

Criticisms of Utilitarianism

E. F. CARRITT

E. F. Carritt (1876–1964) was a Fellow of University College, Oxford. His publications include *The Theory of Morals: An Introduction to Ethical Philosophy*.

1. One criticism frequently brought against utilitarianism seems to me invalid. It is said that pleasures and pains cannot be measured or weighed like proteins or money and therefore cannot be compared, so that I can never tell whether I shall produce an overbalance of pleasure in this way or in that. I cannot weigh the pleasure of a starving man whom I feed on bread against my own in eating strawberries and say that his is twice as great as mine. Such an argument might seem hardly worth serious discussion had it not been used in defence of applying to conduct a theory of abstract economics: "There is no scientific criterion which would enable us to compare or assess the relative importance of needs of different persons . . . illegitimate interpersonal comparison,"¹ and "There is no means of testing the magnitude of A's satisfaction as compared with B's."²

But this argument, though those who use it are not ready to admit so much, really should apply against any comparison of my own desires and needs. I cannot say that two glasses of beer will give me twice as much pleasure as one, and still less that hearing a concert will give me three times or half as much: yet I may know very well indeed which will give me *more*, and may act upon the knowledge, since the two things though not measurable are comparable. It is true that, not being measurable, they are less easy to discriminate precisely, where the difference is not great, than physical objects; I may be unable to say whether the smell of roasting coffee or of bacon fried gives me the greater pleasure (mixed with some pain of appetite) even at two successive

moments. It is no doubt often easier to read off the luminosity of two very similar surfaces on a pointer than to say which looks brighter, though in the end I have to trust my eyes for the pointer. As we have admitted, the mere existence of other minds is not demonstrable, still less is the intensity of their desires. But if in self-regarding acts I am sometimes prepared to spend my money in the belief that I shall desire tomorrow's bread more than tomorrow's jam, the utilitarian is justified, on his principles, in believing that it is his duty to provide bread for the starving sooner than jam for the well fed.

In fact it would be no commendation of an ethical theory if, on its showing, moral or even beneficent choice were always clear, since in practice we know that it is not. We often wonder if we can do more for the happiness, even the immediate happiness, of our parents or of our children; the former seem more in need of enjoyments, the latter have a keener capacity but a quicker recovery from disappointment. Utilitarianism has no need to stake its case on the possibility of an accurate "hedonistic (or agathistic) calculus." We have a well-founded belief that starvation hurts most people more than a shortage of grapefruit, and *no knowledge how much* more it will hurt even ourselves to-morrow; and it is on such beliefs that we have to act; we can never know either our objective duty or our objective long-run interest.

2. The second objection to the utilitarians is serious and indeed fatal. They make no room for justice. Most of them readily admitted this when they found it hard on their principle to allow for the admitted obligation to distribute happiness "fairly," that is either equally or in proportion to desert. This led them to qualify their definition of duty as "promoting the greatest amount of happiness," by adding "of the greatest number," and to emphasize this by the proviso "every one count for one and no more." They can

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hardly have meant by this merely that it did not matter to whom I gave the happiness so long as I produced the most possible, for this they had already implied. They must at least have meant that if I could produce the same amount either in equal shares or in unequal I ought to prefer the former; and this means that I ought to be just as well as generous. The other demand of justice, that we should take account of past merit in our distribution, I think they would have denied, or rather explained away by the argument that to reward beneficence was to encourage such behaviour by example, and therefore a likely way to increase the total of happiness.

3. A third criticism, incurred by some utilitarians³ in the attempt to accommodate their theory to our moral judgements, was that of inconsistency in considering differences of quality or kind, as well as of amount, among pleasures when determining what we ought to do. It seems clear that people do not feel the same obligation to endow the art of cookery or pot-boiling as that of poetry or music, and this not because they are convinced that the one causes keener and more constant pleasure to a greater number than the other. Yet the recognition of a stronger obligation to promote "higher" or "better" pleasures implies that we think something good, say musical or poetic experience, not merely in proportion to its general pleasantness but by its own nature. The attempt to unite this "qualification of pleasures" with hedonistic utilitarianism is like saying 'I care about nothing but money, but I would not come by it dishonestly.' The fundamental fact is that we do not think some pleasures, such as that of cruelty, good at all.

