

Phil 2, August 29, 2007

The road to utilitarianism:

First conclusion (Hedonism):

What is good for us as an end is pleasure, and what is bad for us as an end is pain.

The distinction between what is good as a means and what is good as an end:

- Good as a *means*: good because of it helps to bring about something else that is good.
- But this chain of means has to end somewhere. There has to be something that is:
- Good as an *end*: good because of what it is in itself and not because of what it brings about.

Second conclusion (Aggregation):

The outcome—what happens—is better if the sum of what is good for each person minus what is bad for each person is greater.

Third conclusion (Consequentialism):

We are morally required to do what would produce the best outcome.

If we put all three conclusions together, we get:

Pure Utilitarianism: We are morally required to do what would produce the greatest total of pleasure minus pain.

Bentham's official argument for the "principle of utility":

We have just reached, by different route, the "principle of utility" of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Officially, Bentham argues for it by elimination.

Step 1: "A principle may be different from that of utility in two ways: 1. By being constantly opposed to it: this is the case with a principle which may be termed the principle of *asceticism*. 2. By being sometimes opposed to it, and sometimes not, as it may happen: this is the case with another, which may be termed the principle of *sympathy* and *antipathy*" (II, 2).

Step 2: The principle of asceticism is insane.

Step 3: The principle of sympathy and antipathy, Bentham elaborates, is: "that principle which approves or disapproves of certain actions, not on account of their tending to augment the happiness... of the party whose interest is in question, but merely because a man finds himself disposed to approve or disapprove of them: holding up that approbation or disapprobation as a sufficient reason for itself, and disclaiming the necessity of looking out for any extrinsic ground" (II, 11). Therefore, if we subscribe to the principle of sympathy and antipathy, then we approve of actions simply because we, personally, like them. In other words, we don't offer any *justification*.

Step 4: Only the principle of utility remains.

The argument appears to equivocate on the phrase: “the principle of sympathy and antipathy.” An *equivocation* occurs is when a term or phrase means one thing earlier in the argument, but another thing later in the argument.

An unargued premise(?): To offer a reason for approving of an action is to appeal to the action’s utility, or tendency to produce pleasure overall.

The real appeal of utilitarianism?

Bentham’s official argument is not very convincing. The real force of the position may lie elsewhere.

1. Pure utilitarianism provides an *independent* test of the truth or falsity of received moral ideas. The test is, moreover, largely empirical. (Can it be *completely* empirical?)
2. It *explains*, in a simple, unified way, why the moral ideas that pass the test are true and those that fail the test are false.
3. It promises, at least in principle, a *determinate method* for answering any moral question that might arise.
4. It rests on a *few plausible ideas*: that pleasure is the only thing good as an end, that no one’s pleasure counts for more or for less than anyone else’s, that we ought to do what would do the most good. What are the alternatives?

In other words, Bentham’s real case for utilitarianism may be:

Methodological (1–3): “You have no independent test, no explanation, no way to resolve conflicts. Your whole theory is simply a ratification of what you already believe.”

Substantive (4): “What’s so good about the things that you believe in—justice, rights, liberty—if *not* that they promote pleasure overall?”

Preview:

As we saw earlier, utilitarianism is made up of three parts:

- (1) Hedonism
- (2) Aggregation
- (3) Consequentialism

In the next few classes, we will examine each of these parts, starting, on Friday, with hedonism. Is pleasure really the only thing that is good as an end?