

The Metaphysics of Utilitarianism: A Humanistic Approach

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Abstract

Since the golden days of John Stuart Mill and the exciting Age of Reason to which he was born, the philosophical landscape has changed dramatically-although these changes have not proliferated to popular culture, they have affected other disciplines, most notably, art. This paper will trace the history of philosophy of utilitarianism to find connection with contemporary (or near-contemporary) metaphysical theories, but also, significantly, will attempt to navigate the many-layered 'can of worm' that emerge when we attempt to assign a strict "purpose" for morality, which is in essence what utilitarianism proposes we should do, examining in short, its influence on politics, theology, art and culture. I will thus focus less on philosophical canon and more and more on the theories that they propagate, less on direct quotes, more on general philosophy. I trust this paper will be read not only from academic perspective but from a humanistic one too.

Keywords: *Humanistic, Morality, Popular Culture, Metaphysical, Reason Utilitarianism*

Introduction

Whether we accept it or not, by and large in the 21st century we live in a world, politically and culturally, where our moral decisions are dominated by the theory of utilitarianism - we have assimilated a moral code, perhaps naturally, but certainly in tandem with the 19th century theoretical framework, propagated chiefly by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism originated in Britain at the peak of Her international power and, politically at least. We can look to this period as the common denominator which over 200 years proliferated across the globe; the industrial revolution ushered in a new global relation to economics on which we constructed, or perhaps discovered, a value system where property, wealth and commodities have become directly associated with happiness, if not in practice, then at least in theory, for the 'average 21st' century individual. If this state of affairs has led to exploitation, degradation of the arts and a willful separation from pastoral nature, it has also given rise to a highly subtle moral code which has by and large removed itself from religious dogma and attached instead on to the economical dream. Heaven was dethroned by the equally fantastical notion of pure happiness of the ultra-rich and the ultra-famous; propagated by the culture industry, but even

more, by the faith of the materialist. The calculable nature of utilitarianism yields it authority in a world where ardent control over the environment is admired, its flexibility makes it ideal for a society living at least 4 or 5 personalities simultaneously.

Of course, the idea of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain is both ancient and universal - this suggests a coherence with what can be defined as a "historical intuition" a naturally, perhaps organically evolving system of value-judgment which remains in its fundamental state apparently constant despite the ever-changing reality: it would not be an unwarranted assumption to believe that the ancient man was motivated by the desire of maximizing pleasure as much as the modern man. The need for pleasure remains, while pleasure itself has evolved — although, it seems, not at the expense of its former self. The instinctual, so called "lower-pleasure", the sensual pleasures of sex, food and the like, remain as powerful as ever, but to them an array of new pleasures have been explored; recreational, artistic, social. Another avenue which arguably brings pleasure is the pursuit of knowledge but this pleasure itself has so many parameters that we are tempted to classify it otherwise. For knowledge is also a promise of future pleasure, a promise that it will yield answers to our active curiosity, that it will create a 'better' life, and more importantly, explain to us what a 'better' life is supposed to look like — the pursuit of knowledge becomes a direction with unknown although to some degree predictable results — much like the pleasure of sex leads to offspring — each pleasure is entangled with the consequence of time.¹

Utilitarianism's wide appeal mirrors the present state the world and how we distribute value in it. In modern society, across both, so called developed and developing countries, there is a strong sense of a disparity between pleasure and pain - this is further established through the empirical approach that science has taken towards the above-mentioned dichotomy i.e., pleasure and pain, survival and entropy and so on. Thus, in a biological context, utilitarianism is described as the movement of life towards self-propagation, the value thus associated to death is negative, the value to life being positive. As thus, maximizing one direction over

¹ Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, (OUP: Revised edition, 1972) 87.

the other creates a clear distinction of moral right and wrong for life. Utilitarianism, in its broadest sense, requires a confident understanding of pleasure and displeasure, or some other Such binary (dialectic) i.e., right/wrong etc. if it is to be taken seriously as a theory.

Even if we could, would it be right for us to assign any value-judgment to something as seemingly individual as pleasure? The instinctual answer here is certainly no; much like you cannot measure pain nor confidently predict if pain will be the effect of some cause, especially emotional or inner pain, you cannot be expected to measure pleasure with any accuracy. Yet we see that pleasure can be, and often is, a shared experience. Indeed, we require another sentient being in order to experience pleasure.

