

On Mill's Revisions of Bentham's Utilitarianism

Zijian Huang^{1,*}

¹School of Marxism, Guangxi University, Guangxi, Nanning, China

*Corresponding author: 1670629384@qq.com

Abstract

In response to the deficiency of Bentham's utilitarian ethics, Mill made significant corrections to it, realising three major conversions of utilitarianism itself: the conversion of the doctrine of pleasure to happiness; the conversion of the theory of moral sanction from extrinsic to intrinsic sanction; and the conversion of the principle of "the happiness of the greatest number" from "egoism" to "altruism". This makes utilitarianism itself become richer, which is a powerful response to the questioning of various parties. However, Mill's revision and development of Bentham's utilitarian ethics did not escape the utilitarianism. His principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" was criticised by Rawls, Amartya Sen and others for sacrificing the welfare and freedom of the minority. Nevertheless, in contrast to Bentham, Mill made the structure of the utilitarian ethical system more refined and complete.

Keywords

MILL; Bentham; Hedonism; The theory of Sanctions; The Greatest Happiness Principle.

1. Introduction

Utilitarianism has a long historical origin, but its systematic elaboration as a doctrine is a matter of recent times. According to current research, the philosophical theories of Hume and others have already included elements of utilitarianism. However, as a unique moral philosophy, the term "utilitarianism" was first used by Bentham in 1791. [1] Bentham's idea of utilitarianism was first formed in his book *A Treatise on the Slices of Government* which published in 1776, and was elaborated and defended in detail in his subsequent book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Bentham's utilitarianism contains several aspects, most notably consequentialism, the pleasure principle, and the maximisation principle. [2] Consequentialism emphasizes the consequences of actions rather than the motives for them as the measure of moral behaviour, and believes that the correctness of every action must be guaranteed by the consequences of the action. Bentham defines utilitarianism in terms of pleasure theory, and his hedonism neglects the more important spiritual pleasure of emotion because of its excessive emphasis on sensual pleasure. In Bentham's principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number", utilitarianism is compatible with egoism. Bentham's utilitarian ethics was ridiculed and criticised by philosophers of the time from different quarters for this defect. In order to respond to the criticisms from various aspects, utilitarianism itself also made efforts to make adjustments and corrections, which is especially reflected in Mill's masterpiece of ethics, *Utilitarianism*, published in 1861: he defended the principle of utilitarianism's "consequentialism", and at the same time reasonably absorbing the progressive factors of Bentham's utilitarian ethical ideas, and revised some of Bentham's ideas, thus pushing the utilitarian ethical doctrine to a new peak of development. In what ways does Mill's revision and development of Bentham's utilitarian ethical thought reflect this? What are the limitations of this revision and development? This is exactly where this paper intends to study in depth.

2. Mill's Revision of Bentham's Utilitarian Pleasure Theory

2.1. Clarification of the Meaning of "Utilitarianism"

Before revising and developing Bentham's theory of pleasure, Mill makes a stark rebuttal to the many deviations and misunderstandings that exist in people's ordinary understanding of utilitarianism, and endeavours to clarify the meaning of utilitarianism in a comprehensive manner. Critics of the meaning of the word "utilitarian" tend to "use the term in that restricted and merely colloquial sense in which utility is opposed to pleasure"[3], this narrow understanding, Mill ironically dismisses as ignorant. Another common criticism, on the contrary, equates utilitarianism with "the grossest pleasures". The lack of a proper understanding of the meaning of the term "utilitarianism" has led to the blind rejection of utilitarianism. In Mill's view, the fact is that the general public, including writers in general, have only a literal understanding of the word 'utilitarianism,' and have no idea of its deeper meaning, except for the pronunciation of the word. In response to such shallow misunderstandings of utilitarianism, Mill refutes the opponents and positively explains the connotations of utilitarianism.

Mill argues that throughout the history of Western utilitarianism, from Epicurus to Bentham, utilitarianism has never been regarded as the opposite of pleasure. Mill rescued utilitarianism from the abyss of depravity by further making "utilitarianism" or the "principle of the greatest happiness" as the cornerstone of moral beliefs, arguing 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"[4] And the basis for this claim is that pleasure and the elimination of pain are worth desiring because they are important means for the enhancement of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It follows that one of the most important meanings of utilitarianism is that utilitarianism consists not only in the pursuit of happiness, but also in the prevention and alleviation of misfortune. This shows that in clarifying the meaning of "utilitarianism", Mill actually has a tendency to shift from the doctrine of pleasure to that of happiness.

