

THE UTILITARIAN NOTES IN THE ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS

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My intention is to trace the utilitarian notes in the Aristotelian ethics (i.e., *Ethica Nicomachea*.)

I shall examine the plausibility of the thesis that the utilitarian theory bears, in fact, real similarities to the Aristotelian theory.

Prof. J. Barnes in his introduction to *Aristotle's Ethics* states that Aristotle in fact offers a fairly refined species of utilitarianism, that the only ultimately good thing in the world is the happiness of sentient beings, and the only ultimate moral rule is one enjoining us to maximize the sum of that happiness. He describes Aristotle as "... a precursor of the great English Utilitarians, Bentham and J. S. Mill."¹

Let us see how far this estimation holds.

1. However, on one occasion Prof. Barnes remarks that the happiness which Aristotle expects the virtuous agent to pursue is not, as the utilitarians would have it, the general happiness of the sentient world, but rather the individual happiness of the agent himself. He is of opinion that Aristotle's happiness (or eudaimonia) is egoistic while the utilitarian conception is an altruistic one.

I shall try to show that on the whole though Aristotle and the utilitarians differ extensively from one another, still they somehow seem to meet on the same ground starting from opposite perspectives.

One may quote passages from the *Ethica Nicomachea* in order to prove that Aristotle's concept of happiness is not purely egoistic. It contains some obvious altruistic notes in it.

(A) According to Aristotle happiness is the ultimate or the highest good. It is desired for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else. In Book X of his *Ethica Nicomachea*, Aristotle refers to happiness as consisting of the most perfect activity of the wise man, i.e., in contemplation, since reason is man's distinctive virtue, which shows itself at its best in the wise man's contemplation of the highest truth.²

However, it is true that the happiness which Aristotle expects the virtuous man to pursue is the happiness of the agent himself. The good man is a producer of his own happiness. Thus Aristotle may be taken as preaching a sort of egoistic eudaimonism. But in Book I, Section ii of his *Ethica Nicomachea* Aristotle points out that the good of the community is above the good of the individual. The good of the individual may coincide with that of the community, still the good of the community must be preserved over and above the good of the individual. Aristotle says, "For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve that of a community; for while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer and more sublime".³

Prof. Hardie, while dealing with the problem of the final good in Aristotle's ethics, states that the virtuous acts of the individual are actually acts which are beneficent to the happiness of others and not personal. He says, "I have represented Aristotle's doctrine as primarily a doctrine about the individual's pursuit of his own good, his own welfare. But something should be said at this point about the relation between the end of the individual and the 'greater and more complete' end of the state. 'While it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more good-like to attain it for a nation or for city-states' (*E. N.* 1 : 2, 1094b 7-10). This does not mean more than it says : if it is good that Smith should be happy, it is even better that Brown and Robinson should be happy too".⁴

According to Aristotle a man requires and desires social communion with others. This is clearly stated in his *Ethica Nicomachea*, Book I, Section VII, a context where Aristotle states that the final good must be sufficient by itself. He says, "Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children,

wife and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship".⁵

Aristotle's individual is a citizen of the society or the state and is conceived only *as such*, all his virtues broadly referring only to his citizen's duty. The happiness of the state, which is on Aristotle's theory superior to that of the individual, determines the character of the individual's virtues and hence of his happiness, so far as his happiness consists of his virtuous activities.

Prof. Hardie has correctly observed that according to Aristotle, "The family and the state, and other forms of association as well, are necessary for the full realisation of any man's capacity for living well".⁶ "The statesman aims", he adds, "to speak roughly, at the greatest happiness of the greatest number. He finds his own happiness in bringing about the happiness of others (*E. N. X7, 1177b. 14*)".⁷

(B) As a theory of morals, utilitarianism proceeds on the assumption that man is essentially and fundamentally a sentient being. He is a pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding creature, every-thing in him turns upon pleasure and pain; they are the causes of his actions. According to the utilitarians an act is right, if it produces a surplus of pleasure over pain; and wrong if it produces more pain than pleasure. It means that the moral worth of an act is to be measured by its usefulness in promoting pleasure or happiness. But this happiness or pleasure is not a man's own alone.⁸ His own 'good' is to be realized in conjunction with that of others; for he and they alike are eager for a life of satisfaction and contentment. A satisfied, contented life is, in the ultimate analysis, a life of happiness.⁹

According to the utilitarians, 'general happiness' constitutes the norm of right and wrong of individual actions, since the welfare of the individual seems to depend upon that of all people. The truism is that each of us pursues his own happiness or interest, as he understands it.