And since once something can be shared universally, we become aware of our lack of understanding of it, and as such we begin to assign certain regularities and qualities to control the output (in this case pleasure) towards favorable odds.

The previous rather convoluted sentence is a great example of how any action, such as "studying logically 'pleasure'" requires some kind of 'ends', and indeed a 'favorable end'. How can we escape the paradox of ambition? We, philosophers, are compelled to examine the nature of pleasure (or for that matter of ambition, pragmatism, utilitarianism) by some sort of drive, whether it is the Darwinian Drive for Survival, 'Nietzschenian' Will to Power, 'Schopenhauerian' Drive to Fight or any other number of purpose-driven ideas this curiosity, this conscious desire to study is the first obstacle for philosophers trying to grapple with morality. A true deconstruction of this theory should aim at exploring this fundamental assumption, to which, we argue, there is no independent or objective evidence of support available.

(1). For the materialist, utilitarianism is the ideal moral code as long as he/she can continue to change the value of the 'utility' according to the situation - thus pleasure is considered the most valuable in one transaction, pride or integrity in another, and perhaps adventure or excitement in yet another. For instance, the stereotypical hero has taken on surprising roles in contemporary popular culture; the womaniser, epitomized in the character of Barney in American sit-con How I Met Your Mother,

or the ruthless businessman, as depicted by Leonardo Da Vinci in the film *The Wolf of Wall Street* are almost addictive in their appeal --it is difficult to imagine such figures attaining the kind of recognition in, for instance, the Dark Ages.

(2.) An individual is, according to Performance Theory of the sort proposed by Richard Schechner², in a continuous state of performance, alternating between different personalities according to what social situations demand. This is based on the idea (supported by psychological and psycho-analytical evidence) that the self, or the identity, in a child begins only after the realization or 'discovery' of 'the other' (through the use of language). The self therefore can only exist via the reference of those around you. For this reason, new cultures are difficult to assimilate into, long periods of solitary confinement are punishments, but also have strange outcomes i.e. Stockholm Syndrome (sympathy for the kidnapper). This constant reassessment of relations within a social space creates culture-specific movements that are 'counter-productive to the apparent goals of life — for example war. From each side there is bombardment of motivations for one way of acting 'as oppose to another, so that during war, a different state of consciousness, like the one accelerated by consumption of alcohol (brave, aggressive) is promoted (and alcohol, at times of war too is promoted). In times of peace these states of being, like the function of alcohol, are no longer applicable. but the habit remains, creating a greater state of societal confusion.

(3) Here is the attack on this sort of certainty of 'drive': From a psychological (strictly speaking psychoanalytical) view-point, our recognition of a drive or will to survive (which necessarily contains morality, since it is better to "live" rather than to "die") is nothing but a catharsis of our immediate reality on the external reality we are attempting to investigate. More specifically; all humans have purpose, and purpose is the direct response to the impossibility of overcoming time — purpose, paraphrasing Kant,³ is our (sensual) response to time. We see that life leads to some end (death) and thus suppose that the external reality too leads to some end and as thus this end must be a reaction, and a reaction is a moral condition.

² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (London: Routledge, 2003) 39.

³ Immanuel Kant *The Moral Law*, (London: Taylor and Francis 2005), 40.

If we were to remove ourselves from this discussion, then neither morality nor purpose would survive.

On Utilitarianism

First, let us analyse utilitarianism in its broadest sense. we quote Bernard Williams⁴ opening paragraph on the subject: "Utilitarianism...holds that there is just one moral principle, to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number...and that the once moral principle...is to be applied to each individual situation". Jeremy Bentham's⁵, the most famous utilitarianist, defines this "happiness" as "pleasure", and pleasure, he continues (in the popularly accepted terms of the strict epistemologist), is a physiological, chemical reaction in the body which favours pleasure over pain. In this context, Bentham removes the human being (and any sentient being) from the "amoralistic" reality, making "nature" the arbitrator of both pleasure and pain, and man in constant battle with this blind (and very blindly defined) entity — man, therefor, has purpose, has an end, and nature is the entity against which this purpose is measured. For Bentham, this theory was modern for its egalitarianism, as he gave no indication to any static or defined cause of pleasure — from individual to individual, pleasure may vary significantly, as it may from civilization to civilization, culture to culture and so on until the science fiction realm of out-of-worldly beings with the most incomprehensible sense of pleasure. Yet, the core remains the desire for pleasure, which he asserts, all living organisms, or at least organisms with the ability to alter their destiny, possess. This last part becomes the core of the philosophical theory and is what separates it from just a moral point of view.

