Chapter --

Utilitarianism and Evil

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Chapter summary

Utilitarian ethical theories take as the measure of the moral quality of acts their propensity to increase or diminish human well-being. For early utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), good was equated with pleasure and evil with pain, and the ethical goal of both individuals and institutions was to promote "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". As a secular and pragmatic philosophy, utilitarianism was concerned not merely to identify the causes of suffering in the world but to formulate practical strategies for improving life for the population in a rapidly industrialising society. Bentham's campaign to reform the English legal system, and the advocacy by William Godwin (1756-1836), James Mill (1773-1836) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) of political freedom and democratic government, were underpinned by acute philosophical argument and animated by a deep hatred of oppression and exploitation in all their forms. Although utilitarianism has often been accused of sanctioning the doing of lesser evils to prevent greater ones, and with fostering an over-calculating attitude to decision-making, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) equipped the theory with a more refined view of good and evil that accorded more weight to the protection of individual liberty, security and lifestyles. To emphasise utilitarianism's essentially practical bent, the chapter concludes by briefly surveying its application in the nineteenth century in three significant areas: 1) domestic political reform; 2) the anti-slavery movement and race relations; and 3): the governance of the overseas territories under British control.

"Utilitarianism" is the name of a family of ethical theories that take as the yardstick of moral appraisal the propensity of acts to increase or decrease human well-being (or, more generally, the

well-being of all sentient creatures). Emerging to prominence in the European Enlightenment, utilitarianism was, and continues to this day to be, a secular, pragmatic and humane philosophy which favours reason and experience rather than religion or tradition as the paramount guides to the ethical life. For utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the proper end of action, for individuals and institutions alike, was the promotion of happiness and the reduction of pain. For Bentham, acts possessed "utility" when they served to "produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this … comes to the same thing) or what also comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered" (*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 126). And since, according to utilitarianism, no one's happiness or misery counts for more or less than anyone else's, *whose* interest is in question is irrelevant. The important thing is to advance "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" – an uncompromising egalitarian stance that predictably raised enemies for utilitarianism from the start.

While later utilitarians did not always, as we shall see, accept Bentham's simple hedonist equation of good with pleasure and evil with pain, they shared his conviction that good and evil have to do with lives going well or badly for their subjects. This was a significant departure from older views that saw evil primarily in terms of disobedience to divine or human authority or departure from socially established norms. Radical, ambitious and optimistic, early utilitarianism aimed to reform or, in the irremediable cases, eliminate institutions and practices that impeded human happiness. This improvement of the human condition was to be achieved where possible by peaceful rather than violent means, and while many utilitarians were broadly sympathetic to the aims of the French Revolution, most preferred, with Bentham, the pacific method of "rear[ing] the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law" (*Introduction*, 125) to the sanguinary operations of the guillotine. Karl Marx's famous complaint that philosophers had been over-much concerned to understand the world, whereas the real need was to change it, scarcely applies to the utilitarians of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who saw little point in theorising that made no difference to the public good. In their eyes, theory without practice was as empty as practice without theory was blind.

"Rearing the fabric of felicity": the nature of the theory

John Stuart Mill (1806-73), who is normally accounted the greatest of the classical utilitarians, plausibly suggested that every age of philosophy had witnessed some utilitarian thinking (Mill, *Bentham*, 87). But it was in eighteenth-century France and Britain that the empirical study of human nature and society, allied with a more progressive politics, produced a new philosophical outlook which placed man, rather than God, at the centre of concern. Hence writers like Helvétius, Condorcet and Chastellux in France, Hutcheson, Hume, Paley, Priestley, Godwin and Bentham in Britain, urged that the general happiness of mankind should be the primary objective of states and of individual agents, and – crucially – the test of all public institutions, practices and laws. The enshrinement of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the American Declaration of Independence states the utilitarians' goals to a nicety. (It ought to be noted, however, that utilitarianism was not, and is not, an anti-religious philosophy, and some of its proponents – for example, Priestley and Paley – were ministers of religion who believed that God himself was a utilitarian who "wills and wishes the happiness of his creatures" (Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 50).) Leslie Stephen has represented Bentham as asking "What is the use of you?" of every national institution and law (Stephen 1900: Vol.1, 271); those which cannot give a good account of themselves, and show that they are more conducive to happiness than to misery, have no right to continued existence in their unregenerate state. Judged by such a criterion, many commonly accepted contemporary practices such as the slave trade or the imposition of draconian punishments for very minor criminal offences, were evident cases for treatment, the evil they caused being plainly in excess of any good that they did.

The idea that we should aim to maximise happiness and minimise misery, and do so in a thoroughly impartial way, was taken to its logical conclusion by William Godwin (1756-1836). Godwin believed that human beings are born egoistic, originally concerned only with their own pleasures and pains, but through experience learning to sympathise with the feelings of others. Since reason tells us that our own happiness or misery is objectively no more nor less important than anyone else's, we should see it as our moral duty to work unremittingly for the greatest general good, no matter what personal sacrifices this involves. Aiming to make this message more palatable by the rather hopeful claim that nothing gives an agent more pleasure than causing pleasure to others, Godwin's startling conclusion was that

> We have in reality nothing that is strictly our own. We have nothing that has not a

> destination prescribed to it by the immutable voice of reason and justice (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 86).