The utilitarianism gives primacy to individual rights and leaves to individual freedom as large a scope as is consistent with public order. Nevertheless, it admits that the right of the individual to happiness cannot be achieved by an individual independently of regard for others, his happiness must be dependent on the existence and organisation of the state. The individual needs

the state for the achievement of happiness and public policies are valuable only if they promote social well being. Thus, utilitarianism starts with an individual that desires his own happiness and ends by prescribing an altruistic goal.

II. One may note that the qualitative distinction between pleasures, as conceived by Mill, finds a support in the Aristotelian thesis.

Aristotle says that, " ... pleasures also differ in kind. For we assume that things that are different in kind are perfected by things that are different in kind. This is clearly the case with both natural products like animals and trees, and artificial ones like a picture, a statue, a house or a piece of furniture; and we assume that similarly what perfects one kind of activity must differ in kind from what perfects another. But the activities of the intellect differ in kind from those of the senses, and both differ among themselves; therefore so do the pleasures that perfect them".¹⁰

This can also be seen, he says, from the close connection of each pleasure with the activity that it perfects. For the pleasure proper to an activity intensifies it, for those who work with pleasure show better judgement and greater precision in dealing with that particular kind of object (i.e., those enjoying geometry become good at it and understand its various aspects better and similarity with things of other kinds). Moreover, things proper to different things are also different in kind. Thus pleasures intensify their activities; and what intensifies a thing is proper to it.

Thus, according to Aristotle corresponding to different kinds of activity there are different kinds of pleasure and this thesis lends support to the utilitarian theory of Mill distinguishing pleasures not only according to their difference in quantity but according to difference in kind (depending upon the source of pleasure) as well.

Furthermore, I would like to point out a similarity between the two theses regarding the conception of this qualitative difference of pleasures being an object of knowledge. That is to say, both for Mill and for Aristotle the distinction between the baser and the nobler kind of pleasure is known to the wisdom of the learned, i.e., the experienced man, which wisdom the common man is required to follow. However, Aristotle states that "... not every pleasure is desirable; also that there are some pleasures that are desirable in themselves,

being superior either in kind or in respect of the sources from which they come".¹¹

III. In continuation of the foregoing argument it may be observed that Aristotle on the whole is inclined to conceive virtue or happiness as an object of knowledge, correctly known to the wisdom of the expert. This is due to the influence of Plato. One need not mention that the above theory will imply obviously that there is a real distinction between what is truly pleasurable, or happiness, as Aristotle would say (pleasure having a somewhat different connotation from happiness for him) and what may falsely appear to one as such, indicating that if pleasure (in utilitarianism) or happiness means prosperity or welfare of the party concerned, there is an objective criterion to verify it and only an expert is capable of knowing what act or end fits in that criterion. In the following discussion I shall refer to passages both from Aristotle and from the utilitarian philosophy in order to see how far the above thesis is tenable. However, if happiness means welfare, perfect realisation of one's potentialities, it is not difficult to conceive it to be an object of knowledge.¹²

But even the distinction between pleasures, which accompany, happiness are conceived by Aristotle as knowable phenomena. For only the good man's pleasure is real and truly human and the existence of this is known by the wise man, he says.

He holds, "... it is generally accepted that the good man's view is the true one. If this formula is correct, as it seems to be; that is, if the standard by which we measure everything is goodness, or the good man *qua* good: then the true pleasures too will be those that seem to him to be pleasures, and those things will be really pleasant that he enjoys. And if things that displease him seem pleasant to somebody else, it is not at all surprising; for humanity is subject to many kinds of corruption and perversion, and the things in question are pleasant only to these persons in their particular condition. Clearly, then, we must deny that the admittedly disreputable pleasures are pleasures at all, except to the depraved; but of those are regarded as reputable which, or what sort, should we pronounce to be the pleasure of man? Probably this will emerge from a study of human activities, because these are attended by their proper pleasures. So whether the perfect and supremely happy man has one activity or more than one it is the pleasures that perfect these that can properly be described as *human*;

the remainder, like their activities, can be so called only in a secondary or far lower degree".¹³

Mill also finds true happiness or pleasure to be what the wise man recognises to be such. The preference of the wise man is to constitute the guideline of our conduct, that is to say, of our moral duty. In this connection, I may refer to a passage from his *Utilitarianism*. As he says, "From the verdict of the only competent judge, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final".¹⁴

