it may be said that one can distinguish between those that focus on what is a 'right' action and those that focus on how far an action leads to a 'good' outcome.

The former tend to emphasise the 'rightness' of certain actions independent of their consequences. Theories of this kind, which do not focus on the consequences of any action, are known as *deontological* theories. Probably the oldest form of a deontological moral theory was embodied in the Ten Commandments which simply laid down rules about what was the 'right' thing to do and what was the 'wrong' thing to do. No nonsense about evaluating the consequences and whether they were 'good' or not. God told people what was the 'right' thing to do and that was that.

Deontological theories give priority to what is a 'right' action *even if it fails to maximise the 'good'*, or, more generally, to prohibit what is a 'wrong' action *even if it may promote more good*. Common positive deontological injunctions are that it is always right to keep one's promises or contracts, or to honour one's parents. Examples of negative deontological injunctions would be that it is always wrong to tell lies, or to violate other people's rights such as their right not to be killed or tortured or falsely imprisoned, or to covet one's neighbour's wife (or husband), and so on,

irrespective of the consequences. Deontological ethics start and finish with the notion of what is the ‘right’ action.

Thus, *deontological* ethical principles tend to focus on the agent himself and his motives, or on the nature of the action itself, rather than on the consequences of any particular action. Pacifism is a simple example of a deontological injunction that contrasts with utilitarian consequentialism. A dedicated pacifist will object to killing people in a defensive war irrespective of the utility consequences. Similarly, somebody who opposes capital punishment under any circumstances would object to taking a human life irrespective of whether doing so would deter potential murderers and hence, perhaps, save more lives. Society may also take the view that certain sources of utility are inherently evil, such as those that may be derived by a paedophile or a sadist.

By contrast with deontological theories, teleological theories define a ‘right’ action as one that promotes some notion of the ‘good’. The ‘good’ is defined independently in term of certain value judgements, like ‘utility is good’, and ‘right’ actions are defined as those that maximise ‘utility’. Thus the focus of teleological theories is on the *consequences* of any action. The good takes priority over the right. Utilitarianism is thus a teleological moral theory in which the *right* action is the one that has the ‘good’ consequence of promoting utility. There can be many varieties of teleology, depending on how the ‘good’ that is to be maximised is defined. For example, the ‘good’ could be defined in terms of happiness, preference satisfaction, capabilities, functionings, peace, rights, prosperity, and so on.

An example of the distinction between deontological and teleological theories is the distinction drawn in [Chapter 16](#) between two types of egalitarian theories. The theory that more equality is desirable because it is instrumental in promoting some desirable consequence, such as greater social stability, is teleological. The theory that equality has some basic intrinsic value, such as being more ‘just’, is deontological.

3 UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism is probably the most popular form of teleological consequentialism. Acts should be judged as right or wrong according to their consequences. And ‘good’ consequences are those that promote society’s utility. From its early days, in the hands of Bentham and Mill, ‘utility’ has been identified with ‘happiness’ and happiness is the only thing that is good in itself. Unhappiness is the only thing that is bad in itself.

Everything else is only good or bad according to its tendency to produce happiness or unhappiness.¹

Bentham began his famous work ‘*An Introduction to the Principle of Morals and Legislation*’ with the words ‘Nature has placed mankind under the governments of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*’ and he goes on to say that ‘The principle of utility recognises this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system . . .’.² In the next few paragraphs he goes on to explain that utility is the property of any object that tends to produce the happiness or reduce the unhappiness of the party ‘whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual’. And in the next paragraph he goes on to make an assertion which is related to the discussion earlier in this book of the concept of a ‘society’. This is his statement that

the interest of the community is one of the most genuine expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of individual persons constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what? – the sum of the interests of the several members who composed it. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures; or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.³

But although Bentham derived the principle of utility from the forces that governed individual behaviour, he was mainly concerned with the aggregate utility of all the people in the ‘community’ – that is, of society – and its application to public policy and legislation. Utilitarianism did not discriminate between individuals. It did not matter to whom exactly the utility accrued or when it accrued. Thus Utilitarianism was inherently impersonal from the outset.