If we need to sacrifice our own life, or that of someone who is dear to us, in the interests of the general happiness, we should do so without demur. If I can save only one of two people from a burning house, one of whom is a famous writer whose works are enjoyed by many, and the other is my brother, his lowly servant, then I am duty-bound to save the former, since while I may love my brother more, I should recognise the writer's greater potential to increase the sum of felicity. Moreover, if I exercise my personal freedom by acting in ways that produce less net good than other acts I could have performed, other people are entitled to compel me to adopt better courses. Godwin even claimed that

> I may put a man to death for the common good, either because he is infected with a pestilential disease, or because some oracle has declared it essential to the public safety (*Enquiry*, 244).

Here Godwin's thought is that we should aim to bring about the lesser of two evils.

Godwin's disconcerting views forcefully illustrate a tension that pervades utilitarian thought between, on the one hand, the general good and, on the other, the freedom, and more broadly the welfare, of individuals. As a *maximising* doctrine that assumes that different people's happiness or misery can be *measured on a common scale* and *aggregated*, classical utilitarianism not only enjoins us to accord no special favour to our own personal interests, but also to sacrifice other people's interests, and even their lives, when the utility sums require it. Paradoxically, the inspiring call to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number seems also to encourage the *doing of evil*, or at least of things which go against the natural psychological and moral grain, where these are required in order to generate the greatest net good. We shall have more to say about this problem in the next section.

Jeremy Bentham, Godwin's close contemporary, held that "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*" (*Introduction*, 125). As the ultimate ground of all motivation, our desire for pleasure and aversion to pain might be supposed to lead us to act on all occasions selfishly, with no concern for the good or harm we do to other people. But because an unrestrained free-for-all, in which people assiduously pursue their private interests, would produce only chaos, violence and misery, government is necessary to provide the security, stability and opportunity for cooperative engagement in the absence of which no

one is likely to be happy. Because government restricts individual freedom, it is not in itself a good but rather, thought Bentham, a necessary evil. The best (or least bad) form of government is a representative democracy which works for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In a democratic polity the interests of the governed and the governors coincide, and laws are made to promote everyone's good and not merely that of some privileged class. And since there is always room for improvement even in the best of polities, free discussion of laws and existing political arrangements should be not merely tolerated but encouraged. Under a properly set-up government, the motto of a good citizen should be: "To obey punctually; to censure freely" (*A Fragment on Government*, 10). As Gerald Postema remarks, Bentham's ideal government was one which should bring about the "convergence of diverse interests of the country around certain goods and opportunities" (Postema (*date?*): 42), so that no one could complain that that his or her particular interests were being neglected.

Bentham's view of the role of government and of law was echoed in its essentials in the *Essay on Government* (1819) published by his most zealous and trenchant disciple, James Mill (1773-1836), the father of John Stuart. Like his master, James Mill believed that good and evil consist, respectively, in pleasure and pain, and that people were fundamentally selfish beings who were potentially in danger of doing one another little good and much harm; hence they needed to live under a government that pursued "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" by "insuring to every man the greatest possible quantity of the produce of his labour" (*Essay on Government*, 3-5). However, Mill did not think that democracy was suitable for everyone. As a high official in the London office of the East India Company (a role in which his son was later to follow him), Mill was not in favour of granting democratic government to the teeming millions of India, who he thought had not yet arrived at a sufficient level of civilisation to be capable of mature self-government; their interests were for the present best served by the paternal administration of the Company. While, as we shall see later, the low opinion held by both of the Mills of the state of Indian civilisation was a blinkered one, heavily distorted by their western prejudices, their engagement in the day-to-day work of (as they saw it) improving lives through benign and efficient government did at least typify the admirable *practical* bent of the utilitarians. That same concern to put theory into practice was manifested by other utilitarians, such as George Grote, Charles [*check*] Roebuck, Sir Samuel Romilly and Sir William Molesworth, who entered Parliament and campaigned vigorously for liberal and reforming

causes. The "philosophical radicals", as they became known, formed a *de facto* left wing of the Whig Party, which they sought to persuade to persuade to adopt a more extensive programme of reforming measures, including the further extension of the voting franchise and the curtailment of the powers of the aristocracy; but for many of the more radical measures they proposed the time was not yet fully ripe.

