

Empiricism, Natural Rights, and Utilitarianism

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

I. Empiricism

II. Human Nature and Natural Rights

III. Utilitarianism

I. Empiricism

Epistemology —theory of knowledge:

- What counts as knowledge
- how we come to know anything

Central tenets:

- Human beings are born as “blank slates” — we have no innate ideas or innate knowledge.
- All knowledge is ultimately derived from sensory experience.
- Presupposition: There is a clear and absolute division between the knowing subject and the known object — cf. Carr, pp. xxx

Who was the first major modern empiricist?

Our Old Friend Locke!

**Published *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,
the same year as his *Two Treatises***

(Coincidence? I think not...)

Main Similarity Between His Two Theories:

Both rely on a robust view of human nature.

Human beings are able to ...

- **know the world unproblematically,**
- **discover the natural law, and**
- **discover our natural rights.**

Problems with Natural Rights

Rely on controversial (unproven, and probably unprovable) accounts of human nature

How can we come to know that any rights are *natural*?

Accounts of human nature and rights are typically specific to...

- ... particular societies, and

- ... particular privileged people within them

Natural Rights in Locke, Paine & Founding Era:

Presume that the people with the rights have property sufficient to meet their needs and still have the time and energy to participate in public affairs.

Bentham: Natural rights are “nonsense on stilts”!

III. Utilitarianism.

Main Utilitarian Philosophers:

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Utilitarianism: A theory of ethics — an account of what makes an action morally right.

Related to theories of market economics.

The Principle of Utility:

An act, A, is morally right = A is the act, of all available alternatives, that brings about the greatest net happiness (total happiness less total unhappiness) for all.

Questions about Utilitarianism:

- *How are happiness and unhappiness defined?* Three views:
 - Pleasure vs. Pain (Hedonism — Bentham)
 - Satisfied vs. Frustrated Preferences
 - A List of Objective Qualities (e.g., health, appreciation of beauty)
- *How are pleasure & pain measured?* Bentham had seven criteria by which pleasures and pains can be measured:
 - intensity
 - duration
 - probability
 - nearness in time
 - fecundity (does a pleasure lead to later pleasures? e.g., reading philosophy)
 - purity (does a pleasure lead to later pain? e.g., overindulgence)
 - numbers (how many are affected)

Further Points about Utilitarianism

- Egalitarian (in one sense): Utilitarianism counts each one's pleasure and pain *equally* to each other one's pleasure and pain, of the same magnitude. No one counts more than anyone else.
- Non-egalitarian (in a different sense): Utilitarianism implies that it is right to cause suffering to some, if that suffering results in enough enjoyment by others to maximize the sum total of happiness.
- Utilitarianism includes all *people*, and in fact, all sentient beings. (Bentham: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?")
- Utilitarianism is *only* concerned with the consequences of actions — not with whether they follow a law, a rule or God's commandments.
- Utilitarianism is intended to be *empirical*.

The Empiricism of Utilitarianism.

Bentham's Psychology:

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall 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. They govern us in all that we do, in all we say, in all we think....” *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Human Motivation: Mechanistic and deterministic – verifiable by observation

Pleasure and Pain: Sensory, measurable, subject to observation

Utilitarianism as an Empirical Theory: In principle, it is possible to determine by observation whether or not a person is doing the right thing, and the theory is itself justified by empirical observation.

Appeal of Utilitarianism in the 19th Century

- Emphasis on empirical observation
- Insistence on summation of pleasure and pain across all of society
- Emphasis on efficiency – translated readily into economics
- Emphasis on passive experience of pleasure and pain, not on active exercise of rights – amenable to rise of management
- No presuppositions about economic independence as with natural rights theories
- Flexible – easily adapted to new industrial conditions