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Chapter 1: The Principle of Utility

1. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. They alone point out what we *ought to* do and determine what we *shall* do; the standard of right and wrong, and the chain of causes and effects, are both fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, all we say, all we think; every effort we can make to throw off our subjection to pain and pleasure will only serve to demonstrate and confirm it. A man may claim to reject their rule but in reality he will remain subject to it. The **principle of utility**¹ recognises this subjection, and

makes it the basis of a system that aims to have the edifice of happiness built by the hands of reason and of law. Systems that try to question it deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice [see Glossary] instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation! It is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

2. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work, so I should start by giving an explicit and determinate account of what it is. By 'the principle² of utility' is meant

¹ [Note added in 1822.] This label has recently been joined or replaced by the **greatest happiness principle**. This is an abbreviated version of

The principle stating that the greatest happiness of all those whose interests are involved is the right and proper—and the only right and proper and universally desirable—end of human action; of human action in every situation, and in particular in the situation of functionaries exercising the powers of Government.

The word 'utility' doesn't point to the ideas of pleasure and pain as clearly as 'happiness' does; nor does it lead us to the thought of *how many* interests are affected, though this number contributes more than any other factor to the formation of the standard here in question, namely the only standard of right and wrong by which the propriety of human conduct in every situation can properly be tested. This lack of a clear enough connection between •the ideas of happiness and pleasure on the one hand and the •idea of utility on the other has sometimes operated all too efficiently as a bar to the acceptance. . . .of this principle.

² The word 'principle' [he suggests Latin roots for the word] is a term of very vague and very extensive signification; it is applied to anything that is conceived to be a foundation or beginning of a series of operations; in some cases physical operations, but in the present case mental ones. The principle I am discussing may be taken for an act of the mind; a sentiment; a sentiment of approval; a sentiment that when applied to an action approves of its utility, taking that to be the quality of it by which the measure of approval or disapproval of it ought to be governed.

the principle that approves or disapproves of *every* action according to the tendency it appears to have to increase or lessen—i.e. to promote or oppose—the happiness of the person or group whose interest is in question.

I say ‘of *every* action’, not only of private individuals but also of governments.

3. By ‘utility’ is meant the property of something whereby it tends •to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all equivalent in the present case) or (this being the same thing) •to prevent the happening of mischief [see Glossary], pain, evil [see Glossary], or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered. If that party is the community in general, then the happiness of the community; if it’s a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

4. ‘The interest of the community’ is one of the most general expressions in the terminology of morals; no wonder its meaning is often lost! When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body composed of the individuals who are thought of as being as it were its members [see Glossary]. Then what is the interest of the community? It is the sum of the interests of the members who compose it.

5. It is pointless to talk of the interest of the community without understanding what the interest of the individual is.¹ A thing is said to ‘promote the interest’ (or be ‘for the interest’) of an individual when it tends to increase the sum total of his pleasures or (the same thing) to lessen the sum total of his pains.

6–7. An action then may be said to conform to the principle of utility. . . .when its tendency to increase the happiness of the community is greater than any tendency it has to lessen

it. And the same holds for measures of government, which are merely one kind of action performed by one or more particular persons.

8. When someone thinks that an action (especially a measure of government) conforms to the principle of utility, he may find it convenient for purposes of discourse to •imagine a kind of *law* or *dictate* of utility and to •speak of the action in question as conforming to such a law or dictate.

9. A man may be said to be a ‘partisan’ of the principle of utility when his approval or disapproval of any action (or governmental measure) is fixed by and proportional to the tendency he thinks it has to increase or to lessen the community’s happiness. . . .

10. Of an action that conforms to the principle of utility one may always say that

•it ought to be done,

or at least that

•it is not something that ought not to be done.

One may say also that

•it is right that it should be done; it is a right action;

or at least that

•it is not wrong that it should be done; it is not a wrong action.

When thus interpreted, the words ‘ought’ and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and others of that sort have a meaning; otherwise they have none.

11. Has the rightness of this principle ever been formally contested?

next sentence: It should seem that it had, by those who have not known what they have been meaning.

¹ ‘Interest’ is one of those words that can’t be defined in the ordinary way because it isn’t a species of some wider genus. [Unlike (for example) ‘square’ falls under the genus ‘rectangle’ and can be defined through that and the differentia ‘equilateral’.]

perhaps meaning: It seems to have been contested, by people who didn't understand what they were contesting.

Is it susceptible of any direct proof? It seems not, because something that is used to prove everything else can't itself be proved; a chain of proofs must start somewhere. To give such a proof is as impossible as it is needless.