So, a common example used by utilitarianists in demonstrating the reasonable grounds for this assumption is, for instance. a choice between two dentists - both will do the same job but one will cause more pain than the other - it is self-evident that most people will choose the least painful dentist. It is this "most people" clause that provokes so much attention and also carries the moral theory

⁴ Bernard Williams *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 5.

⁵ Jeremy Bentham *An Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1789), 102

aloof of many obvious criticisms. Certainly, a masochist might prefer the other dentist, but that does not alter the situation as pain is merely substituted for pleasure, and pleasure for pain. Thus, on an individual level, we don't require the knowledge of this idea to apply it - it is seemingly intrinsic in our present-day existence. This does not make it a truth, but it does make it applicable. However, once we attempt to superposition this theory on to a community, society, country, and so forth, we become entangled in a number of issues. It is these issues, which we will mention in the following paragraph, that the popular philosopher, John Stuart Mill⁶ attempted to address by creating a hierarchy of pleasure where certain pleasures are elevated - the example he uses is that it is better for Socrates to be a mortal philosopher than an immortal pig with unlimited access to food. The pleasure of philosophy is thus greater in quality than the pleasure of feeding one self. This theoretical example does not hold up too well in the practical world, for we may starve Socrates for some time (although Socrates might choose to die for philosophy once more if he is presented with the full information of our experiment - perhaps we should starve a less idealistic philosopher instead, like Wittgenstein). The idea of pleasure as calculable not just in quantity but in quality, as Mill suggested, is today unpopular among many utilitarianists, for we have become significantly more aware of the social conditioning in which we exist. Still, the idea of certain pleasures, even if subjectively, more important than others, lends itself to the idea of pain having the same emotional structure, and when we try to draw the line between the two, we find that there is no concrete distinction point, no middle ground or rather everything becomes a middle ground.

Dealing with the idea of a collective moral solution, if we may call it that, is always uncertain, because the initial variables are exponentially multiplied with the progress of time, and since, as Bernard Williams⁷ points out, "any actual calculation of utilitarianism will take place under conditions of considerable uncertainty and very partial information" a large outcome can be perpetrated by a very small number of people, who have no actual certainty that their act is the favorable one (as is the case in all political decision making). Alternatively, the

⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, (London: Longman and Green and Co 1879), 76.

⁷ Bernard Williams, *op.cit*, 104

democratic view of many contributing to one decision too has its drawback; the question being, would you trust the majority vote or the specialist in certain decisions, e.g. medical. Others have pointed out that certain instances of utilitarian thought can lead to abhorrent actions which today would be considered completely immoral, as in torturing a terrorist's family for the sake of saving a larger group of people, and that we should strive for a better moral system. Although laws change, their purpose remains the same — to maintain the well-being of society; and this requires a compromise from both the individual and society, a continuous trade off. However, while it is easy to recognize the utilitarian needs of the individual, a sentient, emotional and creative being, it is much more challenging to afford the same distinction to a society — this creates a backlash between the individual and the state, and pins the two against one another, so that from the point of view of either entity, the other replaces nature to take the position of the "enemy". If people were not individualistic than society would become Utopian, if society could embody each individual in it, there would be personal liberty — the two states of being are incompatible with each other.

At this stage a distinction must be made about the direction we take when arguing for or against any philosophical theory about morality — while many philosophers have tackled the 'problem of morality'. (i.e., its origin, structure, character, purpose and objective existence) they have often done this (sooner or later) from the point of view of the well-being of the individual, the society or humanity as a whole; as such directly or indirectly assuming some kind of utilitarianism. In other words philosophers would begin from a position of logic and then, almost apologetically retrace their steps to 'fit' their theories into the context of the real human world.⁸ We suspect that this is often done in order to address the state of nihilism that enquiry into the subject-matter of morality produces (itself a moral response) — the moment we attempt to explore morality from an objective position as humanely possible, we quickly become aware of the pitifully weak structure on which so many of our moral codes rest and yet we cannot ignore their existence, even if history demonstrates the ephemeral and culture-specific

