UTILITARIANISM

DEFINITION OF CLASSICAL UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism derives from the Latin utilis, meaning useful. It is a consequential morality. An action is good if it produces beneficial results / consequences. There are therefore no intrinsic goods (goods that are good irrespective of consequences). Rather utilitarianism is instrumental in its approach – the ends (results / consequences) justify the means. The consequential good is defined according to the Principle of Utility (usefulness) “The good is that which will bring about the greatest sum of pleasure and the least sum of pain for the greatest number.” (Jeremy Bentham)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE ENLIGHTENMENT: Known as the as The Age of Reason, The Enlightenment was a time when great optimism was expressed in humanity’s intellectual powers. Through the writings of Voltaire and David Hume, theological dogma, with its emphasis on faith and ecclesiastical authority, was viewed with suspicion and scepticism. Reason, empiricism and human autonomy were placed over and above metaphysical belief and God. “Take in hand any volume of divinity or school of metaphysics…and let us ask: Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” (David Hume) Utilitarians reject God as the author of morality, as empirically God’s existence cannot be proven, and reject the Bible as a source of authority with the principle of utility - as no one can doubt the reality of pleasure and pain.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: In 1789 the battle-cry of the French Revolution was Rousseau’s “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” which reflected the challenge by the masses against the elite aristocracy. The political structure of France, where the wealthy noble-people lorded it over the majority of the poor peasants, came to an abrupt end; many of the landed gentry losing their lives at the guillotine. Sentiments of sympathy (advocated by David Hume) and benevolence (Jean Jacques Rousseau) for the well being and happiness of others became a central aim of ethics throughout Europe
**Victorian Britain:** England in the 1800s was a class-riddled society. Charles Dickens, in his novel *Hard Times*, highlights enforced debtors prisons, exploitation of child labour and the subjugation of women. The pioneers of utilitarianism, *Jeremy Bentham, Mary Wollstonecraft* and *John Stuart Mill* campaigned for social change – promoting structures which would enable the majority of people to live fulfilled and happy lives. eg. Penal and Electoral Reform, greater equality for women.

**Bentham’s Principle of utility**

“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.” *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Interestingly, the rationale behind the Principle of Utility is *Psychological hedonism*; as Bentham believed that people are motivated by the desire for pleasure and seeking the absence from pain. These two factors, pleasure and pain, according to Bentham, determine how people behave. It is significant to realise just how radical Bentham’s utilitarianism was. He considered that to talk of *abstract inalienable rights*, such as those found in natural law or the divine command theory of ethics, was “nonsense on stilts.” Talk of rights, according to Bentham, only makes sense when they are based upon observable, empirical, facts. Bentham’s philosophy is that of a *reductive empiricist*; everything is reduced to what can be proven by sense experience. He therefore believed that the language of metaphysics would be replaced by the principle of utility within the arena of ethics.

Just as Newton’s laws of science were capable of explaining how the world is governed by universal laws of nature which causally determine action, so too Bentham reasoned that ethics was a science. Good, he claimed, could be scientifically proven according to the *principle of utility* and the *felicific calculus*.

**Bentham’s Felicific calculus**

Bentham reacted strongly against a rule based approach to morality; be it through the church, Bible, natural law or conscience. Rather, he replaced such sources of authority with a simple calculation which an individual can use in order to work out which decision would promote the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people. The felicific calculation (from the latin meaning fruitful) was based upon seven criteria: *duration, intensity, propinquity (nearness or remoteness) extent, certainty, purity and fecundity (likely to lead to additional pleasures).* To help people remember, it is thought that Bentham made up a little mnemonic jingle, “Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure, such marks in pleasures and in pain endure. Such pleasures seek if private be thy end: If it be public, wide let them extend. Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view: If pains must come, let them extend few.” Bentham’s felicific
calculus was egalitarian and democratic. “Everybody is to count for one, and nobody for more than one.” (Bentham) No one person’s pleasure is greater than another’s. In keeping with Enlightenment thinking the Felicific Calculus was a rational and scientific way to measure pleasure; which is consistent with Bentham’s claim that goodness could be empirically proven. (Socrates Says: When answering an examination question on utilitarianism try and avoid simply listing the felicific calculus – as this only demonstrates knowledge (something which lower grade students can achieve). Rather, select a particular feature of the felicific calculus, perhaps propinquity, and show how it might be difficult to apply in practice e.g. Is the pleasure near or remote in terms of space (geographically close) or time – may have an impact in years to come. Think about applying the felicific calculus to a national or international example to illustrate further understanding and evaluation: America withdrawing from the Kyoto agreement; Bush claiming the American way of life is non-negotiable. Can the felicific calculus overcome such political short-termism?)