12. Not that there has ever been *anyone*, however stupid or perverse, who hasn't often and perhaps usually deferred to the principle of utility. [The next sentence is exactly what Bentham wrote.] By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it; if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men. Yet there may not have been many, even of the most intelligent, who have been disposed to embrace the principle just as it stands and without reserve. There aren't many, indeed, who haven't sometimes quarrelled with it, either •because they didn't always understand how to apply it, or •because of some prejudice that they were afraid to examine or couldn't bear to give up. Such is the stuff that man is made of: in principle and in practice, on the

right path or a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency.

13. When a man tries to combat the principle of utility, his reasons are drawn—without his being aware of it—from that very principle itself.¹ If his arguments prove anything, it isn't that the principle is wrong but that he is applying it wrongly. Is it possible for a man to move the earth? Yes; but he must first find out another earth to stand on.

14. To disprove it by arguments is impossible; but from the causes I have mentioned, or from some confused or partial view of it, a man may come to be disposed not to like it. Where this is the case, if he thinks it's worth the trouble to settle his opinions on such a subject, let him take the following steps, and he may eventually come to be reconciled with the principle of utility.

(1) Let him decide whether he wants to discard this principle altogether; if so, let him consider what all his reasonings (especially in politics) can amount to?

(2) If he does want to discard the principle, let him decide whether he wants to judge and act without any principle, or is there some other principle he would judge and act by?

¹ I have heard it described as 'a dangerous principle', something that on certain occasions it is 'dangerous to consult'. This amounts to saying that it is not consonant to utility to consult utility—i.e. that it is not consulting it, to consult it.

Addition by Bentham in 1822 .

Not long after the publication of my 'Fragment on Government' (1776), in which the principle of utility was brought to view as an all-comprehensive and all-commanding principle, one person who said something to that effect was Alexander Wedderburn, at that time Attorney General [and Bentham lists his later positions and titles]. He said it in the hearing of someone who passed it on to me. So far from being self-contradictory, the remark was shrewd and perfectly true. . . . A principle that lays down, as the only right and justifiable end of government, the greatest happiness of the greatest number—how can it be denied to be dangerous? It is unquestionably dangerous to every government that has for its actual goal the greatest happiness of *one* person, perhaps with the addition of a comparatively small number of others whom he finds it pleasing or convenient to admit to a share in the concern, like junior partners. So it really was dangerous to the sinister interest of all those functionaries, Wedderburn included, whose interest it was to maximise delay, vexation, and expense in judicial and other procedures, for the sake of the profit they could extract from this. In a government whose goal really was the greatest happiness of the greatest number, Wedderburn might still have been Attorney General and then Chancellor; but he would not have been •Attorney General with £15,000 a year, or •Chancellor with a peerage and a veto on all justice and £25,000 a year, and with 500 sinecures at his disposal.

(3) If he thinks he has found another principle, let him examine whether it is really •a separate intelligible principle rather than merely a •principle in words, a verbal flourish that basically expresses nothing but his own unfounded sentiments—what he might call 'caprice' if someone else had it?

(4) If he is inclined to think that his own (dis)approval annexed to the idea of an act, with no regard for its consequences, is a sufficient basis for him to judge and act on, let him ask himself whether (i) his sentiment is also to be everyone else's standard of right and wrong or whether instead (ii) every man's sentiment has the same privilege of being a standard to itself?

(5) If (i), let him ask himself whether his principle is not despotical, and hostile to the rest of the human race?

(6) If (ii), let him ask himself:

- Isn't this position anarchic, implying that there are as many different standards of right and wrong as there are men?
- Aren't I allowing that to the same man the same thing that is right today could (with no change in its nature) be wrong tomorrow?
- and that the same thing could be right *and* wrong in the same place at the same time?
- Either way, wouldn't all argument be at an end?

•When one man says 'I like this' and another says 'I don't like it', is there—on my view—anything more for them to say?

(7) If he answers all that by saying 'No, because the sentiment that I propose as a standard must be based on reflection', let him say what facts the reflection is to turn on. If on facts about the utility of the act, then isn't he deserting his own principle and getting help from the very one in opposition to which he set it up? And if not on those facts, then on what others?

(8) If he favours a mixed view, wanting to adopt his own principle in part and the principle of utility in part, *how far* will he go with his principle?

(9) When he has decided where he will stop, let him ask himself how he justifies taking it that far, and why he won't take it further.

