

A FEW NOTES ON BENTHAM'S CONCEPT OF UTILITY

The utilitarian theories of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill have invited endless streams of comments and criticisms since the days they came out. In the present article I shall note some of my observations regarding Bentham's concept of utility. My purpose is to show that Bentham perhaps does not deserve atleast some of the adverse comments traditionally made against him.

The principle of 'utility' or 'the greatest happiness' is regarded to be a self-evident principle of conduct by Bentham, constituting the first principle of morality.

According to him, man is a pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding animal and that the only thing that can impel him act is the prospect of getting pleasure and avoiding pain.

The paragraphs with which Bentham begins his book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, are bold and sweeping.

"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 hand, 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 subject to it all the while. *The Principle of Utility* recognises this subjection and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity

by the hand of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of senses, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light".¹

The Principle of utility is based on the ideas of pleasure and pain, and is conceived by him to be the first principle of morality.

Bentham goes on to explain :

"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, pleasures, good or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happenings of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered : if the party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual".²

In fact, Bentham's principle applies not only to morals but also to legislation and his aim is to apply his principle to legislation and to reforms of it. He has, as Davidson states it³, a living and practical interest, in the welfare of the community at large. Hence, he substitutes for the principle of utility the more significant phrase "The greatest happiness principle". The point can be established from Bentham's own statement elaborating the terms 'pleasure' and 'happiness' indicating their relation to 'utility'.

In a foot note in the pages between 33 and 34 of his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* Bentham says :

"The word *utility* does not so clearly point to the ideas of *pleasure* and *pain* as the words *happiness* and *felicity* do: nor does it lead us to the consideration of the *number*, of the interests affected;

to the *number*, as being the circumstances, which contributes, in the largest proportion, to the formation of the standard here in question, the standard of right and wrong, by which alone the propriety of human conduct in every situation, can, with propriety, be tried. This want of a sufficiently manifest connexion between the ideas of *happiness* and *pleasure* on the one hand, and the idea of *utility* on the other, I have every now and then found operating, and with but too much efficiency, as a bar to the acceptance, that might otherwise have been given, to this principle".⁴

However, as Bentham states it, pleasure and pain point out what we ought to do, so they also determine what we shall do. The principle of pleasure-pain, he finds, determines man's action, and also recommends it as the criterion of right and wrong. Though it is not much evident in these opening lines whether he means that the pleasure-pain formula actually determines our ideas of right and wrong or that he wishes to assert the formula as the true criterion of our duties, Bentham's adherence to the latter position is clear from the discussion of the subject in the course of his entire work. In the context of the same section, as mentioned above, he asserts the formula as the indisputable principle of all judgements of right and wrong and even claim its denial to be fallacious and contradictory.⁵ In a statement⁶ in another context Bentham also argues that the utility, or the principle based on the ideas of pleasure and pain, is one which defines the meaning of right and wrong and the terms have meaning only when understood with reference to this principle.

In spite of various arguments in favour of interpreting his statement as being meant to assert the position that human beings are psychologically incapable of disputing this principle and, thus, are incapable of conceiving something as right and wrong in any other way, it has always appeared to me that Bentham and the utilitarians in general rather assert the principle as the true principle of right and wrong and the entire utilitarian theory of Bentham and Mill should be seen as a normative theory of individual ethics and legislation.⁷

The principle of utility as the first principle of morality is a self-evident principle and is used to provide the test of right

and wrong and the principle itself is incapable of being proved, since a chain of proofs must begin somewhere. He holds that to give such proofs is not only needless but also impossible, and any attempt to deny the principle of utility must be self-defeating.⁸

However, in order to prove the indisputability of the principle of utility Bentham argues that one who does not accept utility as the ethical first principle, may take several steps to disprove the principle but at last will have to realise that the greatest happiness principle is the only valid principle of morality.

Bentham considers the following points in order to establish his thesis. (a) The person who does not believe the principle of utility will have to decide himself whether he will discard it altogether. But then he will have to find out the *reasons*⁹ for it.

(b) He will have to decide whether he will judge and act without reference to any principle, or whether he will have to find out any principle other than the principle of utility.

(c) Supposing that he has found out one such principle, then, he will have to satisfy himself whether it is an intelligible principle or not. If his first principle be, merely an expression of some sentiment, then his whole system will be founded on caprice.

(d) He will have to enquire whether his first principle is tyrannical or hostile to human beings (i.e., one may say, against their interests).

(e) He will have to decide that his first principle is not an anarchical one and that there are not as many different standards of right and wrong as there are men. And he will have to take into notice that to the same person the same thing cannot appear to be right now, and to be wrong later on.

(f) Supposing that any principle, other than the principle of utility, is a right principle to be pursued by all; supposing (what is not true) that the word right can have a meaning without reference to utility, let him decide whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have to pursue the dictates of it.

Finally, if it is not possible, then it is useless to try to look for any principle, other than the principle of utility and this seems inevitable in view of what are stated above, that the validity of any alternative principle presupposes the principle of utility of justifying itself.

