

JEREMY BENTHAM AND MORAL ARITHMETIC

UTILITARIANISM PROPOSES as its name implies, to establish the *usefulness* of an act or an object as the ultimate norm of its value or goodness. The question is, what is *useful*? The individual person is the only judge of that. But according to Utilitarians, there should be no difficulty of conflict of individual interests, for the same things are useful for all men. Happiness is the purpose of man's being; but happiness comes from pleasure. The useful, then, is ultimately the pleasureable. With this understood, we can comprehend the doctrine as formulated by the Utilitarians themselves: Utilitarianism approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness both of the individual and of society in general;¹ and this tendency becomes objectively accountable by the measurement and calculation of pleasure and pain.

The source material for this study is taken from the writings of Jeremy Bentham, whose 85 years of life were devoted chiefly to the development of the seeds of this philosophy into an organic system. Bentham lived between the years 1748 and 1832. This chronological placement in history had great influence upon the development of his thought, since Bentham's philosophy is a reaction to elements which he found in his environment, both social and philosophical.

Socially considered, Utilitarianism was largely a product of the British Industrial Revolution. British law had failed to keep pace with rapid economic and social developments. The plight of British workers, dispossessed of their lands and herded by the tens of thousands into factories was miserable. Hours were long—sometimes 16 hours a day—conditions unsanitary, and pay scarcely adequate.² The great expansion of the laboring classes kept them constantly pressing on the means of subsistence. The "corn laws" gave to the unproductive landed gentry an unbalancing share of other men's production. And finally English penal law, in a condition of disordered cruelty, included at this late date penalties such as mutilation and burning at the stake.³ The goal of Jeremy Bentham was ultimately to re-evaluate English social institutions with an eye toward reform; and to institute a

completely objective standard of morality by which infallible justice could be assured.

Philosophically, the works of Isaac Newton and Adam Smith had a formative influence on Bentham's doctrine. On the one hand, Newton gave Bentham his ideal of a *science* of morals which could, like physics, have in certain areas the certitude of mathematical demonstration. Newton's work suggested the idea of treating morals like any other science and making an experimental morality like an experimental physics.⁴ On the other hand, Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* had thrown his theses of political economy into a mechanism by which the exchange and division of labor and the products of labor led individuals, without knowing it and while each was pursuing his own end, to work for the direct realization of the *general interest*.⁵ Jeremy was to take the ball from here and show, "infallibly," how to secure the attainment of this end, namely, the greatest good of the greatest number. This objective becomes the ultimate purpose of society: that the greatest number possible should have the greatest amount of happiness possible.⁶

No clearer introduction to Bentham's ethical doctrine is available than these words which form the inception of his "masterpiece," *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*:

Nature has placed man under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do. . . . On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects are fastened to their throne. . . . In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire, but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and it assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. Systems which attempt to question it deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.⁷

Up to his time, Bentham tells us, there was a great gap in philosophy. There ought to have been what he calls a *logic of the will*. The operations of the will, he explains, are no less susceptible to being delineated by rules than those of the intellect. Just because Aristotle was unable to see such a use, is no reason why the art of logic should not be applied to the will. Although the intellect and will are so closely connected, the will is more important since evidently it is by this faculty that human actions are carried out. And this logic of the will, of course, is nothing other than the discovery and analysis of what is useful in human conduct.⁸

What has not been understood previously, said Jeremy, is that there is a quantitative value to happiness, pleasure and pain. Happiness is pleasure; and pleasure is good. Unhappiness is pain; and pain is bad. Nothing else matters, then, but their accurate measurement. For although it is conceded that there are various kinds of pleasures, all differences of species or quality must be disregarded, except in so far as they can be restated as differences of *quantity*. Since quantitative analysis and measurement are essential to scientific technique, ethics, if it is to make headway as a science, must have a system of quantitative calculation. This system, known as the "Hedonistic Calculus," intends to assure the accurate measurement of pleasure and pain and thus of right and wrong.

Bentham first places seven quantitative variables on which his tabulation will depend. The value of the pleasure springing from any action will depend upon: 1) its *intensity* or degree of enjoyment; 2) its *duration*; 3) its *certainly* or *uncertainty* of fulfillment; 4) the promptitude of its fulfillment; 5) its *fecundity*, or chance of being followed by like sensations: that is, pleasures by pleasures, and pains followed by pains; 6) its *purity*, or the chance of *not* being followed by *opposite* sensations; 7) and finally its *extent*, or the number of persons who are affected by it.⁹

To take an exact account of the tendency of any act, compute the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it, then the value of each pain. Next investigate the *fecundity* and *purity* of each of these. Sum up all the values of pleasure on one side and all the values of pain on another. A balance on the side of pleasure will give a good tendency; but a predominance of pain will show the act to be bad. Then it is necessary to take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned, and to repeat the above process with respect to each one of them. The result will indicate the general moral value of the act with respect to the community of persons involved. In order to lodge this process firmly in your memory, you simply have to learn by heart the following verses framed by the master himself:

Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—
Such marks in *pleasures* and in *pains* endure.
Such pleasures seek, if *private* be thy end;
If it be *public*, wide let them extend.
Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:
If pains *must* come, let them extend to few.¹⁰

In addition to this calculation, however, it is necessary to distinguish

six elements in every act: 1) the act itself; 2) the circumstances in which it is done; 3) the intention that accompanies it; 4) the consciousness of the agent; 5) the motive which gave birth to it; and 6) the general disposition which it indicates.