**Benefits of Classical Utilitarianism**

**Appeals to Human Nature:** Human beings share a common interest in the variety of utilitarian strands which have developed historically, be it the notion of a universal feeling of benevolence and sympathy for human kind, as suggested by David Hume, or an altruistic desire for people’s pleasure and happiness, by Bentham and Mill. More recent versions of utilitarianism, such as Ideal (G.E. Moore) or Preference (Peter Singer) utilitarianism take seriously the value of friendship, aesthetic appreciation (Ideal) and people’s right to express their likes and dislikes (preferences).

**Utilitarianism is Fair, Objective and Democratic:** Bentham’s felicific calculus claims that “Everybody is to count for one, and nobody for more than one.” In short, no one person’s pleasure is greater than another’s. Historically, utilitarianism radically challenged the elitist aristocratic system that offered privilege to the select few at the expense of the majority. In its stead was the Rousseau’s battle-cry of the French Revolution: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” Equally significant is the application of utilitarianism to social developments in the nineteenth century; where utilitarianism may be seen as being compatible with Marxist democracy, in giving the proletariat their just rewards for their labour and the authority and power to determine their future.

**Appropriate Ethic for a Secular and Scientific Age:** In a Post Enlightenment world, with the challenge to metaphysical and theistic foundations, utilitarianism has a high regard for individual autonomy. Although the felicific calculus was not the resounding success that Bentham may have envisaged, the importance of pleasure and happiness of people’s lives, here and now, is something which governments take seriously. Peter Singer’s Preference Utilitarianism recognises the importance of
respecting people’s desires and inclinations when assessing moral dilemmas. It is significant that Preference Utilitarianism wishes to replace the sanctity of human life with the criteria of personhood (sentience, rationality, self-consciousness, the ability to communicate and to establish relationships). Due to advances in scientific technology it is possible to maintain life even when there is a minimal quality e.g. life support machines, say in the latter stages of Motor Neurone Disease. Peter Singer argues that such an ethic not only respects the dignity and preferences of the person involved but also may be cost effective, as in a world of limited resources it may be regarded as being more sensible to respect a patient’s wish to die, e.g. legalise voluntary euthanasia and so reduce needless suffering, and equally be able to redistribute funds which would otherwise have been spent keeping terminally ill patients alive who, significantly, wished to die and had minimal quality of life.

**Common Ground with Christian ethics:** Bentham’s Principle of Utility has been compared to Jesus’ Golden Rule, “Love your neighbour as yourself” or “Do unto others as you would have they do unto you.” Indeed, the rationale behind the Christian teaching of redemption may be understood in a utilitarian manner: the vicarious suffering by Jesus on the cross to redeem humanity is the self-sacrifice of the one for the needs of the many. So it may be regarded that utilitarianism upholds the message of a benevolent God showing interest for the well-being of human beings; but (perhaps ironically?) rejects belief in the existence of such a metaphysical deity!

**Utilitarianism Suitable for Government:** Bentham’s and Mill’s political and social reforms had significant impacts on public policy e.g. penal reform, greater right for women and children. Indeed, Bentham’s felicific calculus was the philosophy behind the Whig government’s Social Reform of the New Poor Law. As Edward Chadwick, introducing the bill in parliament cited, “Man seeks pleasure and flees pain.” As a consequence The New Poor Law (1834) stated that life inside the workhouse must be less eligible (pleasant) than life as an independent labourer. Further, no able bodied man should be able to get relief outside the workhouse. More recently the Labour government of the Blair administration has taken seriously its duty and commitment to promote the quality of life for the overwhelming majority of its electorate by focusing on a social policy programme of Education, Health and Law and Order reform.