This has important implications for the discussion in later chapters of whether the society whose welfare we are trying to maximise includes other countries and future generations. And, strangely enough, the impersonal character of Utilitarianism contrasts with the views of David Hume (as explained in the next chapter) in spite of the influence of Hume on Bentham. In a reference to Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bentham,

one of the founding fathers of Utilitarianism, stated that ‘that the foundations of all virtue are laid in utility is there demonstrated. . . . I well remember, no sooner had I read that part of the work that touches on this subject that I felt as if scales had fallen from my eyes’. (The scales to which he was referring included the moral authority of the church or the monarch and the like). He went on to say that, in their place he ‘. . . learned to see that *utility* was the test and measure of all virtue; of loyalty as much as any; and that the obligations to minister to general happiness was an obligation paramount to and inclusive of every other’.⁴

4 UTILITARIANISM IN ECONOMICS

The moral rule of maximising utility plays a central role in the behavioural assumptions of economic theory, such as in the notion of ‘diminishing marginal utility’, as well as in the normative implications of welfare economics. For example, it is incorporated in the economic concept of a ‘utility possibility frontier’ and its practical application in CBA as explained in [Chapter 7](#). According to one of the pioneering critics of contemporary welfare economics, the late Ian Little: ‘For 200 years the concept of utility has been thought of as a cornerstone of normative economics’.⁵ In a similar vein, Frank Hahn states that ‘the economic theory of public policy is relentlessly utilitarian: policies are ranked by their utility consequences’.⁶ The great economist Stanley Jevons wrote back in 1871 that ‘. . . the object of economics is to maximise happiness by purchasing pleasure, as it were, at the lowest cost in pain’.⁷

Utilitarianism in one form or another comes naturally to most economists. This is partly because the micro-foundations of economic theory are built on the concept of *maximisation*. Everybody has to be assumed to be maximising something or other. As explained in [Chapter 3](#) this assumption makes it much easier to construct models of how economies operate. Without it basic micro-economic theory would collapse, taking with it much of the mathematical economics used in the analysis of the maximisation of some function or other.

So it is quite natural that economists should be drawn to an ethical theory that is in terms of maximising something, such as total utility, or utility per head (depending on which version of Utilitarianism one prefers). Utilitarianism appeals to economists because it corresponds to their use of the notion of rational choice in the explanation of people’s behaviour.⁸ This envisages people choosing, on the whole, between the various

options open to them – such as choosing leisure over income, or spending rather than saving, or buying this object rather than that object – as a process of rational selection in the pursuit of some given objectives. As Rawls says, ‘Teleological theories have a deep intuitive appeal since they seem to embody the idea of rationality. It is natural to think that rationality is maximizing something and that in morals it must be maximizing the good’ (Rawls, 1971:24–25).

This maximisation process requires that the options open to people can be ranked in a *comparable* manner. It is easier – though by no means essential – if the options also happen to be *commensurate*. The concept ‘commensurate’ is taken to mean here that the options can be compared in terms of some relevant *quantitative* metric. And the metric has to be in units of ‘utility’.

Quite apart from its obvious appeal to economists, Utilitarianism has the great advantage of resolving conflicts between different deontological moral injunctions. For example, should you tell a dying person that his dependants were provided for even though you know this to be untrue. To do so could violate a deontological moral law that one should always tell the truth, but it would comply with some other deontological law to be kind to people. There may also be conflicts between the ‘rightness’ of telling the truth and some personal obligation. For example, if some baddies were chasing your friend or brother should you tell them, untruthfully, that ‘he went that way’ when you know that he went the other way.

The appeal of Utilitarianism is that it appears to provide a way to solve conflicts of values, such as those that may be represented by certain deontological theories. If people have plural incommensurate values, it is far more difficult – and usually impossible – to rank them in a precise and transitive manner. But this inconvenience does not arise for utilitarians. Utilitarians have a view as to what the single ultimate value ought to be, namely utility, and, in theory, all other values can be converted into their contribution to this one basic value.

At a superficial level, Utilitarianism appears to be a beautifully simple system. It appears to replace arbitrary-seeming rules by a morality with a single coherent basis. Acts should be judged right or wrong according to how far they promote society’s utility/happiness. This calculating approach to morality is an attempt to make our ethical life more rational and objective. It liberates our moral decisions from any authority (e.g. killing is wrong because that’s what some authority, divine or other, declares), and its potentially arbitrary – if not capricious – verdicts. By

looking at overall consequences of actions all of us should arrive at the same verdicts about their desirability *provided we all shared the same conception of 'utility' and all contributions to it are commensurate with each other*. But therein lies the snag. Not all people subscribe to the same concept of 'utility', and many people subscribe to values such as kindness, integrity, truth, loyalty, and so on that they find impossible to make commensurate with utility. This is not surprising since it is not even very clear what is meant by 'utility'.