The *act itself* is equivalent to and cannot be separated from its consequences. And these are all important, for it is the consequences which are pleasureable or painful. Next the *circumstances* are considered. These are capable of influencing sensibility, so that the quantity of pleasure or pain will not depend entirely upon the exciting cause but also upon some combination of 32 generic circumstances which Bentham elaborates. Next is *intention* which is the voluntary factor of the agent. To the extent that an intention aims at the performance of specific acts which will produce pleasure, it is good.¹¹ *Consciousness* is the part which the understanding or *perceptive faculty* plays in the act. The malice of intention depends directly upon the greater or less realization of consciousness. *Motive* signifies anything which can contribute to or prevent any kind of action. Motives are speculative if they influence merely intellectual acts, or practical if they produce internal or external sensible effects. Motives in themselves can be either morally indifferent or positively good. Considered as the desire implanted by nature for pleasure, motives are indifferent since both good and bad actions may spring from them naturally. Considered, however, as that which will stimulate the agent to act consciously toward attaining the greatest pleasure of the greatest number, motives must be considered positively good. Finally, *disposition* is that character which expresses what is permanent in a man's frame of mind. He is termed good or bad according to his disposition, since his disposition is merely an indication of the manner in which he normally acts.

To illustrate the application of this doctrine, Bentham formulated, in the Newtonian mode, four "scientific" laws for judging depravity of disposition. These will indicate to what an extent Bentham conceived of his ethics as a perfect science, amendable to mathematical formulation:

Rule I—Temptation remaining the same, the mischievousness of the disposition is directly proportional to the mischievousness of the act.

Thus it would show greater malice to murder a man for five dollars than simply to steal the same amount while the man is sleeping. The temptation is the same: acquiring five dollars; but evidently the act of murder is more mischievous than mere robbery.

Rule II—The badness of the act remaining the same, the badness

of the disposition is inversely proportional to the strength of the temptation.

Thus a man is more wicked who would kill another man out of mere sport (as the Roman Emperors used to do), than if he killed out of revenge. For revenge constitutes a greater temptation and leaves the agent less disposed to resist.

Rule III—The badness of the act remaining the same, the evidence which it affords of depravity of disposition is inversely proportional to the strength of temptation.

If a poor man is about to die of hunger and steals in order to buy a loaf of bread, it is less explicit a sign of depravity than if a rich man were to steal the same amount.

Rule IV—Where the motive is anti-social, other things being equal, depravity is directly proportional to the degree of deliberation with which it is accompanied.¹²

For just as friction tends to halt what has been generated by impulse, society tends to overcome anti-social tendencies of individuals. Since proper social interchange is important, the greater a man's deliberation in anti-social acts, the more obviously his intent is against the greatest good of the greatest number.

One more stroke of the pen completes this sketch of Jeremy Bentham's moral system. He took for granted the validity of the theory of psychological determinism or ethical determinism, as it is also called. With Socrates, Jeremy believed that man's every error was due to ignorance alone.^{13 14} If his reform was reasonable, then every problem would be automatically solved as soon as it was explained to other men.

The seeds of problems still remain, however. "Why should a man, unless he happens to feel like it, adopt as his motto the greatest happiness of the greatest number, rather than the greatest happiness of number one?"¹⁵ Jeremy's answer is, of course, not lacking: "The interests of the individual do not always agree with the interests of the community; and this divergence sets the problem for penal law."¹⁶

All the legislator has to do, then, is hold in one hand Bentham's multi-fold tabulations of pains and pleasures, and in the other keep the Hedonistic calculus. By attaching through proper legislation sanctions of punishment to criminal acts, he will destroy crime. Stealing, for example, must be so punished that the thief's enjoyment of the stolen goods is nullified by the pain of the punishment he receives under the law. But while this punishment is necessary, nevertheless it must exceed the pleasure of criminal profit in

quantity by as little as possible. For every punishment is an evil and can only be inflicted just in so far as it is necessary and no farther.¹⁷ With the application of this principle to all areas of criminology, crime and vice will disappear.