The relatively simple psychological and axiological theories that utilitarians had so far accepted with little questioning or variation were weighed in the balance and found wanting by John Stuart Mill (1806-73). Exhibiting a precocious intelligence in childhood, John Stuart was raised by his father and Bentham to be the spokesperson of utilitarianism for the next generation. But at the age of 20, John Stuart suffered a "mental crisis" (apparently a bout of severe depression) in which the view of life propounded by his elders came to seem to him intolerably narrow and banal. It was not, as Mill's later exposition of utilitarian conceded, that there was much wrong in itself with Bentham's identification of the human good with pleasure and evil with pain; "by happiness", Mill himself explained, "is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure" (*Utilitarianism*, 210). The trouble was that Bentham's understanding of pleasure and pain betrayed an inadequate conception of the range and quality of satisfactions achievable in a human life well lived. Bentham's (in)famous remark that "if pushpin [a simple game] gives as much pleasure as poetry, it's as good" showed an undiscriminating attitude to pleasures that laid utilitarianism wide open to attack by its critics. As Mill wryly observed:

> To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened (*Utilitarianism*, 210).

It was therefore important for utilitarians to recognise that "Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification." In Mill's view, "the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" have "a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation" (*Utilitarianism*, 211). Developing a cultivated mind, a lively imagination and the ability to empathise with others was far more fulfilling than ceaselessly searching for quantitatively intense pleasures. For Mill personally, this

represented a crucial discovery, since it enabled him to emerge from his youthful mental crisis and realise that life was, after all, worth living provided the right targets of desire and aversion were in place.

Mill's insistence that utilitarianism should recognise qualitative as well as quantitative differences among pleasures, whereby some pleasures, regardless of their intensity, are seen as contributing more to human well-being than others and therefore as more worth pursuing, prompts the question whether he took a symmetrical view of pains. Are some pains worse, or more evil, than others, not merely on quantitative grounds but for qualitative reasons? Unfortunately, Mill did not address this question directly, though he did in one place remark that "*Neither pains* nor pleasures are homogeneous" (*Utilitarianism*, 213; my emphasis), which suggests that he took the answer to be yes. This conclusion is also suggested by what he had to say about pleasures. If, as Mill held, the moral pleasure of helping someone in need is qualitatively superior to the pleasure involved in indulging an "animal appetite", such as eating an ice-cream on a hot day, then not only should the absence from our lives of pleasures of the former kind be qualitatively worse for us than the absence from them of mere sensory pleasures, but by a consistent extension, the pain of a guilty conscience for failing in our moral duty should be qualitatively more severe than that of mere unsatisfied hunger or other "animal appetite". It should be noted that adopting a view on these lines plausibly calls for a qualification of the standard utilitarian formula that we should always seek to increase pleasures and diminish pains. If, for example, someone who has done a mean or callous deed is blithely regardless of the harm he has caused, it may be appropriate to try to induce in him a painful sense of remorse, as something that is *good for him* to feel (and not merely for the instrumental reason that it may dissuade him from doing similar bad deeds in future). Just as there are undoubtedly some harmful pleasures, there may also be some salutary pains. Mill himself gestured towards this insight in his striking remark that "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (*Utilitarianism*, 212).

A sketch of the major figures in nineteenth-century utilitarianism would be incomplete without a mention of Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), whose book *The Methods of Ethics* (first edition 1874) was an influential defence of the utilitarian outlook. Sidgwick followed Mill in denying the homogeneity of pleasures and pains and recognising that human desires were not always well directed. While Sidgwick acknowledged that the finest pleasures were those taken

in virtue, personal freedom, knowledge and beauty, and that an existence that was short of these was less than satisfactory, he was more insistent (or more explicit) than Mill that the "ultimate good" consisted in "desirable consciousness" (*Methods of Ethics*, 397). Mill sometimes talked as though, like Aristotle, he thought that the possession and exercise of intellectual, imaginative and moral qualities are good in themselves, so that when we take pleasure in them our pleasure is valuable because it is pleasure in the *right things*. But Sidgwick allowed no ultimate value to anything other than states of consciousness. His main argument for this position was a simple one: if freedom, beauty, knowledge, or even virtue, were *not* experienced by us as satisfying, then their pursuit would be pointless (*Methods*, 400-3). Sidgwick thus rejected the claim that something could still be good for us, in some objective sense, even though our psychology prevented our taking pleasure in it. (Presumably he would also have rejected the proposition that something could be objectively bad for us if it caused no pain.) Yet, *pace* Sidgwick, it is now hard to explain why reading poetry produces more "desirable consciousness" than playing pushpin unless poetry is allowed to be a qualitatively more valuable pursuit than pushpin. Likewise among painful experiences, some are more heart-felt and of more existential significance than others because we perceive something particularly grievous and undesirable in their originating conditions. Thus to be subjected to political oppression or racist discrimination produces a qualitatively different kind of pain to that suffered in the course of a sharp toothache. While the latter merely hurts, the former deeply offends our dignity and potentially undermines that most crucial of our possessions, our sense of self-worth.

Utilitarianism: a no-holds barred philosophy?

In his *Considerations on Representative Government* of 1861, John Stuart Mill sang the praises of those active spirits who, on seeing something amiss in the world, seek to put it right rather than merely to put up with it:

> The people who think it a shame when anything goes wrong – who rush to the conclusion that the evil could and ought to have been prevented, are those who, in the long run, do most to make the world better (*Representative Government,* 214- *to correct*).

