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978-1-108-07142-0 - Utilitarianism: Explained and Exemplified in Moral and Political Government

Charles Tennant

Excerpt

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UTILITARIANISM,  
EXPLAINED AND EXEMPLIFIED,  
IN  
MORAL AND POLITICAL GOVERNMENT.

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CHAPTER I.

GENERAL REMARKS.

THE object of this treatise is not so much to refute the false philosophy under this name, as to draw practical conclusions from a higher and true source.

It is true, as Mr. John Stuart Mill says, that “from the dawn of philosophy the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another.

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And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to old Protagoras, and asserted (if Plato's dialogue be grounded on a real conversation) the theory of Utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist."

Rather a strong ground of presumption this, that there is something wrong in the philosophy!

The Utilitarians may say what they please, but the truth remains the same, and they are only repeating the doctrine of the ancient Epicureans, a doctrine which never made much progress even among Pagans.

The wonder is not that it has made so little progress, but that it has found advocates among enlightened and thinking men in the 19th Century of the Christian Era!

Mr. John Stuart Mill, who may be regarded as the living chief of the small sect of modern Epicureans, is more careful in defining "What Utilitarianism Is," by saying, what it is not, than by saying, in intelligible terms, what it is.

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## GENERAL REMARKS.

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But he is hardly fair to his opponents, when he refers to their "shallow mistake."

He says (p. 8)—"Those who know anything about the matter are aware that every writer from Epicurus to Bentham, who maintained the theory of utility, meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain; and instead of offering the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these, among other things. Yet the common herd, including the herd of writers, not only in newspapers and periodicals, but in books of weight and pretension, are perpetually falling into this shallow mistake. Having caught up the word utilitarian, while knowing nothing whatever about it but its sound, they habitually express by it the rejection, or the neglect, of pleasure in some of its forms; of beauty, of ornament, or of amusement."

Their mistake, according to this, is shallow enough; but, whether shallow or not, their objection is something more than this.

The present object is to state their objection more clearly than Mr. Mill has here stated it, and, perhaps, he will see that the ground of objection to his favorite philosophy is then removed, and that he is still left in possession of all that he desires to establish.

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UTILITARIANISM.

With this view Mr. Mill's work on "Utilitarianism" will be closely followed as the text, on which this treatise will be the Commentary; and it will be concluded with practical remarks in application to Human Government.

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## CHAPTER II.

### WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS.

MR. MILL, (p. 9) says: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."

Referring to some supplementary explanations, he adds:—"But these do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure, and the prevention of pain."

Mr. Mill then goes on, very properly, to add :

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“Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike.”

He also, but not so properly, gives the reasons for their dislike. Those, as Mr. Mill truly says, are foolish reasons; and those are not the reasons which will be given here. This gets rid of a great deal of Mr. Mill’s waste reasoning, which it is needless here to follow.

According to Mr. Mill, (p. 17) “the Greatest Happiness Principle, as explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of

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which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.”

This is a very comprehensive, though not a very clear explanation; but it is given in Mr. Mill's own words, and he is bound by them. He feels the difficulty of defining Happiness, and tries to avoid the difficulty by the use of negatives rather than of affirmatives; by showing what Happiness is not, rather than what it is; by showing that it “is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments,”—but without explaining what he means by pain or enjoyments. He assumes Happiness as a principle, though he admits Happiness to be the end and object of all principle. This, coming from a Master of Logic, deserves notice. He cannot mean that a principle and its consequences are one and the same thing. And yet this is what he has said! He must mean that Happiness is the consequence, or result, of the principle. But,—What principle? The Utilitarian principle. Be it so. But, let us see how this will bear examination.

He says, (p. 16) in reference to his previous reasoning:—“I have dwelt on this point, as being

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a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility, or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct.”

Here he makes Utility and Happiness synonymous terms. But just before he made Happiness the principle, and also the consequence, or result!

Assuming that he meant to say, Utility, the principle, and Happiness, the consequence or result, how can Utility and Happiness be synonymous terms? If so, Utility and Happiness are convertible terms, and a perfectly just conception of one is a directive rule of human conduct for both; or, a perfectly just conception of Utility is a directive rule of conduct for Happiness, and a perfectly just conception of Happiness is a directive rule of conduct for Happiness; which seems very much like saying that, a perfectly just conception of what is right is a directive rule of conduct for what is right;—a proposition which no one is likely to dispute, though the difficulty of obtaining that “perfectly just conception,” seems to be left precisely where it was before this new “directive rule of human conduct” was given.

But, for this new “directive rule,” we must have a “just conception” of what Utility is, or what Mr. Mill means by it. The only explana-



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tion which he has given is that, "Utility holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."

There is nothing new in this, and nobody ever disputed it, but there is not much explanation in this. It would have been something more to the purpose if Mr. Mill had told us more clearly what he means by Utility.

It would have been something new, and might have helped his argument, if he had given us some clear and definite rules by which we might determine this question. But on this he has nowhere ventured, and he has left us only where we were before, and that is, under the guidance of our reason.

We will endeavour to give the answer as we understand it.

What is Utility?

Every created thing is a Utility.

But nothing is of any use, until used. How far anything is useful depends on the use of it. Improperly used it is hurtful, and useful only when properly used. Therefore, the Greatest Happiness results from the proper use of everything.

This is what Mr. Mill and the Utilitarians mean, though it is not what they say; and it is what

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every body means, whatever they may say, or do. But this may be said in fewer words, the meaning being simply that,—‘What is right is best!’

To say that, the Greatest Happiness is Utility, is a mere jumble of words, which would read as well backwards as forwards. Utility is the Greatest Happiness. And this is just what the Utilitarians do say. They say it backwards and forwards, and it is as true one way as the other.

To simplify this, let us reduce it.

The Vegetarians say, Health is the Greatest Happiness:—Vegetables are most conducive to health; therefore, Vegetables are the Greatest Happiness Principle.

The Tee-totallers say, Temperance is the Greatest Happiness:—Milk and Water are most conducive to Temperance: therefore, Milk and Water are the Greatest Happiness Principle.

These words may be said backwards or forwards with as much meaning.

There is no more Principle in Happiness or Utility, than there is in a Potatoe, or in Milk and Water, or any other utility.

Mr. Mill and the Utilitarians seem to have a strange notion about utilities, and in this notion seems to lurk a great deal of their error.