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, (London Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1906), 145.

nature of morality (as most evident in old unaddressed judicial laws that re-emerge in modern society i.e. outdated sedation laws or anti-women laws). We can make the argument that everything is socially constructed, and in fact it is this argument, to a large degree that we will follow in upstaging utilitarianism, but even if that were the case, that does not mean that socially, humanely constructed distinctions of the world are somehow less "real" or "true" - this belief assumes a great moral leap, assigning a degree of hierarchy of one reality over another. From a more ethical point of view, we can argue that for instance the idea of race, as the negative associations attributed to people of colour in the contemporary world, is a false and conditioned idea — but the behavior is still real, as are the consequences of hate crimes. Furthermore, the very existence of a conditioning, and its flip-side i.e. our realization of this conditioning, cannot be sidelined as just human error — it is in the strictest form real⁹, and we propose as real as the molecular structure of carbon or the geometrical rotation of the moon around the earth — as far as we are willing to believe that these concepts are “real.”

Exploring the Metaphysics of Utilitarianism

Falsification as a philosophically accepted theory of the pragmatic 21s' century academic and scientist has given plenty credence to the idea of utilitarianism, for we can say that our current understanding of 'good' and 'bad' is simply incomplete and it is only time that will tell - but why draw an assumption that good and bad are discovered as oppose to created? Does this actually hurt our morality in any way? Perhaps theoretically the consequences of realizing that morality is but a human concept, may be anarchy or pure disillusionment with the status quo built entirely on imaginary concepts - yet our present state of ambiguity, for the larger portion of humanity, has not brought on this state of affair, for there is the ever-present hope that as morality becomes more sophisticated and more refined, our lives become better, and secondly, the present reality is one where evil, war and suffering are at least as widespread as happiness and pleasure, yet that has not stopped philosophers, theologians and so on from refining, exploring and

⁹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 97.

retracing the origins of human suffering in order to fulfill that impossible and yet so simple utopia dream, nor has it prevented Materialistic progress.

To examine how pleasure and pain, morality, drive and moral theories like utilitarianism hold and distribute our concept of meaning, very differently from our definition of these terms, we would do well to turn to a different field of philosophy - phenomenology, and its study of language and how we associate words to meaning, and meaning to morality. In the example of shouting at someone "watch out, there is a car coming", the response that the hearer will have depends on his/her understanding of the word. However, this understanding is implicit - without acknowledging logically, or consciously, what a "car" is in the strict sense of the word, the association to the urgency of the utterance causes the hearer to jump out of the way. This is language which solicits a behavioral response. When the person retells the story, he/she quotes the sentence "watch out, there is a car coming" to elicit an image of the event in his/her listeners. Finally, there is still, as in the first instance, an emotional association with the word: for instance if the story is ornamented i.e. "dust hovered above the road as we stepped out unaware of the black Mercedes speeding carelessly from the left bank" a vivid image is created and the response is not merely an account for the listener, it is a collection of past associations and memory-images and of future possibilities - if the storyteller adds "the car was driving on the wrong side" the listener might become outraged - even though there is no practical consequence for him/her; only an imagined one. We have here the essence of sympathy, for the listener is placed in the shoes of the storyteller, but also of the immediacy of moral thought -. there is no immediate danger, yet the response is based not just on the story but on the hypothetical possibility that the listener might have been, or may be in the future, in the same situation, and it is this imagined reality which manifests the need for preventative laws (much like an imagined utopia can be sufficient reason for certain behavior - i.e. I will recycle, even though it will make no difference in today's world, but it may lead to the imagined scenario where everyone recycled and then it would be justified). The word is always concrete and sensible, however abstract its meaning may be - so our desire for concrete moral rules (and our other desires for control) are based, perhaps, not on meaning, or even images of meaning, but on words,

structures of symbols, signifiers, groupings, which at once describe and alter reality (or real meaning) - if this is the case, then a complete morality (or a perfect virtue - Taosim) as a goal is contradictory to the abstract reality of these concepts removed from the false rigidity of language.