This characteristically utilitarian emphasis on action, coupled with an impatience with social conservatives who believed that whatever is, is best (and thus that "reform" was generally liable

to make things worse), did, however, commit utilitarians to come up with feasible practical strategies for tackling the world's ills. It is often easier to see the faults in existing institutions than to know just how to put them right. Yet taking refuge in intellectual humility and failing to proffer suggestions for improvement was never the utilitarians' style.

Bentham's first major published work, the *Fragment on Government* (1776), was a fierce critique of the English legal system, with its many obscurities, inconsistencies, excessive punishments and unwieldy administration. The complacent satisfaction taken in the existing state of the law and its operations by Sir William Blackstone in his influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765 and many subsequent editions) seemed to him absurd. Consequently Bentham devoted much of his long life to devising practical schemes for the reform of governmental and legal institutions in a rapidly industrialising and changing Britain. One topic that engaged his particular interest was that of prison reform. Being appalled by the unhealthy, crime-ridden hell-holes which still served for prisons at the turn of the nineteenth century, Bentham urged the need for modern penitentiaries that would keep prisoners employed at useful though fatiguing labour while caring properly for their physical, mental and moral health. Bentham's key contribution to the problem of prison design was the "panopticon" – a prison constructed with wings radiating from a central hub, from which a small number of overseers could monitor the activities of the prisoners as they laboured, ate or rested. While Bentham's attempts to persuade successive governments to build a panopticon (described by him as "a mill to grind rogues honest") came to nothing, his ideas on the role and design of prisons had considerable influence at a later date, when the Victorians embarked on a major program of prison building.

Bentham thought that the basic idea of the panopticon could also be extended to workhouses, factories and other locations where it was desirable for the few to be able to keep an eye on the doings of the many. Yet to many later critics, Bentham's "panopticism" has seemed emblematic of one of the less attractive facets of modernity, its willingness to countenance systems of supervision and control that are potentially oppressive and anti-libertarian. Big Brother may not always know best, and even when he does (and acts with good intentions), he is still a benevolent bully. Michel Foucault is one of many writers to have complained that "panopticism" is liable to create more evils than it dissipates. In Foucault's view, "The threefold aspect of panopticism – supervision, control, correction – seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the

power relations that exist in our society" (Foucault 2000: 70) Although it would be unjust to criticise Bentham for not anticipating the threats to individual autonomy and privacy created by our own high-tech "surveillance society", he might more fairly be blamed for failing to see the potential of "panopticism" to blur the boundaries between the public and the private spheres in ways that were not obviously conducive to the increase of happiness.

Whether utilitarianism can draw an adequate distinction between the public and the private has also been questioned on more fundamental grounds. Godwin's stark assertion that "We have in reality nothing that is strictly our own" locates the core of the problem: if utilitarianism tells us always to act so as to maximise happiness or well-being, then there is nothing of our own that we are entitled to hold back if by sacrificing it we can increase overall net utility. To lay claim to a private sphere within which we follow our own interests, engage in personal relationships, and spend our time, effort or money without constantly having to justify what we are doing by reference to the public good, appears prima facie inadmissible by strict utilitarian standards. A philosophy that carries impartiality to this degree may seem not only unliveable by flesh-and-blood human beings, but also questionable on moral grounds. From a Godwinian point of view, it would be quite wrong for me to buy Christmas presents for my own children when the same money could do more good if sent instead to Save the Children. (It would not even be enough for me to donate *some* money to the latter while keeping a sum back for the Christmas presents; this apparently reasonable compromise would still not fully satisfy the utility principle.) It is unsurprising, then, that utilitarianism has sometimes been accused of being a philosophy of the head rather than of the heart – and even, to its fiercest critics, a source of greater evils than it aims to fix. According to Stuart Hampshire, "The utilitarian habit of mind has brought with it a new abstract cruelty in politics, a dull, destructive political righteousness" (Hampshire 1978: 4) that rides roughshod over individual rights, including the right to preserve one's own private space.

Yet a utilitarianism that allowed no personal space for people to live their own lives without constant reference to the demands of general utility would, as many utilitarians, including Mill and Sidgwick, have recognised, actually be counter-productive. As Mill observed, "the notion of a happiness for all, procured by the self-sacrifice of each, if the abnegation is really felt to be a sacrifice, is a contradiction" (*Utilitarianism*, [ref] – p.338 Toronto]). In other words, to insist that people should put their personal concerns permanently on ice while they work tirelessly to

maximise the public good is self-defeating, because that way no one will be happy. Sidgwick too thought that the "commonly received view of special claims and duties arising out of special relations" was perfectly compatible with the "impartial universality" of utilitarianism, and pointed out that benevolent interference in the affairs of people beyond our own circle is often apt to be resented rather than appreciated (*Methods*, 439). A world in which agents attempted to act impartially at all times, ignoring their own pet projects and the special affections they felt for certain others, would, thought Sidgwick, be an exceedingly miserable one. Hence, whatever a naïve understanding of utilitarianism might suggest, "it is, generally speaking, conducive to the general happiness that each individual should distribute his beneficence in the channels marked out by commonly received ties and claims" (*Methods*, 433).