IV. However, unlike the utilitarians, Aristotle conceives pleasure to be distinct from happiness, though the former is inseparable from the latter. It may not be superfluous to refer to a few passages from his ethics in this connection. He says, "It is evident also that if pleasure, i.e., the activity of our faculties, is not a good, it will not be the case that the happy man lives a pleasant life; for to what end should he need pleasure, if it is not a good but the happy man may even live a painful life? For pain is neither an evil nor a good, if pleasure is not; why then should he avoid it? Therefore, too, the life of the good man will not be pleasanter than that of any one else, if his activities are not more pleasant".¹⁵

Aristotle speaks also of difference between pleasure and happiness so far as completeness is concerned. The completeness of pleasure is only for a moment but the completeness of happiness belongs to a whole life time. As Prof. McGrill points out, "The completeness of pleasure is however, only for the moment, and it is essentially intermittent, as the hedonist must concede. The completeness of happiness embodies certain guarantees for the future and belongs essentially to a whole life time. It is the final goal of man's desire, at least in the sense that nothing less would satisfy".¹⁶

So far as the relation between happiness and activity is concerned Aristotle conceives happiness as an activity rather than as a state or disposition. The good or end of a thing is its functioning well according to its nature, and functioning is activity. Secondly, happiness cannot be a disposition, as virtue is,

for a man can have a virtue without exercising it.

I shall now refer to some other relevant points.

V (A) Aristotle holds that his thesis is platitudinous and almost universally accepted; and though it is hardly a common belief that one should aim at one's own happiness, it is a part of common sense realism that men always do act for their own happiness. But as Prof. Barnes puts it, "... the aim of the Ethics is expressly practical : its philosophy aims at changing the world, not at interpreting it; and we should therefore expect it to be concerned to advance a prescriptive 'should' rather than descriptive psychological 'do'".¹⁷

Barnes seeks to resolve this apparent ambiguity in Aristotle's thought by stating Aristotle's position in the following way : It is a fact of human nature that men always aim at what they take to be their own happiness. But generally speaking men have incomplete or mistaken notions of what their happiness consists in, and they find that happiness does not lie where they take it to lie. The fact gives scope for a prescriptive ethics. Aristotle's prescriptions can serve a practical end by completing and correcting those ordinary notions of happiness; and thus they will ensure a more frequent and a more satisfactory achievement of the natural human end. In fact, this normative purpose of the philosopher is evident from the treatment of the entire ethics of Aristotle. The purpose of legislation, i.e., of politics, is to create good citizens, the creation of which alone would guarantee the securing of a perfect society or state, and happiness belongs to a man as a citizen of this state, in the perfect functioning of it.

(B) The utilitarian propositions, at least many of them, can be seen to be much more intelligible than they appear to be, and indeed, many of the criticisms commonly charged against them are found baseless, if the theory is understood as holding the pleasure principle (or utility, to say so) as the evaluative first principle of a moral judgment.

However, attention should be drawn to the fact that there is a basic difference between the Aristotelian theory and the Utilitarian theory in this respect, though both bear a somewhat normative character. Mill accepts our desiring pleasure, or what serves our purpose, as a truism, his presentation of the fact of everybody's desiring his own pleasure as a ground of validity of the

absolute desirability of pleasure can be explained as an attempt to emphasise the point that the moral or evaluative principle is valid by means of the acceptance of the agent, that is to say, his subscribing to it. On the other hand, Aristotle believing as he does that the common man's opinion inheres the true wisdom regarding the nature of objects, he only knows it partially, or even sometimes confusedly, contends that if the common man seeks his own happiness, he must be basically right, the philosopher is only to correct his mistakes and limitations and shows him in what his true happiness does consist and only so far performs a prescriptive task.

VI. According to both Aristotle and the Utilitarians pleasure is the natural object of desire because men do what is pleasurable and avoid what is painful.

(A) As Aristotle says, ". . . it is generally agreed that pleasure is very closely bound up with human nature; which is why those who are educating the young keep them straight by the use of pleasure and pain. It is also thought to be most important for the forming of a virtuous character to like and dislike the right things; because pleasure and pain permeate the whole of life, and have a powerful influence upon virtue and the happy life, since people choose what is pleasant and avoid what is painful".¹⁸

(B) Bentham recognises the force of pleasure and pain. He begins his discussion with the words :

"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".¹⁹

(C) Mill thinks that pleasure is the only natural end of human action. Every one desires what he thinks will be pleasurable. He remarks", . . . desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable, or rather are two parts of the same phenomenon; in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact : that to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its

consequences), and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and that to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility”.²⁰

However, one may not fail to notice that Aristotle may not have taken *pleasure* to mean exactly the same as the utilitarians mean by the term.