Pleasure becomes a slippery concept when we try to rationally examine its causes. Let's use an example of someone feeling hot. The person, let's say Jane, turns on the fan, which moves air molecules more rapidly inside the room causing them to collide and take on electromagnetic properties. These collide or connect with the skin of Jane, who is sweating - sweat is a conductive material, and she transfers (positive + to negative -) her excess heat out onto to the molecules swirling about her, cooling her down (the second and primary way sweat cools us down, through evaporation, is not applicable to this example). An entire process, chemical, physical and biological is at play in creating the pleasure of a comfortable body temperature, although to Jane it is (both falsely and not) the overhead fan that is the object of her pleasure. Feeling pleasure is how we can tell when we are at our most "ideal" state within the environment, but the idea of being in an ideal environment is both apparently impossible to achieve and essentially relative to the environment, both physical and cultural.

The philosophy of Taoism, being nearly 3000 years old, and shrouded in mystic rhetoric, is still not directly challenged or "falsified", even if its metaphorical language requires adjustment. Here the ambiguous notion of virtue is directly related to the equally ambiguous notion of "flowing with the way of nature". It is outlined in terms such as "actionless action" and "the Tao spoken of is not the true Tao" - two points can be drawn. The realization of the impermanence of nature, of its ever-changing quality, and of the impossibility to "not intervene", "to remove oneself" has been recognized since antiquity, and that human awareness into the nature of things is always a subjective human experience, whether we are studying meta-physics, practicing spirituality or probing quarks, we are unable to ever have any direct contact with reality. This is the theory at present maintained by the hegemony of philosophy (and other sciences) and in this state utilitarianism can both exist and not exist, depending on our preference and context. But more importantly, what constitutes as pleasure, pain, morality and the like, cannot be

anchored to the words that depict them. Indeed, if happiness did exist as more than just a concept, as say some practical entity, we would not have this discussion, for the achievement of it would have been completed by now, much like thirst is quenched by water - as it stands pleasure seems to exist only as the binary opposite to displeasure, happiness to sadness, good to evil, and thus requires its evil twin to subsist. If these terms are dependent on such arbitrary notions, how then can we base our theory of life and of purpose on them?

Conclusion

Emotion is not divided into fragments where opposing forces are battling over one another -- the decision is created by our adherence to normality, to our definition of what man "ought to be", what desire we "ought" to praise and what desire we "ought" to disapprove. Pain and pleasure do not exist in a spacial, geometrical place, where one is above the other, or where one is in relation to the other, rather emotions are conjured up according to so many different parameters 'which themselves cannot be " removed from those emotions that they cause — indeed the very idea of Cause and effect must be abolished before we can accept the constant change of what is meaningful, and why it is meaningful. There is certainly a logical way of doing this, but 'there too should be a trust for intuition, if that intuition can be removed from its chains of tradition and culture. We can make allusions to the idea that everything is socially constructed "there are no planets out there until we have named them, become aware of their existence and placed them in a horizon, of understanding, time and space". That everyone is driven by selfish ends but since we are all more or less equally selfish, we achieve a state of minimal equilibrium.¹⁰ We can turn to language-based analysis of man, theological or dogmatic explanations, spiritual revelations — yet all these definitions fall short of creating any concrete moral state in which man is certain of his purpose and his moral obligation. In relation to our ambiguous reality, utilitarianism must be viewed as an incomplete philosophical moral theory, and yet moral theory in its self cannot be incomplete — the purpose of a moral theory is to create a well-defined and reasonable framework in which morality can function, a rule, no matter how broad,

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, *Words and Meaning, The Analysis of mind*, (London Routledge ,1989) 154.

must be present. If we take any form of decision or choose any direction. the only thing we can be certain of is that by choosing it we are negating something else. If we merely want a theory that will create a stable, passive and moderately happy society, then utilitarianism is probably our best bet, but beyond that, it is the very thing that is keeping us away from reaching a stage where concept-based and culture- specific definitions are overcome and a clearer image of reality emerges. Whether or not that will bring about more happiness or less is not important, for the idea of happiness will be judged as the relation to everything, not as some idealistic separate entity.

Perhaps the reader will feel that combining metaphysics with utilitarianism is like combining art with science — a very futile and counter-productive attempt at synthesis, but the motivation for such comparisons is hardly to achieve a collection of ideas into one great singularity; it is rather to show the downsides of both view-points and so hopefully initiate an elevation over these concepts, which are at once a tool for assessing reality, and our greatest liability.