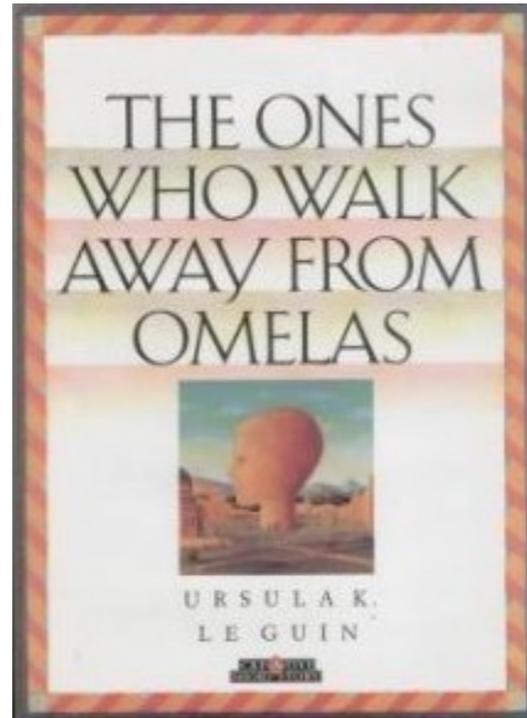


Ethics Unit 3

Utilitarianism

“The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas” -- Ursula Leguin, 1973



- Is Omelas a just society?
- Leguin presents two options for people in Omelas, to walk away, or to remain. What would you do?
- Are we Omelas?

Overview of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist philosophy – meaning that it measures what is right and wrong by the outcomes of an action.

In this way, utilitarianism differs fundamentally from the deontological ethics of Kant in that Kant.

Describe on board using Motive – Act – Consequences.

With this in mind, varieties of utilitarianism define right action using some form of the following formula:

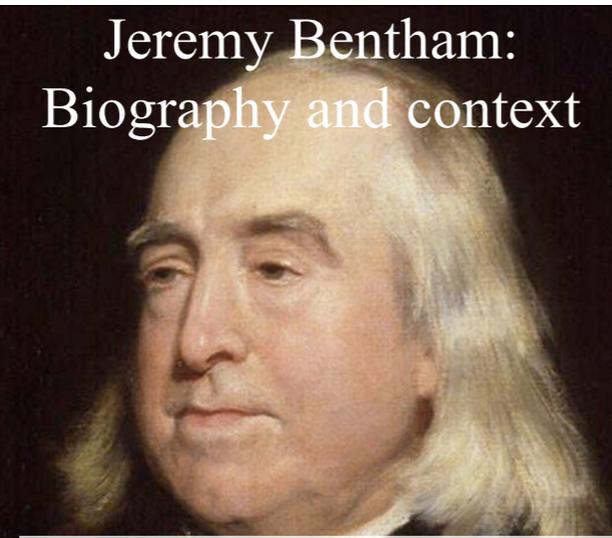
We ought to do what produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people

In examining outcomes, it is important to distinguish between two different sorts of goods:

Instrumental goods – goods which are good because they lead to greater happiness and pleasure (education, money, power etc.)

Intrinsic goods – goods that are good in and of themselves (happiness and pleasure)

Jeremy Bentham: Biography and context



What class of offences shall we refer these irregularities of the venereal appetite which are stiled unnatural? When hidden from the public eye there could be no colour for placing them any where else: could they find a place any where it would be here. I have been tormenting myself for years to find if possible a sufficient ground for treating them with the severity with which they are treated at this time of day by all European nations: but upon the principle utility I can find none. (Accessed on 3.1.16 at <http://www.college.edu/taub/taubcourses/taub160/taub160/bentham.html>)

Other animals . . . stand degraded into the class of things. ... The day has been, I grieve it to say in many places it is not yet past, in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated ... upon the same footing as ... animals are still. The day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty for discourse?...the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? (Accessed on 3.1.16 at <http://www.utilitarian.com/jeremy/bentham.htm>)

Biography 1748–1832

A leading theorist in Anglo–American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham was born in Houndsditch, London on February 15, 1748. He was the son and grandson of attorneys, and his early family life was colored by a mix of pious superstition (on his mother's side) and Enlightenment rationalism (from his father). Bentham lived during a time of major social, political and economic change. The Industrial Revolution (with the massive economic and social shifts that it brought in its wake), the rise of the middle class, and revolutions in France and America all were reflected in Bentham's reflections on existing institutions. In 1760, Bentham entered Queen's College, Oxford and, upon graduation in 1764, studied law at Lincoln's Inn. Though qualified to practice law, he never did so. Instead, he devoted most of his life to writing on matters of legal reform—though, curiously, he made little effort to publish much of what he wrote. (Accessed on 3.1.16 at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/bentham/#H1>)