4. Though the inconsistency of modifying their theory in these two ways seems to have escaped the notice of most utilitarians, they could not help seeing that they were bound to meet a fourth criticism by giving some account of the universal belief that we have obligations to keep our promises. It is obvious that the payment of money to a rich creditor may not immediately result in so much satisfaction as the keeping of it by a poor debtor or the giving of it to a useful charity, and that yet it may, under most circumstances, be judged a duty and always an obligation. The argument of utilitarians to explain this has usually been as follows: It is true that a particular instance of justice may not directly increase the sum of human happiness but quite the contrary, and yet we

often approve such an instance. This is because the *general* practice of such good faith, with the consequent possibility of credit and contract, is supremely conducive to happiness, and therefore so far as any violation of a bargain impairs this confidence, it is, indirectly and in the long run, pernicious.

Such an attempt to bring promise-keeping under the utilitarian formula breaks down because it only applies where the promise and its performance or neglect would be public and therefore serve as an example to others.

Suppose the two explorers in the Arctic have only enough food to keep one alive till he can reach the base, and one offers to die if the other will promise to educate his children. No other person can know that such a promise was made, and the breaking or keeping of it cannot influence the future keeping of promises. On the utilitarian theory, then, it is the duty of the returned traveller to act precisely as he ought to have acted if no bargain had been made: to consider how he can spend his money most expediently for the happiness of mankind, and, if he thinks his own child is a genius, to spend it upon him.

Or, to take a different kind of justice, the utilitarian must hold that we are justified in inflicting pain always and only in order to prevent worse pain or bring about greater happiness. This, then, is all we need consider in so-called punishment, which must be purely preventive. But if some kind of very cruel crime becomes common, and none of the criminals can be caught, it might be highly expedient, as an example, to hang an innocent man, if a charge against him could be so framed that he were universally thought guilty; indeed this would only fail to be an ideal instance of utilitarian "punishment" because the victim himself would not have been so likely as a real felon to commit such a crime in the future, in all other respects it would be perfectly deterrent and therefore felicitous.

In short, utilitarianism has forgotten rights; it allows no right to a man because he is innocent or because he has worked hard or has been promised or injured, or because he stands in any other special relation to us. It thinks only of duties or rather of a single duty, to dump happiness wherever we most conveniently can. If it speaks of rights at all it could only say all men have one and the same right, namely that all men should try to increase the total happiness. And this is a manifest misuse of language.

NOTES

1. Hayek, *Collectivist Economic Planning*, p. 25.
2. Robbins, *Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, pp. 122-4. Cf. Jay, *The Socialist Case*, ch. 2.
3. E.g., J. S. Mill. Bentham more consistently held that "the pleasure of push-pin is as good as the pleasure of poetry."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Carritt use the terms "measurable" and "comparable" to respond to the first objection against utilitarianism? Do you find his response satisfactory?
2. Why does Carritt think that the utilitarian cannot account for justice?
3. Does the utilitarian's appeal to higher and lower pleasures show that something more than just pleasure is desirable as an end (against what Mill claims)?
4. Can you think of a circumstance (besides the ones mentioned by Carritt) in which someone would be forced to do something morally wrong by attempting to follow the dictates of utilitarianism? How might a utilitarian respond to such scenarios?

KEY TERMS

Utilitarianism
Hedonistic

Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism

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Utilitarianism is the doctrine that the rightness of actions is to be judged by their consequences. What do we mean by "actions" here? Do we mean particular actions or do we mean classes of actions? According to which way we interpret the word

"actions" we get two different theories, both of which merit the appellation "utilitarian."

1. If by "actions" we mean particular individual actions we get the sort of doctrine held by Bentham, Sidgwick, and Moore. According to this doctrine we test individual actions by their consequences, and general rules, like "keep promises," are mere rules of thumb which we use only to avoid the necessity of estimating the probable consequences of our actions at every step. The rightness or wrongness of keeping a promise on a particular occasion depends only on the goodness or badness of the consequences of keeping or of breaking the promise on that particular occasion. Of course part of the consequences of breaking the promise, and a part to which we will normally ascribe decisive importance, will be the weakening of faith in the institution of promising.

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