2.2. Revision of Bentham's utilitarian "pleasure theory"

Bentham defines utilitarianism in terms of pleasure theory, with particular emphasis on sensual pleasure. For Bentham, pain and pleasure are the basis of good and evil, and thus the two supreme masters of "pleasure" and "pain" are the starting point of his pleasure doctrine. According to him, "Nature has placed mankind under the dominion of two supreme masters, pleasure and pain. It is these masters that point out what we should do and determine what we will do." [5] In order to measure the degree of pleasure and pain, Bentham also put forward a set of methods for calculating the intensity, persistence, certainty or uncertainty, proximity or remoteness, abundance or purity, and breadth of bitterness and happiness. In Bentham's view, there is only a difference in "quantity" but not in "quality" of happiness. "Leaving aside prejudice, the game of push-pin has the same value as music and poetry, the arts and sciences", [6] that is to say, if the game of push-pin and poetry can give people the same amount of lasting happiness, then the game of push-pin and poetry are equally good and of equal value. This simple mechanical analogy has often been chastised by critics, such as Thomas Carlyle, who unapologetically dismissed Bentham's utilitarian doctrine as "pig philosophy". [7]

Bentham's utilitarian theory of pleasure does have some absurdities. His utilitarian theory of pleasure, completely excluded the Epicurean doctrine of spiritual pleasure is higher than the reasonable component of physical pleasure, and all pleasure is mechanically regarded as homogeneous pleasure. "Quality" and "quantity", like the two ends of a scale, could have been included as criteria for evaluating happiness, but Bentham only considered "quantity" without taking "quality" into account, and from this point of view, Bentham's utilitarian theory of pleasure is indeed prone to be mercilessly attacked. In response to opponents of the philosophy

who likened utilitarianism to "swine," Mill argued that this was a despicable idea, since pleasures differed in "quantity" as well as in "quality". As higher beings, human beings have higher faculties that animals do not possess, and these higher faculties tend to motivate human beings to seek higher things to satisfy themselves, so that it is clear that the pleasures of animals are not indicative of the pleasures of human beings.

In Mill's view, the preferences of qualified people can be used as a measure of the difference between the quality and quantity of pleasure. For those who have experienced both kinds of pleasure will obviously realise in contrast that one is far superior to the other, even though this pursuit of higher pleasures does not satisfy the quantity of the kind of desires we prefer. In this regard, Mill makes a classic statement:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. [8](124)

From this graphic description we can see that Mill actually preferred higher pleasures. In Mill's opinion, very few people voluntarily become lower animals in order to enjoy as many animal pleasures as possible, and those who are tempted to put aside higher pleasures in order to pursue lower ones are due to nothing more than weakness character. There are many kinds of pain and pleasure for higher pleasures, Mill gives higher pleasures a higher priority in the inner emotions of man, and thus it especially emphasises that pleasures are not homogeneous. In Mill's theory of happiness, his pursuit of higher happiness takes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people" as its ultimate destination, just as the realisation of the happiness of the greatest number of people is a matter of particular delight. Thus, Mill shifted from Bentham's pleasure to a non-mechanistic theory of happiness that takes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" as its value.

3. Mill's Revision of Bentham's Utilitarian Theory of Moral Sanctions

3.1. Mill's Reflection and Revision of Bentham's Moral External Sanctions

After clarifying the meaning of utilitarianism and revising Bentham's theory of pleasure, Mill focuses his theoretical construction not on the elaboration of moral entries, but on the exploration of the question of where moral sanctions come from. In response to this question, Bentham's theory of external sanctions suggests that there are four main sources of binding force for bitterness and happiness: moral, political, natural and religious sanctions. Bentham's theory of moral sanctions, which attempts to externally constrain people's behaviour in many ways, is bound to be very flawed. Because external sanctions can be coercive, and if they are applied only from an external point of view, people's adherence to moral standards tends to be passive rather than active. Bentham's utilitarian ethical theory lacks not only the knowledge of the emotional and spiritual world of the individual, but also this deep inner digging into the moral life and moral character of the individual. In other words, Mill's exploration of the ultimate motivation and fundamental source of the binding force of man's moral standards still needs to dig into the inner man, to explore the intrinsic constraints from which utilitarian morality takes effect in the moral feelings.

