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Description of Module

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Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism as a system of thought appeared prominently for the first time in the 18th century in the writings of William Paley (1743-1805) and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)¹ although there had been arguments based on the principle of utilitarianism in the past (as in the ideas of the Epicureans for example). Utilitarianism is a broad tradition of philosophical and social thought, which centres around the promotion of pleasure and happiness. It connects morality and politics with the promotion of happiness. However, within utilitarianism different reasons are given for the promotion or maximization of happiness or the good. I will try to describe utilitarianism in the most general manner to touch upon all forms of utilitarianism. I will then discuss some of the prominent utilitarians to throw more light on their framework and method. I will also discuss briefly consequentialism and utilitarianism to differentiate them from the rival moral reasoning of deontology.

Utilitarianism can be understood in the most general terms as a personal moral doctrine which states that the rightness and wrongness of an action are determined by the corresponding goodness or badness of the consequence of the action. It can also be understood as a theory of public choice or as a criterion applicable to public policy. In both the cases, the quality of the consequences depends on the utility (classical sense) of the actions or public policy. For instance, if I am to judge whether 'telling the truth' is right or wrong then I have to study the context in which telling the truth happens. If 'telling the truth' brings good consequences (utility) to a greater number of people then I judge that telling the truth is the right moral course of action in that particular context and also in similar contexts. The underlying theme of utilitarianism as a moral doctrine is that moral judgment (rightness or wrongness) of an action depends on the total goodness or badness of its consequences. According to J.S. Mill (1806-1873), the doctrine which is the foundation of morals is 'utility'. This is the greatest happiness principle according to which actions are right in proportion to the happiness they promote/increase; they are wrong if they tend to produce the reverse of happiness, namely, pain. Happiness is the intended pleasure and the absence of pain. Pain is equivalent to unhappiness and the privation of pleasure. According to Mill, this creed of utilitarianism does "not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian and in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (Mill, 1949, p. 9).

Let us now discuss the account of utilitarianism starting from Paley. The basic or the central idea behind Paley's utilitarian view was that our duties towards God do not conflict with utility and

¹Rosen 2010, p. 145

the promotion of happiness. He accepted the utility principle however, for him this principle did not arise from direct experience of pleasure and pain but from the will of God. Each individual is enjoined by duty to the common interest in which the happiness of the society and of the individuals comprising it, were to be found. Thus, for Paley, the utility principle was based on duties and rules which sprang from an individual's duties towards God; he said, 'every duty is a duty towards God, since it is his will which makes it a duty'.² One of the main problems in Paley's account of utilitarianism (which makes it inconsistent with modern liberal utilitarianism) is the deprivation of the choice of pleasure by ordinary people. Since his account of the principle of utility is based on one's duty as commanded by the will of God, the individual is taken away from direct experience of pleasure and pain. For this reason Bentham, rather than Paley, is considered as the proper first spokesperson of utilitarianism.

Jeremy Bentham was perhaps the first to use the word 'utility' in a technical sense to mean something approximately equivalent to 'instrumental for happiness' (Mulgan 2007, p. 9). Bentham's utility principle or greatest happiness principle stands for maximization of utility or happiness and avoidance of displeasure or pain. His justification of the utility principle is based on the idea that utility or happiness and truth are causally connected and so also pain and falsehood. He contends that 'No bad consequences can possibly arise from supposing it to be true and the worst consequences cannot but arise from supposing it to be false'.³ For Bentham pleasure and pain are the foundations of morality. For this reason he is regarded as a hedonist. Thus, he equates utility with pleasure and pleasure with the good. For him, utility is the property of any object which produces happiness, benefits, pleasure and the like and thus it also prevents the happening of mischief, pain, or unhappiness. For Bentham, utility is the yardstick by which we judge if an action is right or wrong. Thus, the value of pleasure or happiness can be quantifiable through seven measures such as, intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity/closeness or remoteness, fecundity/productiveness, purity, and extent (number of persons affected by it). Since for him, the values of all pleasures are quantifiable, values of different pleasures are equally valuable. He maintained that 'Prejudice apart, the game of pushpin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry'.⁴ For Bentham, the pleasure that one gets from playing a pushpin game does not differ from the pleasure that one gets from reading poetry. With regards to the concept of 'right', he is very critical and understands it only in the language of law or as legal rights, not the general idea of right (natural rights). However, as the following arguments will reveal, Mill corrected Bentham's claim that all pleasures are quantitatively equivalent.

²As quoted in Rosen 2010, p. 147, from Paley's *The principles of Morals and Political Philosophy* (1819, vol. 1, p. 239).