5 WHAT IS 'UTILITY'?

It was pointed out in [Chapter 4](#) that the concept of 'utility' in modern economics is a far cry from the meaning it had in original Utilitarianism as introduced towards the end of the eighteenth century. Bentham and other early utilitarians defined utility simply in terms of the mental states of pleasures and pains. These either add to, or subtract from, happiness. Utility was thus just the balance between pleasure and pain, though these concepts were defined by Bentham far more widely than is often believed.⁹ No distinction was made between different *qualities* of pleasure, though they could differ in terms of duration and intensity. As Bentham famously stated, 'pushpin is as good as poetry' provided due account is taken of duration and intensity. Much later (1862) John Stuart Mill moved away from this simple view of what is conducive to happiness and allowed for different qualities of experience. He distinguished between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, which seem to conflict with the notion that units of utility is can simply be added together. However, in Mills' version of Utilitarianism, one can somehow or other translate differences in the quality of different units of utility into corresponding differences in their quantity.¹⁰

The 'mental state' concept of happiness which is embodied in Utilitarianism and other theories of human motivation is vulnerable to Robert Nozick's well-known 'experience machine' argument (Nozick, 1974, p. 42) His point is that few people would be ready to hook themselves up to some machine that would give them satisfying mental experiences if the price of doing so was the knowledge that they would be sacrificing the freedom to lead their lives as autonomous human beings. In the same way most people would not want to live in a state of happy, drugged stupor even if they could be confident that there would be no harmful side effects.

As explained in [Chapter 4](#) welfare economics is based largely on an alternative theory of what constitutes human welfare, namely the *preference satisfaction* theory. This asserts that people try to choose the option that ranks highest in their preference orderings. Thus this theory is not vulnerable to Nozick's point, for people may prefer to remain autonomous beings rather than sign up to a Faustian bargain of only having pleasurable experiences inside the experience machine. The preferences between which they choose may include preferences for activities or experiences that they would *not* regard as giving 'pleasure' in the Benthamite sense. For example, some activities – writing books, the pursuit of knowledge, aiding a member of one's family, building something, contributing to some charity to reduce poverty in some remote country, and so on – may rank highly in some people's preference ranking even if they seem to require work and sacrifices that cannot conceivably be regarded as 'pleasurable' in the normal sense of the word.

But although the 'preference satisfaction theory' of welfare is generally adopted in welfare economics, most economists know perfectly well that there are several reasons why the satisfaction of preferences is not necessarily the same as the promotion of one's welfare.

6 MAIN VARIETIES OF UTILITARIANISM

Over the course of the last two centuries different forms of Utilitarianism have evolved quite apart from increasingly refined concepts of what contributes to people's utility or welfare. First, a distinction needs to be made between *'total'* and *'average'* Utilitarianism. The former refers to the objective of maximising the total utility of any society rather than maximising its utility per head. 'Total' Utilitarianism raises problems, however. For example, how far ought one to approve of an increase in total utility caused by an increase in population so large that it reduced utility per head to an extremely low level, and which Parfit refers to as a 'repugnant conclusion'. But the alternative principle, namely 'average Utilitarianism', has its own problems. Obviously, one of the ways of promoting the maximisation of utility per head would be to cut off a lot of heads, starting with those people who are not very good at maximising utility. So 'average' Utilitarianism would have to be qualified by some form of constraint on the resort to such measures.

Another major distinction within Utilitarianism is between *'rule Utilitarianism'* and *'act Utilitarianism'*. This terminology was not used

by Bentham or Mill, and was only introduced by Brandt in 1959.¹¹ Rule Utilitarianism requires that in any particular situation an individual ought not to try to work out himself which particular choice will maximise utility but should choose to apply the general *rules* of utilitarian morality that are believed have to be followed in order to maximise society's utility, such as 'keep one's promises' or 'do not tell lies'.

