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Essay #1

A Summary of Utilitarian Ethical Theory

Utilitarianism is a type of consequentialist ethics developed during the Age of Reason, most foundationally by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), which states that moral worth is dependent on the end result of an individual's actions. This end, or "utility," is known as the "greatest happiness principle," which is often defined as the greatest amount of good provided for the greatest number of individuals. Utilitarianism at its simplest is an ethical hedonism: pleasure and pain, respectively, are the sole indicators of "good" and "bad." This is not to say that Utilitarianism is an egoistic form of ethics, since the theory demands the maximization of the good for as many as is possible. Impartiality is a fundamental component of Utilitarianism such that the good of the individual does not count any higher or lower on a scale of utility than the good of any other individual. Today, the philosophy is split into two separate branches—outcome utilitarianism, according to which "the goodness of any state of affairs is solely a matter of how much overall (or average) well-being people (or sentient beings generally) are enjoying in that state of affairs" and direct consequentialism, "the view that the rightness and goodness of any action, motive, or political institution depends solely on the goodness of the overall state of affairs consequent upon it" (Slote, 890). Utilitarianism has thus changed from its hedonistic origins so that personal good is now understood to refer to that which constitutes the happiness of a whole society.

Prior to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, several English theorists, including Richard Cumberland (1631-1718), George Berkeley (1685-1773), and John Gay (1699-1775)

laid the groundwork for an early Utilitarianism. Gay, for instance, argued for a form of virtue ethics from a Utilitarian perspective, declaring that the individual attains happiness, here meaning eternal happiness arising from one's personal salvation, only by acting in accordance with the will of God. This theological premise is now no longer a requisite part of Utilitarian theory, and, in fact, any vestige of Gay's distinctly Christian virtue ethics is unlikely to be found in modern Utilitarianism. Adding a secular moral dimension to the theory was Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), whose refutations of Thomas Hobbes' egoistic philosophy and emphasis on the individual's responsibility to the general welfare qualify him as a Utilitarian, albeit one who rejects its first hedonistic principles

Yet the theorist who refined this ethical philosophy into what is referred to as Classical Utilitarianism is Jeremy Bentham. Bentham, an English jurist and philosopher of law known for his crusades for social reform, introduced the core principle that the individual is ruled by two qualities—pleasure and pain. According to Bentham, the value of any given action is measured by the following properties: (1) intensity (the strength of the pleasure or pain), (2) duration (the length of the pleasure or pain's lasting effects), (3) certainty (the likelihood of pleasure or pain coming to be the result of the action), (4) proximity (the closeness of the sensation to the performance of the action), (5) fecundity (the likelihood of this pleasure or pain leading to further pleasures or pains), and (6) purity (the mixture, or lack thereof, of one of the sensations with the other). Actions are then not inherently wrong but wrong because of their negative effects, thus they are instrumentally wrong. An advocate of jurisprudence, Bentham argued that these ethical principles find their way into law. But he did not view the law as "monolithic and immutable" and even noted that just as "effects of a given policy may change, the moral quality of the policy may change as well" (Driver). It is Bentham's definition of utility as a property that produces either pleasure or pain and his subsequent advocacy that that utility

be measured according to its consequences that provided a profound influence on the father of modern Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill.

John Stuart Mill's contributions to the development of Utilitarianism cannot be overstated. His essay *Utilitarianism* (1863) is considered one of the philosophy's foundational texts. Part II of Mill's work expounds upon the Greatest Happiness Principle, defined as that which ensures "an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments," stating that "[t]his, 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" (II. 214). Although a disciple of Bentham's rights theory, Mill revised Bentham's definition of utility to defend a "psychological hedonism" that nurtured the higher pleasures of the mind. Mill thus rejected the idea that the individual is innately selfish. Critic Ernest Albee reminds us that, in Mill's view, "man is originally sympathetic, and that therefore he can, to a certain extent, directly will the common good, although other motives do, as a matter of fact, generally come in to complicate" (254). For Mill, the hedonistic impulse is a part of the individual, but the higher impulse, the need to strive for the good of others is also an essential element of the individual's nature.

After Mill solidified several of the ideals of Utilitarianism, other thinkers, from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Edmund Burke (1729-1797) to G. E. Moore (1873-1958) and Amartya Sen (1933-) created subset theories based on the Classical Utilitarianism inaugurated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Moore, for instance, revised Bentham's view of "the good" to what is known now as Ideal Utilitarianism, which goes beyond the hedonistic view and argues that the individual should strive to bring about not only happiness for the greatest

number but beauty and knowledge as well. The direct utilitarian view, by contrast, argues that moral evaluation is necessary to understanding our actions such that “acts are not right or obligatory because of their inherent character, their underlying motives, or their relation to divine or social dictates, but because of how much overall human or sentient well-being they *produce*” ([italics in original] Slote, 890). Another adaptation of Classical Utilitarianism came with the introduction of rule-consequentialism, which states that an action’s consequences are not based on the action itself but on certain sets of rules. And therefore an act is right or wrong based on whether it conformed to or deviated from the established codes of proper ethical conduct. Critics of this theory argue that rule-consequentialism does not adequately explain why these “rules” should be judged according to their consequences when actions should not. Most latter-day Utilitarians are direct consequentialists who argue that right action is to be understood solely in terms of the consequences that follow from the action of an individual. Today, Utilitarianism is seen as one of the most adaptable yet unified systems for ethical theory that addresses all moral questions in a uniform manner with an eye toward an ideal happiness ensured for the greatest number of individuals in any given society in the world.

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