³As quoted in Mulgan 2007, p. 10, from 'Bentham Manuscripts at University College London'.

⁴Bentham, 1994, p. 200.

J.S Mill was a utilitarian and a hedonist, but he differentiated himself from Bentham's position by saying that pleasure could be qualitative as well as quantitative. For Mill, the pleasure that one gets from playing pushpin is not the same as the pleasure that one gets from reading poetry. That is the reason why he said that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.⁵ However, Mill also stands firm on the utilitarianism position by claiming that human beings intuitively strive to advance pleasure (quantitative and qualitative) to avoid pain or displeasure. He provides a succinct account of the utility 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.... But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only thing desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain' (Mill, 1949, pp. 8-9). One of the main problems in Mill which seeks attention is the conflict between general and individual pleasure. Sidgwick tries to answer to this problem through the reconciliation of egoism and utilitarianism.

It is considered that after Bentham and Mill, Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) was the last classical utilitarian.⁶ In his book, *Method of Ethics* (1874), he distinguished the utilitarian method from the other two systems of ethics, namely, intuitionism⁷ and egoism (Sidgwick 1930, p 11). He believed the crux of intuitionism is to have moral sense, but since most of the time we do not know what we ought to do, it is the same that we do not have moral sense. Thus, his charge was that the intuitionist method falls apart. As a method, utilitarianism can provide the justification which intuitionism fails to do in the matter of conflict of values, rules, justice and truth. For him, there were two rational methods of decision-making, namely utilitarianism and egoism. However, these two methods are irreconcilable. The dualism between these two practical reasons can be resolved only through the intervention of God. If God governs the universe, we can have the confidence that our performance of duties will be rewarded.⁸ In this way happiness and morality must coincide and only thus can the clash between egoism and utilitarianism be resolved. However, such a resort to divine

⁵As Mill said, '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, has 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, 1949, *Utilitarianism*, p. 12.

⁶Mulgan 2007, p. 33.

⁷Sidgwick understands intuitionism as, '...it is implied that we have the power of seeing clearly that certain kinds of actions are right and reasonable in themselves, apart from their consequences;- or rather with a merely partial consideration of consequences, from which other consequences admitted to be possibly good or bad are definitely excluded', Sidgwick 1930, p. 200.

⁸As he said; 'From this point of view the Utilitarian Code is conceived as the Law of God, who is to be regarded as having commanded men to promote the general happiness and as having announced an intention of rewarding those who obey His commands and punishing the disobedient', Sidgwick 1930 pp. 504-505.

ground for resolving the relationship between utilitarianism and egoism is not convincing. Subsequent versions of utilitarianism endeavour to offer formulations without such a supernatural foundation.

Contemporary theorists have also attempted to spell out utilitarianism in ways that endeavour to overcome the problems confronting its classical versions. R.M. Hare (1919-2002), the Oxford philosopher, in the early 1960s offered another account of utilitarianism as a defence against logical positivism's version of noncognitivism as emotivism. Hare responded strongly to this position and argued that moral terms are commands or prescriptions. For example if I say that 'People ought not to murder', I am not expressing an emotion, but rather issuing a command, 'Do not murder!' This command or prescription is a moral prescription, if it has a universal character. This moral term has a universal prescription because when I say 'Do not murder' I am not only saying that others ought not to murder without committing myself to the claim; in the same circumstances, no one else should murder either. Thus, for Hare a moral statement must be universalizable by definition. Hare derives utilitarianism from such a metaethical position of prescriptivism. In order to do this he tries to reconcile universalism and impartiality which mainly resides in the idea that the logic of a moral must take equal account of everyone's preference. If I want others to take my universal prescription seriously, then I must also take into account the preferences of others. I must fully represent to myself what it would be like to be in another's situation. Therefore, Hare's claim is that in order to make a moral claim, I must ask to reflect everyone's preferences impartially. Hare argues that the best way to represent everyone's preferences equally is to ask myself what I would prefer, if I took into account everyone's preferences, apart from mine. If x is what I would prefer after I have internalised all the preferences of everyone involved, I would say 'everyone should do x'. Therefore, for Hare what ought to be done is whatever maximizes total preferences. Hence, impartiality leads directly to a form of utilitarianism based on preference theory of well-being.⁹

Having discussed briefly some prominent figures of utilitarianism and their thoughts, I will now discuss the divisions and classifications within utilitarianism. The important division of utilitarianism can be 'act' utilitarianism and 'rule' utilitarianism. According to 'act utilitarianism', an action is morally judged right or wrong corresponding to the consequence of that action. The classical versions of Bentham¹⁰ and Sidgwick have incorporated this conception. Act utilitarianism can be either egoistic or universalistic utilitarianism. If the good consequences are solely considered on the basis of an individual's happiness or pleasure without any thought of others then this kind of act utilitarianism is understood as egoistic. Whereas if the good consequences to be considered by the agent is thought of as the happiness and pleasure of all mankind in general then this kind of act utilitarianism is universalistic. The division between egoistic and universalistic utilitarianism is

⁹ See especially chapter 10, in Hare's *The Language of Morals*, 1978, pp. 151-162.