3.2. Mill's Moral Theory of Internal Sanctions - Theory of Conscience

Despite the obvious shortcomings of Bentham's theory of external sanctions, Mill does recognise the significance of this theory of external sanctions in Bentham's moral theory. According to Mill, the power of external sanctions, such as punishments and rewards, whether they come from God or from our fellow men, is in part conducive to the promotion of the practice of utilitarian morality. In terms of intrinsic binding force, Mill argues that only conscience is the ultimate sanctioner of the utilitarian principle. Although Mill recognises the existence of conscience, this does not mean merging with rationalism and intuitionism; the

question is how to recognise the origin and substance of conscience. Mill opposes the transcendentalism that claim that there is an innate origin of conscience, arguing that conscience, even if is not part of our nature capable of sprouting spontaneously and attaining a high degree of development through acquired cultivation. Therefore, Mill points out that even if the utilitarian principle has no foundation in people's minds, it is possible to develop a conscience consistent with the principle of from utilitarianism through acquired means, as practice has shown.

Just as Hume regarded habit as the great guide to life, Mill's argument for an internally sanctioned moral theory of conscience is clearly in the tradition of English empiricism. His exploration of the "conscience" thesis in fact involves the two main ways in which moral habits are formed, one is external sanction, the mental association with morality that leads people to develop the habit of following morality; the other is social affection that is cultivated between people on the basis of common interests in social interactions. With regard to social feeling, Mill further states that it is the natural basis of feeling in human nature, a firm foundation, which, in so far as it is recognised as an ethical standard, will be the source of the moral force of utilitarianism. As mankind moved further away from barbaric isolation, men formed social communities, and it was clearly impossible for such relationships to be established without benefiting the majority of its members, except in the case of master-slave relationships. The creation of a community of interest that benefits the majority of its members must depend on the creation of a stable "community feeling" within it, which often requires that we never do anything seriously detrimental to others in our social community interactions. When they cooperate, they also feel that the interests of others are their own. Utilitarianism thus gains a humanistic dimension and is thus not difficult to accept.

4. Mill's Revision of Bentham's Principle of the Greatest Happiness of the Most People

4.1. Criticism of Bentham's Utilitarian "Egoism"

In Bentham's utilitarian ethics, utilitarianism is compatible with egoism. Because Bentham believes that as long as everyone pursues his or her own greatest happiness, the result must be the happiness of the greatest number of people, and he fails to take into account the fact that conflicts of interest between individuals cannot be overcome by the "genuine pursuit of one's own greatest happiness". On the surface, Bentham's principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" emphasises the interests of the greatest number, but in reality it stresses the interests of Bentham's minority. In Bentham's rule of calculation, the so-called public interest is nothing more than the simple addition of individual interests, which shows that Bentham's principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is essentially a kind of refined egoism. In response to the inadequacy of Bentham's principle of maximisation, Mill added the reasonable element of "altruism" to utilitarianism and gave a new interpretation of the "principle of maximum happiness. He stresses that utilitarianism uses of the greatest happiness of all as the criterion for moral maximisation, rather than the greatest happiness of the actors themselves as the measure. This suggests that maximum happiness in the public sphere is not a simple superimposition of maximum happiness in the individual sphere, and that it requires "altruism" as the kernel of value, shifting the point of departure for the pursuit of maximum happiness to the "greatest number".

4.2. Mill's Defence of Utilitarian Altruism

On the issue of self-sacrifice, Mill also defends the "altruism" of the utilitarian principle, and the duality embodied in this defence needs to be viewed dialectically. On the one hand, Mill affirms that self-sacrifice is not a purpose in itself, but that sacrifice is some means for or in favour of

the happiness of others. A sacrifice is wasteful if it does not promote or enhance the total amount of happiness. But on the other hand, this kind of self-sacrifice advocated by Mill is obviously at the cost of the lives of a few people, and although Mill wanted to provide a reasonable theoretical basis for this utilitarian view of self-sacrifice, he inadvertently made the legitimate rights and interests of a few people were violated, and many scholars have used this as an object of attack. However, it is undeniable that Mill's principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is not a calculable, mechanical principle of happiness like that of Bentham's. "It is only when the arrangement of the world is in a very imperfect state that the absolute sacrifice of one's own happiness can be the best method of advancing the happiness of others." [9] In other words, Mill did not advocate absolute self-sacrifice in a well-ordered society with perfect institutions. Nevertheless, when Mill justifies sacrifice in terms of the imperfections of the world, sacrifice becomes a tool to promote the happiness of others, with the ultimate goal being the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.