Interests and influences:

- legal reform – he wanted laws to be based on the impact they had on social well-being, not custom or superstition.
- Believed that individuals should be free of government restriction unless that restriction resulted in some social benefit.
- This led him to oppose laws against homosexuality, which at that time in Britain carried the penalty of death by hanging
- Advocated prison reform on the basis of the fact that harsh prisons led to more, not less crime
- One of the the earliest supporters of universal suffrage
- An early advocate of animal rights

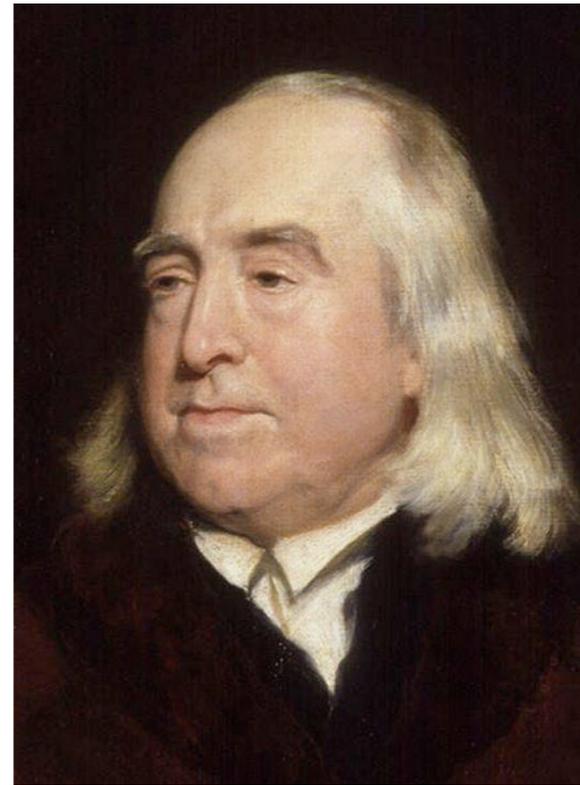
His Major Philosophical work was Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)

A. Biography

B. Bentham's utilitarianism

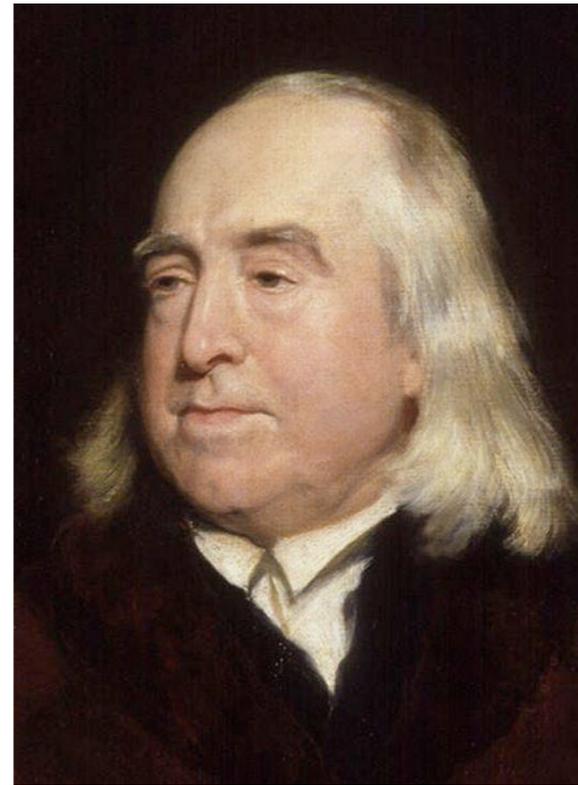
1. Human motivations

"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 make to throw off our subjection, will serve to demonstrate and confirm it." (From *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*)