¹⁰ There is a controversy regarding Mill and the extent to which he can be regarded as an act-utilitarian.

necessary because of the incompatibility that exists between egoistic and universalistic concepts, in theoretical as well as practical terms.

Attempts have been made to further distinguish act utilitarianism in terms of hedonistic and ideal concepts. Hedonistic utilitarianism upholds the view that goodness or badness of a consequence depends only on its pleasantness or unpleasantness (pleasure or pain) without making a distinction between pleasures, as quantitatively pleasurable and qualitatively pleasurable. According to the ideal utilitarianism of G.E Moore (1873-1958) the goodness or badness of a state of consciousness can depend on things other than its pleasantness and unpleasantness. For Moore, goodness or badness of a state of consciousness can also depend, for example, on various intellectual and aesthetic qualities. Ideal utilitarianism is not only concerned with pleasantness and unpleasantness, but also with knowledge and the contemplation of beautiful objects. It even holds that some pleasant state of consciousness can be intrinsically bad and some unpleasant one intrinsically good.¹¹

Hastings Rashdall (1854-1924), an ideal utilitarian, reacts against intuitionism by saying that we cannot discover right and wrong by an appeal to immediate judgment or intuition. He also objects that appeal to good or bad consequences is insufficient and also sometimes not necessary to explain our judgments or to settle conflict between judgments of various actions.¹² In a similar argument with Moore, Rashdall says that pleasure is not the only good since some pleasures are higher than others, and also some are bad. He gives example of some pleasures which are bad; such as drunkenness, bullfighting, gladiatorial fights and the like. On the other hand, we value certain things or states of mind without reference to the pleasure they contain; such as virtuous character, intellectual achievement, aesthetic goods and various kinds of affection and social emotion.¹³ If we follow Rashdall's argument, he distinguishes between good and pleasure. Good is some idea (or end) that we hold on to independent of the pleasure in many circumstances.

Rule utilitarians like Brad Hooker (1957-), John Harsanyi (1920-2000) etc., are on the other hand, not concerned with any particular action and its consequences directly, but considers the consequences of adopting some general rule, such as 'keeping a promise'. Rule utilitarianism will adopt a rule if the consequences of its general adoption are better than those of the adoption of some alternative rule. Rule utilitarianism appeals to the utility of the rule of promise keeping in general, not to the particular act of promise keeping. Hence, rule utilitarianism can be understood as indirect utilitarianism which is concerned with the consequences of the adoption of a general rule as the guiding principle for moral and political action. The basic idea behind rule utilitarianism is that

¹¹ Moore elaborated ideal utilitarianism in the last chapter of his book *Principia Ethica*, where he discussed about different goods which are different from pleasure, like aesthetic good, about knowledge and also about personal affection, pp. 184-225.

¹² See Shaver 2013, P. 302. Shaver has quoted from Rashdall 1913, *Ethics*.

¹³Ibid., p. 303. See Shaver's quote from Rashdall 1924, *The Theory of Good and Evil*.

instead of an individual decision-making procedure, we evaluate codes of moral rules. The idea of a code is the set of rules where the consequences of everyone following them would be better than the consequences of everyone following any other set of rules. The right act for rule utilitarianism is the act called for by the ideal code. J.J.C Smart (1967) tries to see Kantianism as one form of rule utilitarianism since in Kant's moral philosophy the categorical imperative is considered as universal command of moral law. An action would be right if it conforms to the categorical imperative. However, this version of Smart is objectionable; Kantianism is strongly against consequences and does not regard the general happiness or utility that arises or may possibly arise from the application of the rule as the ground of justification. Rule utilitarianism can be summed up in the words of Brad Hooker, 'An act is wrong if and only if it is forbidden by the code of rules whose internalization by the overwhelming majority of everyone everywhere in each new generation has maximum expected value in terms of well-being (with some priority for the worst off). The calculation of a code expected value includes all costs of getting the code internalized. If in terms of expected value two or more codes are better than the rest but equal to one another, the one closest to conventional morality determines what acts are wrong'.¹⁴

