Bentham
From *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*
PHIL101
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Section IV: What is it worth?
Reading IV.3

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an Englishman who worked tirelessly for the reform of law at a key period in English history. He lived during revolutionary times, witnessing tremendous economic, political, and social change. The industrial revolution altered the structure of English society in particular, and the American and French revolutions altered those nations and much of the world beyond. Bentham was also a product of the Age of Reason and in particular of the rise of the empirical, quantified sciences. He sought to bring the precision and authority of quantifiable science to pressing social issues such as the conditions of workers and public education. To this end, Bentham developed a *utilitarian* moral theory, a theory intended to distinguish empirically and thus definitively right from wrong. Such a theory, he thought, might help to sway a wary polity in favor of the social reforms that he advocated. Consider, as you read the following, the extent to which Bentham's moral theory might be employed as a convincing instrument of public policy and persuasion.

The empirical sciences, such as chemistry and physics, seek an account of the world based in observation. What, exactly, do we observe in the world around us? How can we identify and describe this world with clarity and precision? In bringing an empirical eye to the questions of social reform, Bentham proposes considering humanity from an objective, biological or psychological vantage point. From such a point of view, he suggests, we see a certain kind of organism behaving in response to certain forms of stimuli. Any effort to develop laws and other standards for the well-living of such beings, he suggests, should be based in such a study. An objective view of humans suggests that all of our actions are oriented towards two basic, psychological factors, pleasure and pain.

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure.* It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think; every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle* of *utility* recognizes the subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to tear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

We seek pleasure and we seek to avoid pain in all that we do, Bentham maintains. And while we might resist such a self-conception, that very resistance demonstrates the thesis in question: it may pain me to think of myself as a mere creature of pain and pleasure; I may find it more

pleasant to think of myself as otherwise motivated. In particular, following Kant, I may hope to think of myself as capable of *disinterested*, rational action. Bentham denies this possibility, for humans: our only possible motivations are pleasure and pain.

> Psychological Hedonism: humans are motivated exclusively by the wishes to experience pleasure and to avoid pain.[1]

The term 'utility' derives from the Latin *utilis*, meaning useful. Usefulness, of course, ultimately implies the satisfaction of some need or desire, and so the term, historically, has had connotations including the following: advantageous, profitable, choice-worthy, satisfying, gratifying – both for the individual and also in terms of the community at large. Thus, for Bentham, a "principle of utility" will be one based on such pleasures as attend the satisfaction of some interest (a need or desire) and on the pains contrary to those interests. A moral principle based on utility – on feeling pleasure and avoiding pain – will for Bentham be a moral principle based properly in empirically observable fact: human good consists in utility, the gaining of pleasure and avoidance of pain. A public policy that is not based on this fact will be one of "caprice instead of reason," "darkness instead of light."

> Utility: pleasure or the avoidance of pain[2]

If utility is what is good, then an empirical moral science will issue in a set of guidelines by means of which humans might "maximize" utility. If utility is the human good, then more utility entails a greater moral good. Thus, Bentham's psychological hedonism entails a principle defining an ethical hedonism, a moral principle of utility. Bentham develops this view in the following:

> By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

> By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (and this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or 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.

> The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious *body,* composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members.* The interest of the community then is, what? − the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it …

Note Bentham's specific reference to the actions of a government, whose moral quality in particular he seeks to evaluate. An act such as limiting the hours that children may work in factories or the provision of education to all members of society might readily be shown to entail a significant increase in the total happiness, or utility, of the society.[3] It is a purely empirical

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[1] The term 'hedonism' comes from the ancient Greek *hedone*, meaning pleasure. Bentham does not mean to imply any of the negative connotation often associated with the term.

[2] Bentham will also use the term 'happiness' in place of 'utility'.

[3] Note the difference in use of the term 'happiness' from that of Aristotle. While Aristotle uses the term primarily to refer to the "good life" as measured over the whole of a life-time, in

matter, demonstrable to any who is concerned to consider the matter, that such an act would therefore be "approved" – i.e., morally correct. Similarly, failing to act in such a manner, or more positively, enacting or maintaining legislation leading to less happiness or greater suffering may be seen as "disapproved" – morally wrong.

