

CS 203, Fall 2010-11
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Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832):
Utility and Reason

I – The Ethics or Morality Debate: telling right from wrong.

- 1- How do humans acquire knowledge about morality (Possible answers: reason, divine revelation, moral sense)
- 2- What is the source of moral rules? (Reason, God’s will, nature)
- 3- Are moral requirements natural or conventional?
- 4- How do we consider the purpose of morality? Is it virtue based? Or is it rather based on principles and duties or natural laws?

II – Bentham's Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation: The Principle of Utility

- 1- Pain and pleasure are the “two masters” that constrain our actions. As such, they don’t constitute morality. But they are the grounds from which the moral principle of utility is derived. “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which appear to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question” (Bentham, 1.2)
- 2- The principle of utility dictates what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. The principle is normative.
- 3- The principle of utility is not an egoistic principle. Its purpose is to maximize the amount of happiness to the maximum number of persons
- 4- The principle of utility doesn’t focus on actions and the motivation behind these actions. Rather, the stress is on the expected consequences of actions
- 5- The principle of utility is not directly provable. It can be proved indirectly.

III - How is it done?: The pleasure calculus

Morality is determined by measuring the consequences of actions in terms of their expected utility. To achieve this task, Bentham proposes an empirical rational method of calculation based on probability: The pleasure calculus.

Suppose you are considering whether a given action, which you haven't done yet, is good or not. In order to have an answer, you should measure the expected consequences of this action relation to 7 points. If in the final calculation the expected happiness outweighs unhappiness, then the action is good and accordingly it should be done. If the final calculation is otherwise, then the action is not good and it shouldn't be done.

IV- The principle of Utility in Legislation: Paternalism

The purpose of the legislator is to make laws that maximize happiness in society. Laws in society should promote actions which entail consequences that increase utility. Hence, since utility is dependent on motives, the legislator(s) need to know what makes people happy and unhappy. In other words, the legislator(s) need to know the motives of persons insofar as these motives determine the various pleasures and pains.

However, very often people are unaware of the long terms benefits of some laws. Still, it is the duty of the legislator to promote such laws even if persons don't recognize their utility.

How are laws promoted?

Laws are promoted through a process of habituation and conditioning using reward and punishment.

V- Objections to Bentham's theory

Bentham assumes that all pleasures are of the same kind. Aren't some pleasures of a higher quality?

Bentham states that we should be able to have knowledge of all consequences of our actions. Is that possible?

Bentham superposes that actions in themselves are neither right nor wrong. Wouldn't this supposition contradict the view that persons have intrinsic rights and dignity?