It will be important to discuss the differences between consequentialism and utilitarianism so that utilitarianism as one aspect of consequentialism can be differentiated from deontology. It is widely believed that consequentialism¹⁵ in its most general form says that it is by 'total outcome', by the whole formed by an action and its consequences, that what is done is judged right or wrong. A consequentialist theory of ethics which identifies certain states of affairs as good says that rightness or goodness of action consists in their productive relationships between these states of affairs. Consequentialism claims that actions are to be chosen on the basis of the state of affairs which are their consequences. Utilitarianism as we have discussed so far, consists of consequentialism together with the identification of the best state of affairs with the state of affairs in which there is most happiness, most pleasure, or the maximum satisfaction of desire.¹⁶ Hence, utilitarianism can be understood as one specific form of consequentialism. The specificity lies in the identification of particular states of affair (consequence) as the parameter of moral judgment. In the case of consequentialism the state of affair is open to any state of affair or consequences. In the words of Sen,

¹⁴ As quoted in Mulgan 2007, p. 120, from Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*.

¹⁵ As cited in William & Sen 1982, the term 'consequentialism' is supposed to have coined by G.E.M Anscombe, 1958.

¹⁶ The distinction made here between consequentialism and utilitarianism is from Philippa Foot's article 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues', 1985. Frederick Rosen (2010) however gives a different view about consequentialism and utilitarianism; he says that both consequentialism and hedonism are two elements of modern utilitarianism. Foot and Rosen have contrasting views about consequentialism and utilitarianism. For Foot utilitarianism comes under the broader idea of consequentialism whereas in the case of Rosen, consequentialism is a narrower concept which is subsumed under utilitarianism. But in my opinion consequentialism is the broader concept.

utilitarianism is a species of consequentialism which requires simply adding up individual welfare or utilities to assess the consequences, a property that is sometimes called the sum ranking.

At this juncture one could question whether utilitarianism takes rights seriously or not. In my opinion utilitarianism gives greater priority to what is good than to right. However, there is a link between right and good in utilitarianism. Utilitarians often talk of goodness and rightness as connected. For example, according to Mill the principle of utility holds that 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness'.¹⁷ For Sidgwick's ethical theory, the action in a given circumstance is objectively right provided it produces or will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole. Rashdall, as an advocate of ideal utilitarianism, holds the position that actions are right and wrong to the degree that they tend to produce, for all, an ideal end or good. On a similar note, Moore states that utilitarianism means to choose between two actions, one brings intrinsically a better total effect than the other. In this circumstance, one has to choose the action which would bring a better total effect and it would be wrong to choose otherwise.

From Mill to Moore it is clear that there is a connection between rightness and goodness. For all of these utilitarians, I would argue that rightness is dependent upon the concept of good. Unless we have the concept of what is good or the good of the action it is not possible for us to judge whether the action is right or wrong. Here, goodness refers to the consequences or possible end of the action. This utilitarian position about rightness and goodness places utilitarianism in sharp contrast with deontological reasoning. According to those who uphold deontology, moral justification rests entirely on the act itself (or to some principle of practical reason) without looking for the consequences of the act. In deontology, good consequences of the act does not make the action right or wrong but rightness or wrongness of the action depends on the right moral determination of the will. Deontological theory adheres to basic rules, duties, and rights of individuals and groups which are determined *a priori* without referring to the good. For deontologists, these *a priori* rules and duties are universal regardless of what consequence or good they produce. Persons would act on basic obligations and duties based on the guidelines of basic moral principles. A good example of deontological theory is to act according to respect and dignity of the other fellow based on the moral principles which are believed to have universality. Whereas utilitarianism, like other consequentialist approaches, represents a moral reasoning which upholds the view that the moral justification of an act depends on the consequences that the action produces. If my action produces good result for me or for society or otherwise directed towards a good which is antecedently determined, then my action is morally justified as right action. Thus, for utilitarianism, rightness is not

¹⁷Mill 1949, *Utilitarianism*, p. 8.

independently determined and justification lies in the fulfilment of proposed ends or goods. For deontology, rightness is independent or prior to the concept of the good.

In conclusion I would say that utilitarianism is a pervasive and powerful normative position in ethics. It is one form of consequentialism whereby the right action is considered in terms of consequences produced. As I have discussed, classical utilitarians like Bentham and Mill equated pleasure with the good. Whereas others like Hare replace pleasure with preferences. On the whole, utilitarians attempt to maximize the overall good which comprises of the good of the others, as well as one's own good. A survey of all the varieties of utilitarianism reveals that it is distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality, in the sense that everyone's happiness or good has the same value. A specific individual's good count for no more than anyone else's good. Further, the reason for promoting the overall good remains the same for all.