But utilitarianism may not be quite out of the wood yet. For while a sensible utilitarianism recognises that allowing individuals a measure of personal space is consistent with a utility-maximising principle, that same principle nevertheless seems to require agents on occasions to perform acts that intuitive morality would recoil from. Godwin's claim that a man infected by a pestilential disease may be put to death for the common good starkly illustrates the problem. If utilitarianism is only interested in the *maximisation* of utility, and not in how the benefits and disbenefits are distributed, then it looks as though some people's interests will end up being sacrificed for the sake of others' when the utility sums require it. John Rawls has objected that utilitarianism pays too little regard to the "separateness of persons", treating society as if it were a super-person and the interests of individuals mere component parts of the general interest (Rawls 1971: 23-24 *but check*). As a result, no robust protections are afforded to individuals and everyone is potentially a sacrificial victim on the altar of public utility. So if the lives of five sick people could be saved if they were given organs transplanted from one healthy individual, then the opportunity to save five lives for the price of one would apparently sanction the operation, whether or not the "donor" was consenting. Such a transaction would clearly fly in the face of ordinary morality, which would see it as being grossly unjust to the unfortunate individual. If this is the sort of thing that utilitarianism not only allows but positively prescribes, then, in Hampshire's words, it seems that "anything is possible and nothing is forbidden, and all restraints are threatened" (Hampshire 1979: 8). A philosophy designed to combat evil turns out to be itself productive of evils.

Utilitarians have been keen to defend themselves against the charge that there are no limits to the atrocious things that may be done to people in the name of utility. In practice, they point out, a cavalier disregard of individuals' personal interests, instead of promoting the general happiness, would be far more likely to impede it. Although utilitarians have generally taken a sceptical approach to the ontology of natural rights (Bentham colourfully describing rights-talk as "nonsense on stilts"), they have usually conceded that certain individual privileges, protections and permissions need to be enshrined in any society which is to be the setting for happy lives. A "society" in which medical cannibalism was regularly practised would be a fear-ridden and anxious place where no one would feel adequately respected as an end in himself. Mill, as usual, put the point succinctly: personal security is an "extraordinarily important and impressive kind of utility", because it is "to every one's feelings the most vital of all interests":

> Nearly all other earthly benefits are needed by one person, not needed by another; and many of them can, if necessary, be cheerfully foregone, or replaced by something else; but security no human being can possibly do without; on it we depend for all our immunity from evil, and for the whole value of all and every good, beyond the passing moment (*Utilitarianism*, 251).

Whereas security is essential for enjoying all our other goods, insecurity is the root of all evils.

It would give a misleading picture of utilitarianism, however, to represent it as *never* permitting any relaxation of the usual constraints on what may be done to individuals (or minorities). Unlike some other moral theories (e.g. Kant's), utilitarianism is prepared to grant that in exceptional circumstances it may be permissible to bring about a lesser evil to prevent a greater. In a famous thought-experiment devised by Bernard Williams, a hapless individual, Jim, wandering alone in some unnamed South American country, is invited by sadistic Pedro to shoot one innocent peasant hostage himself as the purchase price of the lives of nineteen other innocent hostages; if Jim should refuse to shoot, then Pedro and the soldiers under his command will shoot all twenty (Williams 1973: 98-9). Should Jim accept Pedro's bargain and murder the innocent hostage? While this scenario evokes different moral responses in different people, many have taken the utilitarian line that Jim ought to accept Pedro's offer, if this is the only practicable way to prevent mass slaughter. To critics who object that this response merely tallies corpses, whereas what we should attend to is the agent-centred prohibition against committing acts of murder, the utilitarian can point out that, by shooting one hostage, Jim keeps to a

minimum not only the number of deaths but also the number of murders. The Kantian's rejection of "moralising by numbers" can therefore be challenged when the evils to be weighed in the balance are not amounts of pain or pleasure but quantities of immoral acts.

Utilitarianism: the theory in action

Utilitarians, Lord Macaulay wrote sarcastically in 1828, are "in general ordinary men, with narrow understandings and little information" ('Utilitarian Logic and Politics', 353). John Stuart Mill, in the years following his "mental crisis", conceded that something significant was missing from "Benthamism". In a critical study of Bentham published in 1838, Mill observed that

> Man is never recognized by him as a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end; of desiring, for its own sake, the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good or fear of evil from other sources than his own inward consciousness ("Bentham", 95).