By contrast, act Utilitarianism allows an individual freedom to evaluate the morality of *any particular action* in terms of whether he thinks that, on balance, the action will promote society's utility. Both forms of Utilitarianism accept that the morality of any act is determined by its consequences in terms of society's utility. But rule Utilitarianism specifies rules that will achieve this objective rather than leave it up to individuals to judge whether or not the consequences of his action will be to maximise society's utility. For example, a utilitarian rule may be that one should always tell the truth and keep one's promises, but an act-utilitarian might decide, in some particular situation, that the consequences of telling the truth would lead to lower social utility than would telling a lie.

But there are various snags about act Utilitarianism. These include the inability of individuals to assess the full consequences of their choices, either on account of inherent uncertainty, or poor information, or lack of cognitive ability, and so on, as discussed in more detail in [Chapter 5](#). Furthermore, people cannot be trusted to assess impartially what is good for society's utility. All sorts of personal considerations and prejudices will push people towards choices that may be bad for society's utility but that they may be able to rationalise in terms of society's utility. Throughout human history individuals have carried out terrible atrocities while persuading themselves (or having been persuaded) that they were necessary for the long-run good of society. For these, and other, reasons the vast majority of serious philosophers now subscribe to rule Utilitarianism. But this has still left plenty of room for debate over which precise form of rule Utilitarianism ought to prevail, and the moral philosophy literature is full of excellent discussions of the relevant positions.¹² After all, no moral theory is expected to cover every possible eventuality that may arise.

One variety of Utilitarianism is '*negative Utilitarianism*' as proposed by the late Karl Popper. The standard understanding of Utilitarianism assumes a symmetry between suffering and happiness (e.g. as explicitly stated by Sidgwick), which implies that the increase of happiness and the reduction of suffering are of equal value when of equal magnitude since they contribute equally towards the maximisation of utility. Negative Utilitarianism denies

this symmetry and stresses the moral imperative to relieve suffering. As Popper said, 'I believe that there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure . . . In my opinion . . . human suffering makes a direct moral appeal for help, while there is no similar call the increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway'.¹³ In brief, the message is 'Do not bother about maximising utility; just concentrate on minimising suffering'.

Furthermore, people differ widely in their conception of the good, whereas they differ far less about what constitutes harm or suffering. From the point of view of how the individual formulates his own goals and preference orderings, this philosophy has something in common with that of Max Horkheimer who, while affirming that ' . . . man's striving for happiness is to be recognised as a natural fact requiring no justification', believed that the poorest and most oppressed people in the world were concerned not with the pursuit of some notion of 'happiness' but with relief from suffering (Horkheimer, 1933:34/5 and 44).

According to a leading Utilitarian, a principle of minimising suffering in society as a whole would have to be specified carefully so that it did not lead to the conclusion that the best policy would be to destroy all sentient life painlessly (see Smart, 1973:29). (But perhaps the best policy would be to destroy all sentient life painlessly!) Anyway, even if one does not switch to negative Utilitarianism, the positive version of the theory has been subjected to various criticisms as well as competition from other moral theories. Some of the more important of these criticisms are discussed in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. Glover, 1990:1/2
2. Extract from Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in Glover, *op.cit.*:10.
3. Warnock, (ed.), 2003:17–18.
4. Quoted in Warnock (ed.), *ibid.*:6.
5. Little 2002:8.
6. Hahn, 1982:187.
7. Jevons, 1871, 1970 Penguin edition, p. 91.
8. But according to Hausman and McPherson, 'After decades of contempt and neglect, Utilitarianism and consequentialism were virtually reborn in the 1980s, and are now arguably dominant in moral philosophy' (1994:266).
9. For example, in chapter V, of his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham enumerates in some detail different sources of

pleasure including the pleasures of a good name and public respect as well as of benevolence. But, as John Stuart Mill pointed out, these sentiments were valued chiefly as sources of 'pleasure' (including expectation of eventual gain from them) to the person experiencing them, and Bentham still did not go far enough to take account of such objectives that may have a value independently of the satisfactions that they may provide to people who experience them.

10. See an interesting discussion of this problem in Norman, 1983:127–131.
11. Brandt, 1959.
12. It is, perhaps, invidious to select any particular expositions of Utilitarianism but mention might be made of Glover, 1990; Hooker, 2000; and Sen and Williams, (eds), 1982.
13. Popper, 1966 (5th edn.):264,fn.2.