(10) Admitting something P other than the principle of utility to be a right principle, one that it is right for a man to pursue; and admitting (what is not true) that 'right' can have a meaning that doesn't involve utility; let him say whether there is any motive that a man could have to pursue P's dictates. •If there is, let him say what that motive is, and how it is to be distinguished from the motives that enforce the dictates of utility; and •if there isn't, then (lastly) let him say what this other principle can be good for.

do so too. In every inch of his career the operations of the political magistrate are liable to be aided or impeded by these two foreign powers, who are sure to be either his rivals or his allies. If he leaves them out of his calculations he will

almost certainly find himself mistaken in the result. . . . So he ought to have them continually before his eyes, under a name ['sanction'] that exhibits the relation they have to his own purposes and designs.

Chapter 4: Measuring Pleasure and Pain

1. Pleasures and the avoidance of pains, then, are the legislator's goals; so he ought to understand their value. Pleasures and pains are the instruments he has to work with, so he needs to understand their force, i.e. their value.

2. To a person (considered by himself) the value of a pleasure or pain (considered by itself) will be greater or less according to:

- (1) its intensity.
- (2) its duration.
- (3) its certainty or uncertainty.
- (4) its nearness or remoteness.

3. These are the circumstances that are to be considered when estimating a pleasure or a pain considered by itself. But when the value of a pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of an act by which it is produced, two other circumstances must be taken into the account:

- (5) its fecundity, i.e. its chance of being followed by sensations of the same kind (pleasure by pleasure, pain by pain), and
- (6) its purity, i.e. its chance of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind (pleasure by pain, pain by pleasure).

These last two, however, are not strictly properties of the pleasure or the pain itself, so they aren't strictly to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or pain. They are really only properties of the act or other event by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; so they are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of that act or event.

4. For many people the value of a pleasure or a pain will be greater or less according to seven circumstances—the six preceding ones and one other, namely

- (7) its extent, i.e. the number of persons to whom it extends or (in other words) who are affected by it.

5. Thus, to take an exact account of an act's general tendency to affect the interests of a community, proceed as follows. Of those whose interests seem to be most immediately affected by the act, take *one*, and take an account,

- (1) of the value of each pleasure that appears to be produced by it in the first instance;
- (2) of the value of each pain that appears to be produced by it in the first instance;
- (3) of the value of each pleasure that appears to be produced by it after the first, this being the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain;

- (4) of the value of each pain that appears to be produced by it after the first, this being the fecundity of the first pain and the impurity of the first pleasure. Then
- (5) Sum up the values of all the pleasures on one side and of all the pains on the other. If the balance is on the side of pleasure, that is the over-all good tendency of the act with respect to the interests of that person; if on the side of pain, its over-all bad tendency.
- (6) Repeat the above process with respect to each person whose interests appear to be concerned; and then sum the results. If this balance is on the side of pleasure, that is the over-all good tendency of the act with respect to the interests of the community; if on the side of pain, its over-all bad tendency.
6. It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued before every moral judgment or every legislative or judicial operation. But it can be always kept in view; and the nearer the process actually pursued on these occasions come to it, the nearer they will come to exactness.
7. This process is applicable to pleasure and pain in whatever form they appear, and by whatever name they are labelled: to pleasure, whether it be called 'good' (that is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or profit (that is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of distant pleasure) or

'convenience' or 'advantage', 'benefit', 'emolument', 'happiness', and so forth; to pain, whether it is called 'evil' (that corresponds to 'good') or 'mischief' or 'inconvenience' or 'disadvantage' or 'loss' or 'unhappiness', and so forth. [In that sentence, both 'evil' [See glossary] and 'good' are nouns.]

8. This is not a novel and unjustified theory, any more than it is a useless one. What it presents is nothing but what perfectly fits the practice of mankind whenever they have a clear view of their own interest. What makes (for instance) an article of property, an estate in land, valuable? The pleasures of all kinds that it enables a man to produce, and (the same thing) the pains of all kinds that it enables him to avert. But everyone takes the value of such an article of property to rise or fall according to •how long a man has it, •how certain it is that he will get it, and •how long it will be before he gets it if indeed he does. The intensity of the pleasures he may derive from it is never thought of, because that depends on how he in particular chooses to use it, which can't be estimated till the particular pleasures he may derive from it or the particular pains he may exclude by means of it are brought to view. For the same reason, he doesn't think, either, of the fecundity or purity of those pleasures.

So much for pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness, in general. I shall now consider the various particular kinds of pain and pleasure.



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