Yet for all Mill's efforts to persuade the world that utilitarianism was not confined to considering "the merely *business* part of the social arrangements" ("Bentham", 100) but could accommodate a far richer conception of the human good, the idea that utilitarianism was an earth-bound and uninspiring philosophy proved hard to shift. (Perhaps this was in part because of the unfortunate choice of the dry word "utility" to designate the proper goal of all action. Bentham did the theory no favours when he devised the name "utilitarianism" for it, around 1800.) Charles Dickens' satire, in *Hard Times* (1854), of utilitarianism as "Gradgrindism", a purely "practical" philosophy which exalted the value of facts and dismissed all imaginative pursuits as useless, may have had some validity as a skit on Bentham's views, but had none in regard to Mill's. If he had taken more trouble to acquaint himself with them, Dickens might well have been surprised at how close many of Mill's ideas came to his own. To give just one example, Mill's call, in 1838, for the provision to children of story books of a "chivalrous spirit", and his protest that these stimulants to fancy were being banished from education by "the narrow-minded portion, both of the religious and the scientific education-mongers", sounded a notably Dickensian theme ("A Prophecy", 284 – *page ref. to normalise*).

If some utilitarians did maintain some rather straitened ideas about human well-being, there is no denying the passionate humanity that many brought to the task of bettering the conditions of life for the multitudes of impoverished, oppressed, exploited and underprivileged people. Even

within the "merely business part of the social arrangements", there were many grave wrongs and abuses that cried out for remedy. To end this chapter, I shall discuss, briefly and selectively, a few of the nineteenth-century utilitarian "good causes". It should be emphasised that such a short sketch cannot begin to do justice to the range and extent of utilitarian efforts to eliminate evils and procure better lives for millions of human beings, in Britain and elsewhere; nor can it trace the subtler ways by which utilitarian ideas gradually percolated through society until much that had once seemed radical (e.g. views on political reform or the broadening of educational opportunities) had become broadly accepted by the end of the century. But examining some of the causes that utilitarians advanced should help to illustrate more fully the spirit of the philosophy and its essentially practical bent. The topics chosen for discussion are: (1) *democracy and political representation*; (2) *slavery and the treatment of the coloured races*; and (3) *paternalist colonialism*; and I shall pay especial attention to the work in regard to these of John Stuart Mill.

(1)Democracy and political representation. Early utilitarians were mainly of Bentham's opinion that government was an evil in itself, because it involves compulsion, which is a source of pain to individuals. But since government is essential to prevent the still worse evil of anarchy, the important task was to determine the type of government best suited to modern conditions. Most utilitarians thought that this was some version of representative democracy which would allow citizens the right to choose their rulers, who would remain in office only so long as they served the public good. In his classic defence of representative government, John Stuart Mill argued that "free communities" organised on democratic lines "have both been more exempt from social injustice and crime, and have attained more brilliant prosperity than any others" (*Representative Government*, 210 – *ref to normalise*). Following James Mill's lead (in the *Essay on Government*), John Stuart called for the enfranchisement of the many, but he went further in proposing that women as well as men should be given voting rights in parliamentary and local elections (James Mill had thought that women's interests could be adequately represented by their husbands or fathers). Granting equal rights to women, claimed John Stuart, was demanded both by reason and by justice: reason, because there was no justification for thinking that women were less intelligent than men or less capable of grasping practical affairs; justice, because the subordinate and politically powerless state of women left them vulnerable to male oppression

and abuse. Mill's attempt, during his short time as a Liberal MP in the mid-1860s, to include a clause enfranchising women inserted in the 1867 Reform Act was defeated, but the cogent arguments of his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) were to provide major ammunition for the women's emancipation movement during subsequent decades.

Neither James and John Stuart Mill, nor Bentham before them, believed that the extension of political rights was by itself a panacea for all ills. Unless political emancipation were accompanied by the provision of at least a minimal level of education for the general population, ignorant voters would make uninformed choices and be liable to fall under the spell of plausible demagogues. James Mill's theory of government has been summed up succinctly by John Plamenatz: "The best way of promoting the public happiness is to enfranchise the many and to educate them" (Plamenatz 1958: 107). John Stuart concurred, adding that participation in the political process is itself educative, since "To take an active interest in politics is, in modern times, the first thing which elevates the mind to large interests and contemplations" (*Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, 322). Education of the masses was highly desirable for other reasons too. An exposure to books and ideas would enable people to broaden their intellectual and moral horizons, improve the quality of their pleasures, discover their own talents and – or so Mill hoped – learn to be more tolerant of opinions that differed from their own.

The importance of individuality is the leitmotif of Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), a sustained attack on "the magical influence of custom" which had too commonly been the handmaid of tyrants. By "preventing any misgiving respecting the rules of conduct which mankind impose on one another" (*On Liberty*, 220), it had proved easy for despots of all stripes – kings and emperors, popes and mullahs – to reduce whole peoples to subjection. Yet Mill agreed with Alexis de Tocqueville, the French observer of the young American republic, that even in a democracy there was a danger of a "tyranny of the majority" that would severely constrain liberty by outlawing unorthodox thought and unconventional action. Indeed, such a tyranny of the majority was likely to be

> more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself (*On Liberty*, 220).