Bentham rightly points out the logical fact that if the principle of utility is to serve as the criterion of all moral evaluation, be the first principle of morality, it cannot be subject to the kind of evidence that is based on the principle itself. But there seems to be something more about it as I have already suggested. The concept of a man's welfare which consists in the fulfilment of all his interests—that is to say, a man's prosperity—is taken by him to be a basic idea, nothing except which he can conceive as the end for which one should act. Bentham continues to argue: "Admitting any other principle than the principle of utility to be a right principle, a principle that it is right for a man to pursue: admitting (What is not true) that the word *right* can have a meaning without reference to utility, let him say whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have to pursue the dictates of it: if there is, let him say what that *motive* is, and how it is to be distinguished from those which enforce the dictates of utility: if not, then lastly let him say what it is this other principle can be good for?¹⁰ In this statement Bentham enquires whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have for pursuing the dictates of that which is not based on the principle of utility and if there be any, what should be the point of its pursuit in doing moral action.

We cannot deny, as I have mentioned, that both the founders of the utilitarian theory (and Bentham more prominently) take it for granted as a basic truth that a man can under no circumstances act for the sake of anything which does not serve his utility in whatever way, or, in other words, for the sake of pleasure and believes this attitude to be basically justified. Even, to say so, it is inconceivable that we should try to do anything except for the sake of promoting our welfare, or sometimes, for avoiding what is harmful. But in addition to this, Bentham also seems to find a relation between motive and utility, which makes it a logical impossibility that one should act for the sake of anything which

is not in anyway related to his utility, That this analysis of Bentham's theory is not really a too ambitious one is evident from the way Bentham wants to define the concepts "right" and 'ought' and also from his defining the motive of an action in terms of one's idea of 'good' for what. In fact, if motive of an action, as we commonly understand it, is the reason for one's doing the act, it is naturally related to the idea of its utility, i.e., one's interest in doing the act, the benefit one hopes to derive from his doing the act, in whatever sense it is taken.

It should be noted carefully that in his analysis of the concepts of pleasure and pain Bentham seems to repudiate the ideas of utility as being based on a person's feeling-state so to say, which he believes, will render it subjective and varying from man to man, state to state. If pleasure is a subjective state of feeling, it cannot provide us with a criterion of practical judgement, he says, specially one for legislation which has to refer to a verifiable standard.

That the pleasure-pain, which is set by Bentham as the true criterion of human conduct, is not really a feeling-state is further suggested by two things: in the first place, by his mentioning of such thing as benefit, advantage, gain, emoluments, etc., which he seems to identify with pleasure, as determining the value of an act¹¹ and secondly, by his idea of measuring pleasure and pain in a way in which one cannot believe one can weigh one's feeling. Regarding the former, none of the terms which he seems to identify with pleasure stand for a state of feeling, rather they are conceivable only in terms of achievements, in terms of various objects, place or position and can indeed be objectively identified, the necessity of doing which he demands of a true criterion of human conduct and for the reason of which he suggests the substitution of the term happiness for pleasure as we have seen.

Regarding the second point Bentham's idea of measuring pleasure does sensibly apply to tangible objects and, as Mitchell¹² correctly points out, has a pecuniary note about it. Moreover, Bentham in the context of this very chapter, which we are mainly discussing here, has made a statement, (to which I have referred above), which denies that the criterion of our conduct is a kind of feeling. In fact, many of the well-known criticisms against utilitarianism

are based on the assumption that the utilitarian criterion, namely, pleasure-pain, is a state of feeling. However, if my observation, which I share with some others, stands, it will not only relieve the utilitarians of the charge of defining a moral concept in terms of a psychological state, but will establish this theory as a logically tenable theory of morals as we may then tend to find it to be based on the indisputable fact that nothing can be good for a man (or a community) unless it serves his true interest, in whatever way it is conceived.

One may not fail to take note of the fact that Bentham does not define the principle of utility by means of the greatest happiness of the greatest number of men. In fact, though Bentham refers to the idea of the greatest happiness on the whole as the criterion of a man's conduct and so the determining criterion of its utility, he makes a clear distinction between what would add to the utility of one's act in the capacity of a private person and what would render one's act useful when he plays the role of a legislator.

As he clearly states in the context of the discussion in the course of which he defines the concept of utility, 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 lead to increase or decrease the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, if the party is the community in general, then it is happiness of the community, if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.¹³

What Bentham wants to say in this is that the utility of an act, when some one is acting in the capacity of a private person, must be different from that of an act when some body is acting in the capacity of a legislator, because in the former one's interest in his own prosperity and happiness, while in the latter it is the good of the community as a whole.

However, according to Bentham, community itself is not conceivable except as a sum total of individual citizens and Government should act only in a manner that the interests of all the individuals are best realised.

On the other hand, Mill by defining utilitarianism which is to set a standard for each individual conduct, in terms of the

greatest happiness of the greatest number, prescribes an idea of an individual morality which is directly connected with the idea of the individual as a social entity.