Bentham’s and Mill’s conception may be so explained with adequate justification as to mean that it (both pleasure and pain) enjoys a logical status. The logical end to be sought in all we do is the fulfilment of our desires or in other words the attainment of the object of desire. If the object of desire is what pleasure means, pleasure is evidently our end, which indeed is a logical truism. We do not find any such logical stand in Aristotle’s ethics. For according to Aristotle there is a pleasure in relation to every sense organ (in acting well in relation to its object) and the best or the most complete is the most pleasant. The best activity of an organ is both complete and pleasant. The pleasure completes the activity as a supervening character.

He says”, . . . the activity of any sense is at its best when the organ is in the best condition and directed towards the best of the objects proper to that sense. This activity will be most perfect and most pleasurable; for there is a pleasure corresponding to each of the senses, just as there is to thought and contemplation; and it is most pleasurable when it is most perfect, and most perfect when the organ is in a healthy condition and directed towards the worthiest of its objects; and pleasure perfects the activity”.²¹

It may be recalled here that a similar statement is made by Professor Sidgwick, while criticising the Utilitarianism of Mill. He states that what we desire is object and pleasure only accompanies the obtainment of it. He observes that Mill’s utilitarianism becomes intelligible if we are allowed to say that we desire the object and pleasure comes up as a result of the fulfilment of the desire. As he puts it, “We could not pursue pleasure at all, unless we had desires for something else than pleasure;...²²

NOTES

- 1) Barnes. In his introduction to *Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. by J. A. K. Thompson, Penguin Publications, U. K., 1977., p. 31.

- 2) "Aristotle's eudaimonism in fact differs from classical Utilitarianism in one crucial respect which my exposition has so far deliberately suppressed. The happiness which Aristotle expects the virtuous agent to pursue is not, as the Utilitarians would have it, the general happiness of the sentient world, but rather the individual happiness of the agent himself. Happiness is to be my goal, not in the generous sense that I am to aim at a general increase in the commodity, but in the selfish sense that I am to seek the enlargement of my own portion of it. The good man is a producer of happiness but of his own happiness and not, or at best incidentally that of others. The theory, which might be called egoistic eudaimonism, is worlds away from the noble sentiments of Bentham and Mill; and it is, I think, well removed from anything that we might be tempted to think of as a system of morality".
- 3) *Ibid.*, pp. 1094b 4 - 10.
- 4) Hardie "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics", *Philosophy*, The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Vol. XL., No. 154., October, 1965, p. 281.
- 5) Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. by Akkrill, J. L., Faber & Faber, 3, Queen Sqr., London, 1973., pp. 1097b 7 - 11.
- 6) Hardie. "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics", *Philosophy*, The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Vol. XI., No. 154., October, 1965, p. 281 - 82
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) a) "An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it". Bentham, J. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p. 35., ed. by Mrs. Warnock, Fontana, U. K. 1972
- b) "The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others". - Mill J. S. *Utilitarianism*, Mrs. Warnock (ed.), Fontana, U. K., 1972, p. 368.
- 9) Vide Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Mrs. Warnock (ed.), 1972, p. 268.
- 10) *Aristotle's Ethics.*, ed. by Thompson, 1977, pp. 1175a 25 - 29.
- 11) *Ibid.*, pp. 1174a 6 - 10.
- 12) I may mention here that according to Kenny happiness, for Aristotle, is concretely verifiable object. He says, "Aristotle who considers happiness only in the dominant sense, does not make even the modest claim that everyone seeks

happiness. He certainly says that all agree that happiness is the purpose of ethics, and that it is, the highest practical goods'. p 99., Kenny, Anthony "Happiness", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol., (1965-66).

- 13) *Ibid.*, pp. 1176a 10 - 29.
- 14) Mill. *Utilitarianism*, ed. by Mrs. Warnock, Fontana, U. K., 1962., p. 261.
- 15) Aristotle *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. by Ross, Oxford University Press, U. K., 1966., pp. 1154a 1 - 7.
- 16) Mcgrill. *The Idea of Happiness*, Froderica A Praeger, London, 1962., p. 261.
- 17) Barnes. In his introduction to *Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by J. A. K. Thompson, Penguin Publications, U. K., 1977., p. 32.
- 18) *Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by Thompson, Book X., Sec. I., pp. 1172a 20 - 25.
- 19) Bentham. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. by Mrs. Warnock, Fontana, U. K., 1962., p. 33.
- 20) Mill. J. S. *Utilitarianism*, ed. by Mrs. Warnock, Fontana, U. K., 1962., p. 293.
- 21) *Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. by Thompson, Penguin Publications, U. K., 1977., pp. 1174b 15 - 24.
- 22) Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1966., p. 44.

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