To prevent such an evil, Mill considered, a democratic polity needed to develop a culture of free thought and discussion, in which unconventional views would be readily heard and no topics,

however sensitive or sacred to some, would be insulated from discussion. Further, by giving "the freest scope possible to uncustomary things", society would become happier as a whole, for "Human beings are not like sheep" but flourish best when allowed to develop in different ways and pursue a variety of goods (*On Liberty*, 125 – *ref to normalise*).

(2)*Slavery and the treatment of coloured people*. Anglican and evangelical protestants such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce are rightly credited with the practical and moral leadership of the British campaign against slavery in the early nineteenth century. But utilitarians were also present in the vanguard, since on no possible interpretation of the greatest happiness principle could the cruelty, exploitation, degradation and denial of liberty that were inseparable from slavery and the slave-trade be justified. The transport of African slaves to the Americas in British ships, Sir Samuel Romilly told the House of Commons in 1806, was "a stain upon our national reputation that ought immediately to be wiped away". It was "a system of blood, rapine, robbery and murder" that disgracefully put the profit of the few before the happiness of the many (Romilly, 9). As such, it represented the very antithesis of the human values for which the utilitarians stood.

Yet old ideas can be slow to die. As late as 1849, the conservative Thomas Carlyle argued for the revival of the British slave-trade (which Parliament had banned in 1807), on the ground that "negroes" were naturally inferior to white people and so lazy that they must be forced to work. In a fiery response to Carlyle, John Stuart Mill protested against "the iniquitous dominion of the law of might", accusing his "anti-philanthropic opponent" of wilfully turning a blind eye to the gross mistreatment of black slaves. It was not, Mill stressed, mere "rose-pink sentimentalism", as Carlyle had scornfully claimed, that had turned British public opinion against black slavery in America and the West Indies, but a fervent sense of justice. Hundreds of thousands of Africans had perished – and were still perishing – on the slave-plantations "after having had their lives pressed out by slow or fierce torture" by white men concerned only to make themselves rich; "I have yet to learn," Mill said, "that anything more detestable than this has been done by human beings towards human beings in any part of the earth" ("The Negro Question", 88).

In Mill's view, it was historical circumstances and environmental conditions that were chiefly responsible for the variable rates at which human cultures had developed, rather than any natural differences of ability in people of different races ("The Negro Question", 92-3). And while he

has sometimes been accused of maintaining a form of "contingent racism" in imputing such "historical inferiority" to black people (see, for instance, Goldberg 2005: 130), it is probably fairer, and certainly more gracious, to credit him for rejecting the biological racism of Carlyle, with its implication that higher races may legitimately enslave inferior ones. For Mill's rejection of that position was uncompromising: "a doctrine more damnable, I should think, never was propounded by a professed moral reformer, …, that one kind of human beings are born servants to another kind" ("The Negro Question", 92).

Mill's hatred of slavery found further expression during the American Civil War (1861-65), when public opinion in Britain, from a mixture of economic reasons and a confused grasp of the nature of the liberty the South was fighting for, was initially inclined to side with the Confederate States. Along with other utilitarians and radicals, Mill was from the first firmly on the side of the North. In "The Contest in America", he argued forcefully that no support should be given to "those who rebel for the power of oppressing others" (137). This essay is of additional interest for its utilitarian defence of the concept of the just war. In the balance sheet of utility, war was sometimes the lesser of two evils, an "ugly thing" but not always "the ugliest of things" (141). War in a good cause – and Mill considered that of the northern states to prevent the further spread of slavery an extremely good one – was not the greatest evil that could happen to a nation. Someone who believes that there is nothing worth fighting for, he thought, "is a miserable creature", a poor-spirited soul whose own liberty will never be secure unless he is fortunate enough to be protected by better people than himself (142).

Utilitarians were also leaders of the campaign to prosecute Governor John Eyre of Jamaica for the disproportionate punishment meted out to the black community of Morant Bay in that island following a riot in 1865 in which a justice of the peace had been killed. Swiftly declaring martial law, Eyre had instituted a vicious campaign of reprisals in which almost five hundred black people were executed, a larger number flogged, and over a thousand homes burned down. When the Conservative government refused to bring criminal charges against Eyre for the excessive violence and dubious legality of his proceedings, a "Jamaica Committee" was formed in 1866 with the aim of bringing the Governor to trial for murder. Mill was its chairman and the Committee also included such eminent figures as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer and Frederick Harrison. Ranged against them was a rival committee determined to defend Eyre as a loyal servant of empire; this contained some equally prominent luminaries,

among them Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Alfred Tennyson and (more surprisingly) Charles Dickens. After months of public meetings, lobbying and wrangling in the press, the Jamaica Committee secured the dismissal of Eyre from his post but was unsuccessful in its attempt to have him prosecuted in the criminal courts. One recent commentator has suggested that Mill and his colleagues were really less concerned about the injustice suffered by the black population of Jamaica than about the threat to liberty, especially that of free-born Englishmen, when ordinary law is suspended and replaced by martial law (Miller 2005). But this view pays insufficient attention to Mill's firm stand, in "The Negro Question" and elsewhere, on the idea of justice for all – a justice which makes no invidious distinctions among people on grounds of race, gender, colour or creed but regards everyone's happiness as having exactly the same importance. Like many of his predecessors and successors in the utilitarian and radical camps, Mill had a visceral hatred of all forms of oppression by the strong of the weak and spontaneously sided with the powerless. Yet, as we shall now see, this did not translate into an absolute rejection of coercive government. Less advanced people, Mill believed, might legitimately be subjected to the rule of those at a higher level of civilisation, for the sake of their own greater happiness.