5. Mill's Utilitarianism and the Limits of its Modification

5.1. Whether "actual desires" can be derived from "worthy desires"

In Mill's view, the utilitarian principle as a first principle cannot be proved by reasoning, but it can have recourse to the faculties that determine facts, our senses and our inner consciousness. Following the English empiricist tradition, he pins the final proof and defence of the utilitarian principle on empirical facts and psychological facts. So we can only use human experience or the opinion of the majority to prove that the ultimate aim of life should be "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". The argument Mill gives for this is:

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.[10]

According to this logic, people actually desire happiness, and happiness is worth desiring. As social beings, the social sentiment of harmony with one's fellow human beings requires that people actually desire public happiness, which is, in this sense, also desirable. This mode of argumentation from "actual desire" to "desirable desire" seems to be correct, however, it has been criticised by many people. First of all, sight and hearing are nothing but a kind of sensory feeling of human beings, while happiness is a kind of psychological feeling of human beings, and Mill's analogy between the sensory level of human beings and the psychological level of human beings has precisely committed the logical error of an inappropriate analogy. In the second place, Moore argues that Mill makes a logical error by equating facts with values and moving from "actual desires" to "ideal desires." Moore accuses Mill of trying to help us discover what ought to be done when in fact he is telling us what we are doing, or that Mill makes the mistake of deriving "ought" from "is."

5.2. Ignoring the "best interests of the least beneficiary"

In Utilitarianism, Mill further explores the compatibility of justice and utilitarianism in a way that Bentham's utilitarian ethics does not. Mill argues that justice and utilitarianism are not incompatible with each other in terms of two essential elements, the rule of justice and the sense of justice. Mill points out that the so-called rule of justice means that people are required to uphold or not to violate the legitimate rights of others. With regard to the sense of justice, Mill defines it as the desire to resist or retaliate due to injury to oneself or one's own kind, which is common to both humans and animals. By defining it in this way, Mill is clearly trying to further prove that the intensity and moral justification of this desire for revenge comes from a related utilitarianism that is of great importance, and thus certify for the compatibility between

utilitarianism and justice. The overall interest of society is to achieve the greatest good of the greatest number of people, people's own security interests are the common pursuit and recognition of human beings, so that justice can be from the security interests of the common pursuit of the principle of utilitarianism within the scope of application of the utility of the principle of the compatibility between utilitarianism and justice to be possible.

In essence, Mill's utilitarian view of justice is based on the general interests of security and the overall merits of society, but his moral principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" ignores and even sacrifices, the rights and interests of minorities at a certain level. For this reason, Rawls, the main representative of the famous contemporary liberal contractarian school of thought, has put forward a contrasting view of justice, namely, "the greatest good for the least favoured". As two different social groups, the "largest logarithm" and the "least favoured" are the logical starting points of the two views of distributive justice. However, the "greatest number" often becomes synonymous with all members of society, thereby masking actual distributive injustice. The economist Amartya Sen has also pointed out that utilitarianism uses the sum of utility as a criterion for judging social achievement, which leads to a neglect of distributive justice. Although the Rawlsian principle of justice overcomes the uncertainty of the "greatest number", the desire to pursue the general welfare may be diverted from the purpose of just distribution due to the controversy over the group of "least beneficiaries" in reality, thus making it difficult to achieve the goal of justice in the implementation of distributional policies. This makes it difficult to achieve the goal of justice in the implementation of distributional policies.

6. Conclusion

In view of the defects of Bentham's happiness doctrine, moral sanction theory and the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people", Mill sharply criticised it and made significant amendments to it, realising three major transformations of utilitarianism itself: the transformation of happiness doctrine to happiness doctrine; the transformation of the moral sanction theory from external to internal sanction; and the transformation of the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people" from "egoism" to "altruism". The conversion of the theory of moral sanction from external to internal sanction, and the conversion of the principle of "the happiness of the greatest number" from "egoism" to "altruism". This has enriched the content of utilitarianism itself, and it has been able to respond forcefully to the challenges from all sides. However, the core of Mill's doctrine is still utilitarian, and his revision and development of Mill's utilitarian ethics did not escape the utilitarianism. Nevertheless, Mill clarifies and defends the misunderstanding and misuse of the meaning of utilitarianism, and also amends and develops Bianchin's pleasure doctrine, moral sanction theory, and maximisation principle. Compared with Bianchin, Mill tends to make the structure of the utilitarian ethical system more refined and perfect.

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