C. The principle of utility

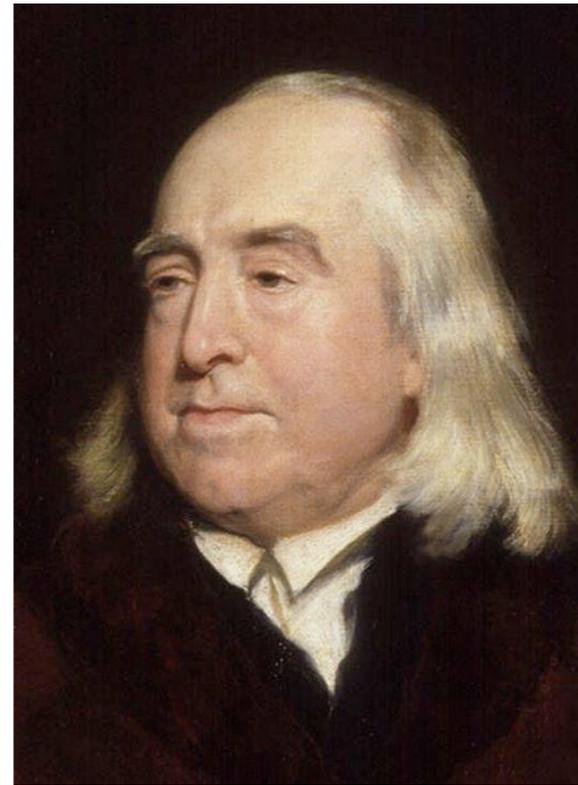
“By the principle of Utility is meant that Principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency with which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or oppose that happiness.” (From *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*)



D. The calculus of felicity

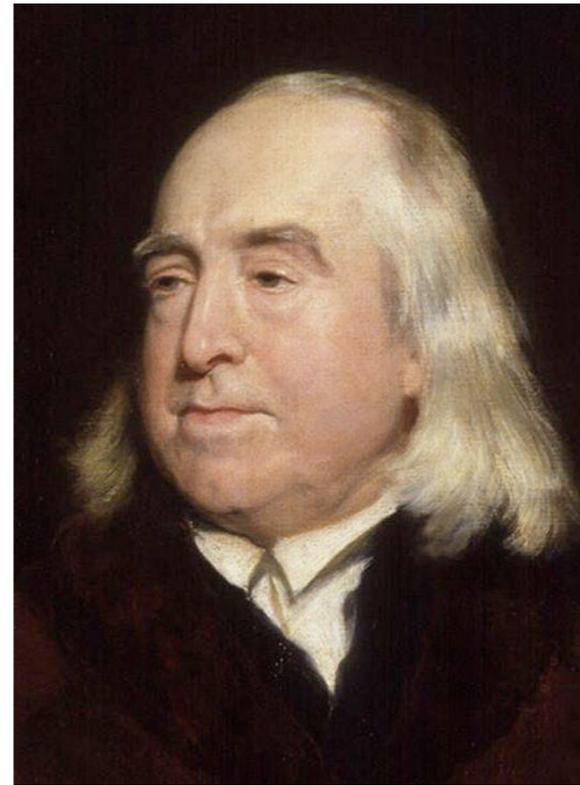
1. Intensity
2. Duration
3. Certainty
4. Propinquity or remoteness (How soon the pleasure is expected)
5. Fecundity (some pleasures or pains bring further pleasures or pains in their wake - some do not)
6. Purity (The degree to which the pleasure is not tainted by accompanying pain)
7. Extent (How many people will be so affected)

Try it!



E. Problems with Bentham

1. Can pleasure and pain be reduced to purely numeric terms?
2. Won't people differ?
3. Doesn't the solution above run the risk of "dumbing down?"



Act	Intensity (on a 1-10 scale)	Duration (1= really short, 2 = short, 3 = medium, 4 = long, 5 = really long)	Certainty (measured in terms of a decimal percentage 0-1)	Propinquity (how soon 1 = Immediate 0 = never)	Fruitfulness/fecundity (A-G From extreme negative fruitfulness to extreme positive fruitfulness) A x .1 B x .5 C x 1 D x 1.5 E x 1.9	Purity - How free from pain? (Number of units of pain created by this action)	Extent - How many people effected	Total Pleasure (BxCxD xE xFxG) xH	Total pain (GxH)	Net Pleasure (I-J)
A								0	0	0
B								0		0
								0		0

III. JS Mill



- A. Biography
- B. Mill's big concern with Bentham
- C. Mill's Utilitarianism



I. The happiness principle

- Like Bentham, Mill believes that man is motivated by pleasure and pain
- Mill calls this the “happiness principle:”

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure” (Mill paragraph 1).