(3)*Paternalist colonialism*. Both James and John Stuart Mill held high administrative positions in the East India Company ands served it loyally for many years. Bringing a characteristically high-minded attitude to the Company's affairs, both Mills saw it less as an institution for making money for its shareholders than as a benevolent ruler of the native people in its charge. To our contemporary eyes, their paternalist attitude to the Indians under Company rule can seem not only unacceptably patronising but hard to square with their advocacy of enlarged political rights for the poor and downtrodden at home. Yet what chiefly exercised the Mills when they contemplated India was the chronic misgovernment of many of the native princes, whose selfish and lavish lifestyle had long been supported by a feudal peasantry kept in abject poverty and ignorance. Rule by the well-intentioned Company might indeed be coercive and undemocratic but it was potentially a much more effective engine for bringing happiness to the masses. Under its beneficent administration, justice would replace royal whim, enterprise combat lethargy, and education banish superstition. And given sufficient time (though this could not be expected to happen quickly), Indians should develop the requisite skills and virtues to make them capable of self-government. Such at least was James and John Stuart's vision for India.

There is some irony in the fact that during his thirty-five years in the Company's service, the younger Mill, despite his reputation as the empiricist *par excellence*, never visited India. Certainly his reports and recommendations on Indian affairs (now available via the Toronto University Press edition of his works) display an impressive command of detail, acute judgement and problem-solving ability, humanity, and diplomatic good sense. Yet Mill's lack of first-hand acquaintance with India and Indians, its culture, arts, religions and lifestyles, made it all-too-easy for him to slip into the a priori assumption that India was a generally barbarous country which, without western help, would remain in the slough of misery it had lain in for centuries.

Mill's remove from reality is clearly apparent in a curious essay entitled "A Few Words on Non-Intervention". Published in 1859, the same year as *On Liberty* (where the *anti*-libertarian doctrine is preached that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end" (*On Liberty*, 224)), Mill's "Few Words" paint a flattering but naïve picture of the aims of British imperialist endeavour. Mill's contention is that Britain's extensive (and expensive) intervention in other countries' affairs is driven by selfless, philanthropic motives which are rarely if ever sullied by thoughts of vulgar profit. Indeed, he insists, even when British politicians do occasionally profess to employ force in international affairs for the sake of the national interest, "[t]heir language is not a correct exponent of their thoughts", since the only interest they have in mind is "England's safety" – never her aggrandisement or financial gain ("A Few Words", 114). Spelling out his own colonial philosophy, Mill explains that the evils of barbarism (injustice, illegality, cruelty, oppression of the many by the few, ignorance and superstition) justify the forcible imposition of dominion by more civilised nations, provided always that the improvement of the natives is the principal objective of the overlords. The "law of nations" that bans the uninvited interference by one nation in the affairs of another refers only to *civilised* nations, and has no application to barbaric ones, whose rulers are capable neither of understanding nor respecting it. "[N]ations which are still barbarous", Mill unblushingly concludes, "have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners" ("A Few Words", 118).

It may seem to us another irony that the apostle of liberty should deliver such an uncompromising defence of imperialist restraint on liberty in the case of people in "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage" (*On*

Liberty, 224). The utilitarian calculation that produced that result might be considered faulty on several counts: its under-valuation of self-determination as a good; its blindness to the qualities of alternative life-styles that it does not respect because it does not understand them; its simplistic assumption that western civilisation is the *ne plus ultra* of cultural achievement; its failure to see that treating people as incompetent not only demeans them but is a hindrance to their self-development; its inattention to the corrupting effects of power and the inevitable abuse and exploitation by the rulers of the ruled; and its corresponding neglect of the moral risks to the rulers themselves, who falsely come to believe themselves a superior breed to the folk they rule.

However, we should not forget, while levelling these easy charges, that the utilitarian conception of empire provided a valuable counterpoise to the much more jingoistic and grasping conceptions of empire that saw its prime purpose as that of making Great Britain greater (and richer) still. Mill's campaign to prosecute Governor Eyre, and his strident protests against the atrocities committed against Indians by British soldiers in the aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, helped to focus minds on the truth that imperial rule came with weighty moral responsibilities. The greatest happiness of the greatest number *might* be promoted by the British Empire, but this outcome was by no means a foregone conclusion. By causing thoughtful men and women to reflect that the fruits of the tree of empire could be evil as well as good, the utilitarian perspective made a non-negligible contribution to making the world a happier place.

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