**Problems of Classical Utilitarianism**

**Commits the Naturalistic Fallacy:** As G.E. Moore famously argued in Principia Ethica, 1903, one cannot deduce an ought from an is; one cannot move from fact to values, or, one cannot move from epistemology (knowledge) to ethics. The reasoning behind the naturalistic fallacy is clear: from the mere statement of psychological fact that people actually desire happiness for its own sake one cannot deduce the evaluative conclusion that pleasure is desirable, i.e. that it ought to be desired. For example, people
may desire something that they ought not to desire, something which is not really desirable. e.g people may desire to take hard drugs as it produces pleasure. However, such a statement is vulnerable to the open question, as one may ask: But is taking hard drugs good? (For more information on the Naturalistic Fallacy please go to the notes or power-point presentation on Meta-ethics, by John Waters)

**The Felicific Calculus Is Too Impractical:** When making decisions in the heat of the moment, lacking reflection, it is not practical to apply the felicific calculus to moral dilemmas. Adding up “pleasure units” is a dubious exercise and is difficult to measure accurately. Equally, the whole idea of assessing different varieties and intensities of pleasures is too subjective. An important development in utilitarian thought arose when J.S. Mill argued that instead of the felicific calculus people should come up with general principles which over the passage of time have promoted the greatest happiness. By following such principles and rules individual judgements are supported by past events and so are less pressurised and less subjective in their moral judgements. This development is a major reason why some have labelled Mill a “weak rule” utilitarian – as he advocated following such rules as opposed to continually using the felicific calculus or even his own Greatest Happiness Principle.

**Principle Of Utility May Undermine Freedom:** In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, a utopian society is projected where people are genetically engineered with differing levels of intelligence, ranging from Alphas to Epsilons (A-E). Citizens simultaneously receive state indoctrination and soma drugs to promote a feeling of happiness. Although Brave New World is a work of fiction it is noteworthy that in today’s secular society modern day prophets may be thought to be playwrights and poets. An example of Huxley’s dystopic vision of the future may be testified by the very high number of people in the UK who are prescribed the medication of Prozac as a means of keeping depression at bay. Perhaps more alarming is the international example of State indoctrination by the Chinese government witnessed in 1989 when the Chinese government suppressed the student uprising in Tiananmen Square. The Communist Chinese government claimed that the State, not the educated students, knew what was in the people’s best interest. Giving students the civil liberty to protest in their desire for greater autonomy and freedom was not deemed acceptable. Of central importance to both of these examples is who should have the authority to determine what is regarded to be of utility and why?

“I’M CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO BE UNHAPPY” (John, The Savage, *Brave New World*) In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, John, the Savage, rejects a life of artificial drug (soma) induced happiness. When questioned by the Controller, John asserts his right to be unhappy. John understands that a life of depth and meaning is one which embraces and learns from hardship and sorrow. A life which pursues a drug induced happiness is one which misses the richness that comes from experiencing pain and sacrifice. Such a philosophy of life is compatible with the thinking of Professor John Hick, who argues
in his Irenaean theodicy that “Virtues are better hard won than ready made.” Challenge and struggle are what enables life to have meaning, appreciation and ultimately purpose. Such is a “vale of soul making,” which is a person-making world, as opposed to a “toy-world,” which would not promote moral growth and development.

