

the classical utilitarians bentham and mill

The classical utilitarians Bentham and Mill are two of the most significant figures in the development of utilitarian philosophy. This ethical theory posits that the best action is the one that maximizes utility, typically defined as that which produces the greatest well-being of the greatest number of people. While both philosophers contributed to this consequentialist framework, their ideas and approaches to utilitarianism have distinct features that merit examination.

Jeremy Bentham: The Founder of Modern Utilitarianism

Biography and Intellectual Context

Jeremy Bentham was born on February 15, 1748, in London, England. He studied at the University of Oxford, where he was exposed to the prevailing philosophical ideas of the time. Bentham's early legal studies and dissatisfaction with the legal system inspired him to develop a philosophy that could guide moral and political decisions.

Bentham's utilitarianism emerged in a period of significant social and political upheaval, marked by the Enlightenment and the early stirrings of democratic thought. His work was influenced by empiricism and a belief in rationality, which led him to prioritize the assessment of consequences in ethical decision-making.

Core Principles of Bentham's Utilitarianism

Bentham's utilitarian philosophy is grounded in several key principles:

1. **Principle of Utility:** This principle posits that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by their utility, or usefulness, in promoting happiness or reducing suffering.
2. **Hedonism:** Bentham equated pleasure with happiness and pain with unhappiness, arguing that the ultimate goal of human life is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.
3. **Quantitative Approach:** Bentham believed that happiness could be quantified. He introduced the "felicific calculus," a method for measuring the pleasure and pain generated by different actions.

The Felicific Calculus

Bentham's "felicific calculus" is a method designed to evaluate the moral worth of an action based on its consequences. He proposed several factors to consider, including:

- **Intensity:** How strong is the pleasure or pain?
- **Duration:** How long will the pleasure or pain last?
- **Certainty:** What is the likelihood that the pleasure or pain will occur?
- **Propinquity:** How soon will the pleasure or pain occur?
- **Fecundity:** What is the chance that the pleasure will lead to more pleasure?
- **Purity:** What is the chance that the pleasure will lead to pain?
- **Extent:** How many people will be affected?

This systematic approach was groundbreaking for its time and aimed to provide a rational basis for moral decision-making.

John Stuart Mill: Refining Utilitarianism

Biography and Contributions

John Stuart Mill was born on May 20, 1806, in London, England, and was the son of James Mill, a close associate of Jeremy Bentham. Mill was educated rigorously in philosophy and economics, and he became a prominent advocate for social reform, liberty, and women's rights. His works sought to refine and expand upon the utilitarian philosophy initially articulated by Bentham.

Core Principles of Mill's Utilitarianism

While Mill remained committed to the fundamental tenets of utilitarianism, he introduced several important modifications and expansions to the theory:

1. **Qualitative Hedonism:** Unlike Bentham's strict quantitative approach, Mill argued

that not all pleasures are equal. He believed that intellectual and moral pleasures (higher pleasures) are superior to mere physical pleasures (lower pleasures).

2. **The Harm Principle:** Mill emphasized individual liberty, arguing that individuals should be free to pursue their own happiness as long as they do not harm others. This principle is articulated in his seminal work, "On Liberty."
3. **Social and Economic Aspects:** Mill expanded utilitarianism to include considerations of justice, rights, and social welfare, recognizing that utilitarianism must account for the broader implications of individual actions on society.

Mill's Defense of Utilitarianism

In his book "Utilitarianism," published in 1863, Mill sought to defend the theory against various critiques, particularly the charge that it is a doctrine worthy only of swine. He argued that human beings, as rational creatures, have higher faculties that must be cultivated and that true happiness encompasses more than mere pleasure.

Mill proposed that:

- **Higher Pleasures vs. Lower Pleasures:** Individuals are capable of experiencing both higher (intellectual) and lower (bodily) pleasures. People who have experienced both tend to prefer the higher pleasures, which contribute to a more fulfilling life.
- **Social Progress:** Mill believed that a society that promotes the higher pleasures will ultimately lead to greater overall happiness. Education, culture, and the arts play crucial roles in elevating human experience.

Comparative Analysis: Bentham vs. Mill

Both Bentham and Mill contributed significantly to the development of utilitarianism, but their approaches differ in important ways:

Quantitative vs. Qualitative

- Bentham: Focused on the quantity of pleasure and pain, seeking to create a calculable method for moral decision-making.
- Mill: Introduced a qualitative dimension, emphasizing that the nature of pleasure matters. He believed that some pleasures are inherently more valuable than others.

Individual Rights and Liberty

- Bentham: Had a more utilitarian view of rights, often considering them as social constructs that could be overridden for the greater good.
- Mill: Stressed the importance of individual rights and liberties, arguing that protecting these rights is essential for the overall happiness of society.

Social Implications

- Bentham: Focused primarily on individual actions and their consequences without extensive consideration of societal structures.
- Mill: Advocated for social reforms, linking utilitarianism with broader social issues, including justice, education, and welfare.

Conclusion

The classical utilitarians Bentham and Mill laid the groundwork for ethical thought in the modern era. Bentham's emphasis on the quantifiable aspects of happiness and the felicific calculus provided a systematic approach to moral decision-making. In contrast, Mill's refinements introduced a richer understanding of human happiness, emphasizing qualitative differences in pleasures and the importance of individual rights.

Together, they have shaped utilitarianism into a dynamic and influential ethical framework, impacting various fields, including philosophy, political theory, and economics. Understanding their contributions helps illuminate the ongoing discussions in ethics and moral philosophy today, as society continues to grapple with the balance between individual rights and the collective good.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is considered the founder of classical utilitarianism?

Jeremy Bentham is considered the founder of classical utilitarianism, introducing the principle of the greatest happiness.

What is the principle of utility as defined by Bentham?

The principle of utility, as defined by Bentham, states that the best action is the one that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for the greatest number of people.

How did John Stuart Mill's view of utilitarianism differ from that of Bentham?

John Stuart Mill expanded on Bentham's ideas by emphasizing qualitative differences in pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior to mere physical pleasures.

What is the 'harm principle' introduced by Mill?

The 'harm principle' introduced by Mill states that individuals are free to act however they want unless their actions cause harm to others, which is a key aspect of his ethical theory.

How did Bentham propose to measure happiness?

Bentham proposed the 'hedonic calculus' as a method to measure happiness, taking into account factors like intensity, duration, certainty, and extent of pleasure and pain.

What role does justice play in Mill's utilitarianism?

Mill believed that justice is an essential component of utilitarianism, asserting that actions are just if they contribute to the overall happiness of society.

What was Bentham's view on animal rights?

Bentham argued for the consideration of animal suffering, famously stating that the question is not 'Can they reason?' but 'Can they suffer?', advocating for the rights of animals based on their capacity for pain.

What criticisms did Mill address regarding utilitarianism?

Mill addressed criticisms that utilitarianism is a doctrine worthy only of swine by distinguishing higher and lower pleasures, emphasizing that human happiness involves more complex aspects than mere physical pleasure.

How has classical utilitarianism influenced modern ethical theories?

Classical utilitarianism has influenced modern ethical theories by providing a framework for consequentialism, shaping discussions on morality, public policy, and economics, particularly in areas like welfare and resource allocation.

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