

Why has J.S. Mill's version of Utilitarianism proved to be more acceptable than Bentham's

Utilitarianism began life as an ethical principle under Jeremy Bentham who theorised that an action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In its original form the argument had many flaws so John Stuart Mill decided to defend the principle of Utility against its critics by refining its ideas making them more practical in society.

Jeremy Bentham's theory of Utilitarianism was based on an observation, that the definition "good" in terms of "pleasure" and established that two things are intrinsically good namely pleasure itself and freedom from pain. His logical progression deduced that we ought to increase what is good by increasing what brings us pleasure or freedom from pain. Thus the Principle of Utility was created - "act in such a way as to bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number working to increase the total sum of pleasure. Mill felt that he could strengthen the argument for Utilitarianism by clarifying its points. In his famous argument he simplifies the terms "happiness" and "pleasure" used by Bentham as one major criticism is that the word "pleasure" does not have the same meaning as the word "good". He attempts to silence critics of the Epicurian substitution of words by his good but less than airtight argument. His flaws lay again in meaning of words, as desirable is used in two different ways- "can be desired" and "ought to be desired". Also he begins by stating the obvious that individuals desire their own happiness but concludes that everyone's happiness is desirable to everyone else. More correctly it should read "desirable to the individual" and then the argument ceases to work. However Mill did not succeed in abolishing all the shortcomings of Bentham's theory. Even the restated version does not avoid the problem of subordinating the rights of the individual to the happiness of the majority. He also could not avoid the uncertainty of the outcomes that stems from the fact the argument is teleological, where deciding whether an action is right or wrong depends on the consequences not the motives. The obvious problem with this is that it is impossible to know all the outcomes of a certain dilemma. For example if we were to shoot Saddam Hussein because of the pain he causes other people, we can assume that if he is dead it will maximise happiness but not if by this action there is an uprising and World War III begins where far more people may be hurt. We can only guess what is probable to happen but cannot predict all the outcomes.

One of the appeals of Utilitarianism lies in its practical value, that it can be applied quickly to any moral dilemma. This is done in a mathematical form, by computing pleasure in the Hedonic Calculus. This is Bentham's way of deciding on the correct or most appropriate course of action by analysing the pleasure that arises from it and comparing it with alternatives. He identified seven factors involved in this process, Intensity, Duration, Certainty, Propinquity, Purity, Fecundity, and Extent which help us weigh and assess the quantity of happiness. One of the problems with the Hedonic Calculus was that it judged the quantity of happiness i.e. the number of people but not the quality of the happiness therefore problems arise in assessing its value. Different pleasures bring different amounts of happiness to different people but in Bentham's theory all pleasures are equal. This received much criticism from Victorian society as like Epicurus he commanded all to enjoy "swinish" pleasures which were frowned upon by the educated classes at this time.

Mill attempted to tackle this pitfall by acknowledging that there were higher and lower pleasures. His proof was based on human experience and proposed that no one who has experienced a higher pleasure would sacrifice that knowledge for an experience, however intense, of a lower pleasure. This is illustrated perfectly in the play "Educating Rita" by C. P. Snow where a working class woman experiences the higher pleasures of literature and feels as if she no longer belongs in a pub experiencing lower pleasures. It is therefore possible to verify which pleasures actually do rate higher than others by the experience of those who have known both. Mill's version is deals more adequately with what we regard as valuable about human life i.e. there are better and worse ways of being human. As higher pleasures also include that of moral feeling and wellbeing, for example the joy of a quiet conscience felt by helping others they receive special weighting. They have a higher value than they enjoyed previously under Bentham where they were merely a possibility amongst others so Mill has tackled the criticism that morality is not taken seriously enough. Mill has acknowledged the complexity of the concepts of "happiness" and "pleasure". This system appealed to the reforming element of society who pushed for education reforms so that more could experience higher pleasures and have a better quality of life. Mill's theory encounters some problems of its own as this separation of the pleasures into two categories makes the hedonic calculus impossible to execute, as instead of one scale there are now two. How can higher and lower be compared? Is the pleasure felt by ten people at the theatre watching Verdi's "Tosca" worth more than a hundred at the cinema watching the latest "Rocky" film? Now that the quality is different they cannot be measured against each other therefore nullifying the calculus. In reality his attempt to assess the quality of an action end in stating that higher pleasures are morally superior and therefore preferable. But Mill's empirical generalisation that no-one who has experienced a higher pleasure would sacrifice it for a lower one is not always correct as it does not account for aesthetics of the individual.

Mill's version of Utilitarianism is more acceptable in practice as it recognises issues that Bentham left out of his theorem. His method of qualitative assessment of happiness is a progression from Bentham's solely quantitative one which recognises educated pursuits above swinish pleasures. Moral issues are given special treatment under his scheme of higher pleasures which acknowledges our higher regard for them as human beings. He also attempted to tackle the unstable use of Epicurean words but could not overcome issues like the loss of justice or the difficulty of knowing all possible outcomes. His version though more refined is still flawed leaving a gap for theologians of the future to fill.