**Utilitarianism’s Universal Altruism Lacks Justification:** Utilitarian thinking follows the following process: Each person desires his or her own happiness; therefore each person ought to aim at his or her own happiness; therefore everyone ought to aim at the happiness of everyone. However, there seems to be a serious problem in jumping from an egotistical position to that of altruism. Supporters of utilitarian altruism have appealed to the ideas of David Hume, who argued that innate within human beings is an elementary feeling for the happiness of humanity and a dislike of seeing them in misery. Equally, the pioneering capitalist Adam Smith thought that economic growth should be pursued as a means of bettering conditions for all. Smith claimed even economic inequality caused greater wealth for all. Finally, Bentham’s original philosophy regarded society as a collection of individuals who work together for the common good. However, in practice there are serious flaws to such an altruistic, utopian vision. Bentham’s and Smith’s premise is undermined by Marxist arguments that in a Capitalist society the competition for limited resources means the bourgeois will seek to exploit the proletariat. Furthermore, world leaders have been seen to fall foul of putting altruism into government policy; sadly soon after being elected President of the USA George Bush withdrew America from its obligations of the Kyoto agreement, claiming “The American way of life is non-negotiable.”

**People Are Separate and Unique:** Professor Simon Blackburn has argued that “Utilitarianism does not take seriously the separateness of persons – the idea being that it subordinates the rights of the individual to solidarity with the general welfare.” *(Being Good, p.92)* For example, in World War II the right of the pacifist Methodist minister, Lord Donald Soper, to speak out against the war was denied as it was thought his words would undermine the war effort and were detrimental to the general welfare of the country. (Though note, below, J.S. Mill’s opposition to such a policy.)

**Will of the Majority Does Not Always Make for Good Law:** Strange as it may seem the will of the majority does not always make for good law. For example, the majority of the UK public are in favour of legalising voluntary euthanasia. *(2001: 82% Opinion Poll)* However, there is a danger that people may be easily manipulated by the media (note how public opinion fluctuates over a short period of time and is dependent on how the question is put) and all too often follow their desires and inclinations and fail to think through the implications of their decisions. eg. How might the ethos of society change, affecting weak and vulnerable people, such as the elderly? Interestingly Mill was all too aware of this criticism of Bentham’s utilitarianism. In *On Liberty*, Mill drew an important distinction
between public and private acts. He famously remarked, “Your freedom to punch me ends where my nose begins.” Any law which has a serious detrimental effect on the qualitative well being of others is wrong.

**Not simply the amount of pleasure produced but how that pleasure is distributed:** The intuitionist W.D. Ross raised a serious objection to Bentham’s utilitarianism, as he considered it was inadequate to focus purely on the amount of pleasure produced, for the greatest number, but other factors should also be taken into consideration. W.D. Ross was particularly concerned that Bentham’s utilitarianism appeared to ignore the demands of justice. In particular, justice is not concerned simply with the amount of pleasure produced but rather how, and on what basis, that pleasure is distributed. An important question which ought to be assessed is, do people and/or groups deserve to receive pleasure? There would also be something implicitly unjust in raising the quality of pleasure for the greatest number, by a small amount, at the expense of severe suffering of a minority group and yet Bentham’s utilitarianism could precisely justify this type of decision.

**Utilitarianism is counter-intuitive:** A further criticism of W.D. Ross is that utilitarianism ignores intrinsic goods that are counter, or contrary, to our intuitive, innate, sense of right and wrong. For example, even if it could be shown that happiness was greatest by lying to people there is something simply wrong about lying and deception which would make people wish to reject such an ethic.

**Utilitarianism lacks intrinsic goods:** As a consequential, instrumental morality it lacks intrinsic goods, such as trust, honesty and dignity. This creates an ethos of uncertainty where people are never really sure if they are valued. In the early 1980s many middle-aged businessmen, who had shown great loyalty accruing high profits for their companies were sacked over night; to be replaced by YUPPIES (Young Urban Professional People). YUPPIES were considered to be of greater immediate use to the company, being younger and so cheaper in the short run.

**Utilitarianism requires a non-utilitarian framework:** In order for the greatest happiness for the greatest number to work Professor Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that a non-utilitarian framework is required, where intrinsic, deontological values enable people to flourish. eg. Happiness may be promoted in a society that upholds intrinsic values of justice, liberty and honesty.