2. Intrinsically valuable v. Instrumentally valuable goods

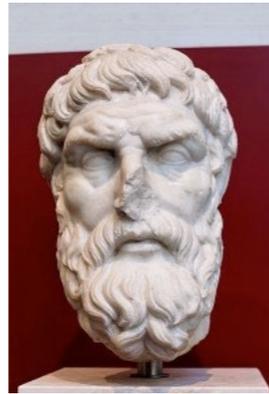
Mill asserts that happiness is the only thing that is desirable as an ends in itself - all other things are desirable only to the extent that they promote happiness.

“Pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things . . . are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain” (Mill paragraph 1).

3. The debasement argument (made by critics of utilitarianism)

Critics suggest such a philosophy reduces men to the level of beasts.

“To suppose that life has . . . no higher end than pleasure —no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they (the critics) designate as utterly mean and groveling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine” (Mill, paragraph 2)



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4. Mill's response - All pleasures are not created equal!

- Mill argues that animals and men have different standards of happiness:

“Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. . . . there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect; of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation” (Mill, Paragraph 3).
- For people, some pleasures are superior to others:

“It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone” (Mill, Paragraph 3).
- The purpose of Mill's inquiry is thus to develop a theory by which we can assess the qualitative dimension of pleasure.

5. Higher and lower pleasures

- The judgement of those who have experienced two pleasures determine which of the two is superior

“Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference . . . that is the more desirable pleasure” (Mill, Paragraph 4).
- The basis for this is Mill’s assertion that no one with experience of both would prefer a lower over a higher pleasure.

“Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs” (Mill. Paragraph 5).

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides” (Mill, Paragraph 5 end)

6. Pleasure and dignity

- The basis of this preference, is, according to Mill, is human dignity. This dignity springs from our higher faculties

“We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness . . .but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them” (Mill paragraph 7)
- Thus our overall pleasure is maximized when the pleasures we seek are in accord with this sense of dignity (conversely, pleasures that conflict with our dignity, while being pleasurable, limit our potential pleasure by being in conflict with dignity)

Does this make Mill an elitist?

7. The greatest good argument (responses to the charge of elitism)

- Mill argues that nobility must be cultivated if it is to survive.

“Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise” (Mill, Paragraph 6).
- If nobility is not cultivated in the many, the many will not be able to achieve maximal pleasure (remember that dignity is a necessary component to maximizing pleasure).
- If the many are incapable of maximal pleasure, then society is not achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. This, by Mill’s definition, constitutes an ethical problem (since the ethical course of action is always that which achieves the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people).

7. The greatest good argument (responses to the charge of elitism)

- The idea that the few will have true pleasure and the masses will not does not achieve the goal of the principle of utility.
- The greatest good overall can only be achieved through universally ennobling all people:

“for that standard [of right and wrong] is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit” (Mill, Paragraph 8)
- Thus utilitarianism requires (to the greatest extent possible) universal education, equality of opportunity and a fair distribution of resources to attain its ends, for without these the overall happiness of society would be less than it would be with them.

8. Summary of Mill's argument

“According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation” (Mill, Paragraph 9).

7. Strengths and weaknesses

- It appeals to the common sense idea that morality should have something to do with making the world better
 - It is fair and unselfish (no individual is privileged over another)
 - It offers a coherent criterion for settling moral disputes (the principle of utility)
 - It does not require an appeal to complex or controversial metaphysical or religious claims (there is no miracle in the middle of the equation)
 - The basis for its ethical evaluations is transparent and universally understood (Happiness).
- Can happiness be measured (either qualitatively or quantitatively) without devolving into relativism? (Mill, paragraph 7)
 - Is happiness/pleasure truly the only thing valued as an end in and of itself
- Would you give up your present life to step into the total happiness box, where your nervous system would be stimulated to experience the perfect balance of both high and low pleasures for the rest of your life, with the only caveat being that your life would be spent wired to a machine in a small box?
- Utilitarianism potentially sanctions immoral actions
 - Utilitarianism can potentially sanction lying (or other actions generally thought to be immoral) in the interest of the general happiness.
 - Utilitarianism fails to respect the intrinsic dignity of the individual, if that dignity is in conflict with the principle of utility (Omelas)

IV. Act v. rule utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism - The idea that one is acting ethically when one chooses the particular act that will maximize happiness.

Rule utilitarianism - When one is considering which of two acts to choose, one should choose the one that, if it were a universal rule, would lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Strengths of Rule Utilitarianism

- It establishes clear cut rules (like Kant) and avoids relativism
- It focuses on principles rather than instrumentality
- It avoids sanctioning actions which are intuitively immoral (transplant, harsh sentencing and torture examples)