Note, too, Bentham's similar treatment of the individual and the community. Moral questions regarding both are purely a matter of utility, whether this is the utility of the single individual or that of the group. And note in particular that the group is simply a collection of individuals: we determine the utility of a group simply by adding together the utility values of the individuals composing it. By treating moral value as a function of pleasure and pain, it is possible for Bentham to consider right and wrong not only in the single individual, but at the level of social institutions.

> Bentham's Principle of Utility: Act so as to produce the greatest happiness in the greatest number.

This principle is sometimes put in terms of "maximizing utility." Where utility is the overall measure of pleasure, in a group, less the amount of pain, Bentham's moral principle requires that we act to produce the greatest utility possible.

Notice the basic simplicity of Bentham's account. A crucial feature reflects the empirical science of his day: pleasure and pain can be *quantified* – they can be counted in numerical units. If my action affects three persons, then the moral quality of my act can be determined by assigning a value (a number) to the pleasures and paint resulting from my act in those three persons. If my action pleases two of these persons and displeases the third, then we can determine the moral value of my act by adding the pleasure of one person to that of another while subtracting the pain of a third. Note further the essential equivalence of pleasure and pain: one person's pleasure is no different from that of another, and my pain is no different from yours. True, the *quantity* of pleasure or pain may vary. But we can account for that fact simply by assigning a larger value (number) to the one than the other. If my stubbed toe is worth a negative five pain points, then your headache might be worth seven; your joy at a newborn child might rate a thousand points compared to my pleasure at watching a sunrise.

Bentham developed his utilitarian moral theory to include specific means of measuring or quantifying the utility resulting from an act. One chapter from his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* is devoted to a sketch of how this might be accomplished.

> Pleasures, then, and the avoidance of pains, are the *ends,* which the legislator has in view: it behooves him therefore to understand their *value* . Pleasures and pains are the *instruments* he has to work with: it behooves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value.

> To a person considered *by himself,* the value of a pleasure or pain considered *by itself,* will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:

> 1.   Its *intensity.*
> 2.   Its *duration.*
> 3.   Its *certainty* or *uncertainty.*
> 4.   Its *propinquity* or *remoteness.*

> These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself. But when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any *act* by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account; these are,

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Bentham's use, it refers to one's specific emotional or sensory state of pleasure, in its various forms.

5. Its *fecundity,* or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.
6. Its *purity,* or the chance it has of *not* being followed by sensations of the *opposite* kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasures or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.

To a *number* of persons, with reference to each of whom the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones: viz.

1. Its *intensity.*
2. Its *duration.*
3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty.*
4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness.*
5. Its *fecundity.*
6. Its *purity.*

And one other; to wit:

7. Its *extent;* that is, the number of persons to whom it *extends;* or (in other words) who are affected by 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* instance.
2. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
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 appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. *Sum up* the numbers expressive of the degrees of *good* tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *bad* upon the whole. Take the *balance;* which, if on the side of *pleasure,* will give the general *good tendency* of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of *pain,* the general *evil tendency,* with respect to the same community.

It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.

To be sure, the moral quality of an act may resist determination with perfect precision. However, Bentham's description of what has been called a *Hedonic Calculus* offers a seemingly reasonable procedure for some approximation of the moral quality of an act. For every individual affected

by a proposed act, we may determine that act's "value" – the net quantity of pleasure minus pain for that individual. The overall value of an act can be determined by assigning a value for each individual and taking the sum total of those values. Adding certain adjustments for likelihood and "fecundity or purity" – the tendency to produce more pain or pleasure – we might then have some measure of the "goodness" or "evil" of the proposed act. And if we face a decision between multiple possible acts, we might determine which was morally preferable by performing such a calculation for each and comparing the results.

Ask Yourself:

1. What is the meaning of the term 'utility', exactly?
2. Are pleasures and pains the sort of thing that might be measured or quantified?
3. Perform a Hedonic Calculus for a recent or proposed decision, and consider whether the resultant outcome agrees with your own, independent moral judgment on the matter.