


# Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

## Handout 5

### Utilitarianism: Bentham, Mill

**THE REIGN OF PLEASURE.** Bentham is off to a rather bombastic start: “Nature has placed etc.” Pain and pleasure determine (1) what we *shall* do and (2) what we *ought to* do. So they govern the actual course of our behaviour (better: its actual motivation) and also its morally right course. This corresponds to the doctrines of *psychological hedonism* and *ethical hedonism* respectively. It is somewhat unclear whether Bentham also endorses *psychological egoism*, the view that we are motivated by *our own* pleasure and pain. Many people believe that he does. Even if he does, though, it is still unclear whether his moral theory is informed by it. 


**THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY.** Bentham continues by giving a more precise formula for the criterion of moral value. An action *A* is morally right to the extent it tends to promote happiness. *A* is morally bad to the extent it tends to diminish happiness. There are a few things to take note of here. (1) ‘Happiness’ is explicitly interpreted as a combination of pleasures and pains (I.iii). (2) Moral value is assigned to actions. Nothing is said, for example, of character. (3) Bentham is careful to always use the locution of ‘tendency’. (4) Moral value resides in the impact the action has upon the world. This is the doctrine of *consequentialism*.

*Question 1.* Delete the locution of ‘tendency’ from the principle of utility. What is the difference between this version of the principle and the version given by Bentham?

**THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY.** Bentham observes that the principle of utility is basic: nothing can be used to prove it. However, we still have good *reasons* to endorse it. Those who rejected it were merely confused.

*Question 2.* Why to believe in the principle of utility?

**HOW TO MEASURE PLEASURE?** The question one may ask is: how to compare the pleasure of reading *War and Peace* with the pleasure of swimming in the Maldives? Which of these experiences is more pleasant? We could name a few factors: (1) the momentary intensity of pleasure (call it ‘enjoyment’), (2) duration of the experience, (3) purity of the experience (e.g., swimming is mixed with some pain).

But the question asked in chapter IV is different. The question there is: how can I choose between staying at home reading *War and Peace* and flying to the Maldives? The choice must be determined by the tendency to produce pleasure. So the question becomes: how to compare the tendencies of the actions about to be chosen? That is why, in addition to the factors already mentioned, Bentham lists certainty, propinquity, fecundity, and extent. 

*Question 3.* Should the assumption of psychological egoism clash with including ‘extent’ on the list of factors in the determination of pleasure, and how?

**MILL’S PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY.** Mill’s aim in chapter 2 is to confront different objections made against ‘utilitarianism’ (= consequentialism + hedonism). Mill begins by rehearsing Bentham’s criterion of moral value of actions. *A* is morally right to the extent it promotes pleasure. *A* is morally bad to the extent it promotes pain. In other words, moral value resides in the impact the action has upon the world (the doctrine of consequentialism). This impact is evaluated by the amount of ‘happiness’ it produced, while happiness itself is interpreted as pleasure and absence of pain (so we get the doctrine of hedonism).

**LOW PLEASURES.** This is a problem for hedonism. All that matters for moral evaluation is the amount of pleasure. The reason is that the only ultimate value in the world is pleasure. Is this so? A problem arises which is best put with regard to a *life*. A life of a care-free playboy is better, on this account, than a life of a struggling composer (e.g. Schubert), which contains a fair amount of pain. So utilitarianism calls on us to increase pleasure at the expense of any other goal. Not only is this scandalous, but also it does not cohere with our deep-seated beliefs.

*Example 4.* A more extreme case: imagine a frog floating in a warm lake. Suppose it lives for 500 years and receives a great deal of pleasure: food, sex, and the like. By the way, being a frog, he never gets bored. And imagine Schubert who creates music and lives for 30 years experiencing lots of suffering (but also some pleasures). Then, according to utilitarianism, it is better to be a frog than to be a Schubert.

*Question 5.* Can we coherently propose to Schubert to become a frog? Does it matter?

**QUALITY OF PLEASURE.** Some utilitarians and ordinary people find no fault with the frog cases. Not Mill. In response he mounts the theory of the quality of pleasure. The estimation of pleasure depends not only on its quantity (intensity), but also on its quality. If one pleasure is of higher quality than another, then even a huge amount of the first would still be less valuable than a small amount of the second. Thus my activity of reading a book for one hour could be more pleasant than days of (enjoyable) scuba diving. We can think of this formula for the value of  $A$ :

$$V(A) = k_1 \times Q_1 + k_2 \times Q_2,$$

where  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$  indicate how much quality and quantity respectively the action has (on the scale  $[1, 10]$ ) and  $k_i$  represents the significance we attach to quality and quantity. Now  $k_1 \gg k_2$  to ensure that quality beats quantity. Then, for instance, the values of reading and diving could be calculated as follows:

$$V(R) = 1000 \times 9 + 5 \times 1 = 9005$$

$$V(D) = 1000 \times 2 + 5 \times 9 = 2045.$$

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