So Jeremy Bentham completed the moral and legal system which was to bring utopia to England, and for that matter— wherever else rulers had the sense to see its value. Strangely though, Jeremy was not himself of a disposition to really enjoy its advantages. He was an odd, unemotional little man. Described by biographers as a sort of "codifying animal,"¹⁸ Bentham seems to have felt more warmth of friendship for his pet cats and mice and pig than for his human associates. But just as strangely, a group of fond disciples grew around him to form what could really be called a philosophic school. From this circle of Utilitarians, men such as James Mill, Malthus, Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill produced writings which were to influence deeply their own century's thinking as well as ours. That Master Jeremy himself recognized his talents is obvious from a letter of his written in 1810: ". . . my fame has spread itself all over the civilized world. . . . I am considered as having superseded everything written before me on the subject of legislation."¹⁹

According to Bentham, his doctrine should have received universal acceptance. Other systems which claim to be founded upon Natural Law, Right Reason, Natural Rights or what have you, are not moral systems at all. 'A man says that he has *right reason* which is the standard of right and wrong: it tells him to do so and so. Hence either all good and just men understand just as he does . . . or they don't have *right reason*.' Or another man says, that there is an eternal and immutable *rule of right*; then he begins giving you his sentiments upon anything that comes uppermost in his mind. And these sentiments (you are to take for granted) are so many branches of the eternal rule of right.²⁰

But there is no getting away from the principle of utility. For with his characteristic "logic," Jeremy explains that should one protest that it is wrong to follow his principle, the objector is merely saying that it is not consonant to utility to consult utility, and therefore by his very rejection of the principle he is acting by it. There seems no way out!

Nevertheless, the chain which binds together this system of moral arithmetic has more than a few weak links. While Bentham holds that reason alone governs human actions, a brief analysis of human nature discloses three principles of operation in man: not only the *faculties*, both cognitive and appetitive, but also the *passions* and *habits*. It is evident from experience

that men act contrary to reason or without consulting reason. Consider a man who knows he should not take seconds of a tender, juicy steak sitting before him. Yet he is led by the love of the good taste and the desire of continuing his pleasure to eat more than he ought, and becomes sick. He knew it was unreasonable, and yet ate too much. Or in another case, what is it that moves you to jump up out of bed as soon as the alarm rings each morning? Obviously, at that hour you don't act by the movement of reason—for anyone could easily find arguments to prolong the mental debate as to the value of getting up early in the morning. In this case, it is habit which moves you by virtue of previous acts of the same kind.

Besides this, Bentham equates pleasure with "sense pleasure." The formal motive of every action has become for him the enjoyment of sense delights. Hence the whole area of spiritual and even intellectual goods which constitute the Life of Grace and the natural contemplation which Aristotle recognized as man's most perfect activity, have no value in the Utilitarian system. Small wonder, then, that Bentham left instructions that his corpse should be "pickled" after his death, to be brought in to sit at the meetings of the Board of Directors of the University of London. He wasn't expecting a life to come anywhere else . . . so he hoped for this rather strange "museum immortality."

One more point can be briefly criticized. It just so happens that not every thing in this world is susceptible to mathematical methodology. Man has a free will, and because of this faculty of free choice human actions are not bound to a hedonistic determinism. It is just not possible to say that "this man plus this delight equals this action" as you would say "three plus two equals five." Ethics as a science cannot be founded in sterile isolation. It must take its principles from a metaphysics and a psychology of man. Otherwise it will be meaningless.

The will moves toward objects which reason finds to be good. And human reason is guided not only by its interior light, but by the blueprints of natural and divine law. It is reason which assures order and harmony in human activity; and that order and harmony make the actions and the man good.

The "Hedonistic Calculus" is a nightmare from an impoverished age of human thought. But nightmares make us appreciate reality the more.

—Paul Philibert, O.P.

¹ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Ed. Philip Wheelwright. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1935, p. 8.

² *ibid.*, p. xi.

³ Crane Brinton, "Utilitarianism," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. New York: Macmillan, 1935. Vol. XV, p. 197-8.

⁴ Elie Halevy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955. p. 19.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶ Bentham, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7-8.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 118-9.

¹³ W. R. Sorley, *A History of English Philosophy*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921. p. 217-8.

¹⁴ Bentham, *op. cit.*, p. 129 ff. The principle of psychological determinism is particularly evident in the Rules of Proportion between Punishments and Offenses.

¹⁵ Arthur K. Rogers, *English and American Philosophy Since 1800*. New York: Macmillan, 1928. p. 53.

¹⁶ Sorley, *op. cit.*, p. 216. The words quoted are those of Sorley.

¹⁷ Halevy, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁸ Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Halevy, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

²⁰ Bentham, *op. cit.*, 180, 181.

HOLY MASS

WE COME NOW to the Eucharist. It sums up and contains all the gifts of God to men. Jesus Christ is really present therein and is given to us so entirely as to become our food. In the very words in which he declared his presence, Jesus at the same time declared that he was giving himself. 'This is my body which is given to you, Take and eat ye all of this.' The Eucharist gives us Jesus Christ offered up, that is to say given entirely: There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friend. It does not only give us his sacrifice but Jesus whole and entire with his body and his soul, his blood, his humanity and his divinity, and all his mysteries.

Finally, in holy communion, Jesus is not only given us so that we eat his flesh for Jesus says with respect to that 'The flesh profiteth nothing' (*John* 6, 64), but so that we should be filled with his spirit and his grace. In a beautiful antiphon for the feast of Corpus Christi, we sing the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: '*O Sacrum Convivium*. O Sacred Banquet in which