As I have earlier stated, Bentham conceives the community as nothing more than an aggregate or a sum total of individuals.¹⁴ He is primarily concerned with the good or welfare of the community and not simply of the individuals, but, nevertheless, of the community which is composed of individuals, though the individual is one whose happiness is attained through co-operation with his fellows. In *Political Thought in England-the Utilitarians from Bentham to Mill*, Davidson says, ".....an individual who is by nature social-whose very existence and whose continued welfare depend on the existence and co-operation of others, to whom he is linked by bonds of altruism and human affection, and whose claims and interests his own egoism is bound to respect." And the idea of this individual Davidson ascribes to Bentham. However, it appears that while Mill prescribes the greatest happiness of the greatest number as a criterion of human morality, Bentham finds a practical difficulty in an individual's prospering by himself without seeking co-operation of his fellow citizens.

Bentham, on the whole, is individualistic in his approach and his idea of a whole is the idea of an aggregate. One cannot say anything about the interest of the community, he says, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. The promotion of the interest of the individual depends upon the augmentation of the sum total of individuals' pleasure or diminution of the sum total of his pain.

Mill, on the other hand, criticizes Bentham for holding that the community is a collection consisting of individuals¹⁵ though he himself is not really far removed from this position.

According to some commentators, Bentham maintains a dual standard in relation to the conduct of the individuals and that of the community. I should refer to the comments made by Plamenatz and D. Lyons in this connection.

Plamenatz charges Bentham for trying to reconcile two inconsistent doctrines 'egoistic hedonism' and 'altruistic hedonism'.

and thereby maintaining a 'dual moral standard'. Plamenatz says, "...it seems to me that Bentham, without quite knowing what he is doing, is trying to reconcile two irreconcilable doctrines: egoistic hedonism and utilitarianism."¹⁶

However, we may refer to the comment made by D. Lyons in defence of Bentham. Lyons says, "...Bentham seems to conceive of this basic principle as if it applied in only two contexts - public and private. Ethics is private when a man directs his own behaviour and no one else is subject to this control. He decides what he himself shall do; he does not direct others. (Private does not mean that others are not affected, but that others are not under one's direction). The standard that accordingly applies (by application of the differential principle) is that of self-interest. Ethics is public in the context of Government in the ordinary sense. Here, too, we may speak of behaviour being directed, influenced, or controlled, and it should be emphasized that Government for Bentham, is concerned not merely with determining what people ought to do, but also with controlling or at least influencing behaviour with getting to do it. The Government, as a whole, (as personified for example in Bentham's legislator or his "Sovereign") may be thought of as 'directing' all the members of the community."¹⁷

Thus, it may appear that Bentham accordingly embraces two distinct standards, one for each branch of ethics. In political affairs the happiness of all members of the community should be served, while in private matters one would serve his own interests, but the charge, Lyons says, does not really hold. For the standard is throughout utility, interest or benefit of the party concerned. Only, as Bentham correctly points out, the benefit of a man as a private individual is not identical with that of the community, which he represents while acting as legislator.

What is really interesting is, as it is evidently reflected in his felicific calculus, that Bentham's entire conception of happiness is numerical in character. His conception of the happiness of the community or the society, as we have already discussed, is that of an aggregate consisting of the amounts of happiness enjoyed by the particular individuals and has no universality or generality about it and, as 'an individual's greatest happiness represents a

totality of the pleasure of his particular achievements or his moments of prosperity.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.
3. Davidson, *Political Thought in England*, Oxford University Press, U.K. 1957, p. 4.
4. Bentham J. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Warnock (ed.), Fontana, U. K. 1972, p. 33-34. (Foot note).
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
8. Bentham says, "Has the rectitude of this principle been ever formally contested? It should seem that it had, by those who have not known what they have been meaning. Is it susceptible of any direct proof? It would seem not: for that which is used to prove every thing else, cannot itself be proved: a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere. To give such proof is as impossible as it is needless".
Bentham : *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p. 36., Warnock (ed.) Fontana, England, 1972.
9. Italics mine.
10. Bentham, J. *op cit.*, pp. 34-35.
11. cf. "... to pleasure, whether it be called *good* (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure), or *profit* (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of distant pleasure), or *convenience*, or *advantage*, *benefit*, *employment*, *happiness*, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called *evil* (which corresponds to *good*), or *mischief*, or *inconvenience*, or *disadvantage*, or *loss*, or *unhappiness*, and so forth".
Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Warnock(ed., Fontana, U.K. 1972., p. 66.

12. Mitchel, Wesley. "Bentham's Felicific Calculus", Published in *Political Science Quarterly*, June 1918.
13. Davidson, *Political Thought in England*, Oxford University Press, U.K. 1958, p. 4.
14. Bentham states : "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. "- Bentham: *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Warnock (ed.), Fontana, U.K., 1972., p. 35.
15. Mill remarks: "Accordingly, Bentham's idea of the world is that of a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest of pleasure,..... "Mill, J.S.: *Essay on Bentham*, Mary Warnock (ed.), Fontana, U.K., 1972., pp. 102-3.
16. Plamenatz, *The English Utilitarians*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, U. K. 1958., p. 72.
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