

2. THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE / UTILITARIANISM

In the summer of 1884, four English sailors were stranded at sea in a small lifeboat in the South Atlantic, over a thousand miles from land. Their ship, the *Mignonette*, had gone down in a storm, and they had escaped to the lifeboat, with only two cans of preserved turnips and no fresh water. Thomas Dudley was the captain, Edwin Stephens was the first mate, and Edmund Brooks was a sailor —“all men of excellent character,” according to newspaper accounts.¹

The fourth member of the crew was the cabin boy, Richard Parker, age seventeen. He was an orphan, on his first long voyage at sea. He had signed up against the advice of his friends, “in the hopefulness of youthful ambition,” thinking the journey would make a man of him. Sadly, it was not to be.

From the lifeboat, the four stranded sailors watched the horizon, hoping a ship might pass and rescue them. For the first three days, they ate small rations of turnips. On the fourth day, they caught a turtle. They subsisted on the turtle and the remaining turnips for the next few days. And then for eight days, they ate nothing.

By now Parker, the cabin boy, was lying in the corner of the lifeboat. He had drunk seawater, against the advice of the others, and become ill. He appeared to be dying. On the nineteenth day of their ordeal, Dudley, the captain, suggested drawing lots to determine who would die so that the others might live. But Brooks refused, and no lots were drawn.

The next day came, and still no ship was in sight. Dudley told Brooks to avert his gaze and motioned to Stephens that Parker had to be killed. Dudley offered a prayer, told the boy his time had come, and then killed him with a penknife, stabbing him in the jugular vein. Brooks emerged from his conscientious objection to share in the gruesome bounty. For four days, the three men fed on the body and blood of the cabin boy.

And then help came. Dudley describes their rescue in his diary, with

staggering euphemism: “On the 24th day, as we were having our breakfast,” a ship appeared at last. The three survivors were picked up. Upon their return to England, they were arrested and tried. Brooks turned state’s witness. Dudley and Stephens went to trial. They freely confessed that they had killed and eaten Parker. They claimed they had done so out of necessity.

Suppose you were the judge. How would you rule? To simplify things, put aside the question of law and assume that you were asked to decide whether killing the cabin boy was morally permissible.

The strongest argument for the defense is that, given the dire circumstances, it was necessary to kill one person in order to save three. Had no one been killed and eaten, all four would likely have died. Parker, weakened and ill, was the logical candidate, since he would soon have died anyway. And unlike Dudley and Stephens, he had no dependents. His death deprived no one of support and left no grieving wife or children.

This argument is open to at least two objections: First, it can be asked whether the benefits of killing the cabin boy, taken as a whole, really did outweigh the costs. Even counting the number of lives saved and the happiness of the survivors and their families, allowing such a killing might have had consequences for society as a whole—weakening the norm against murder, for example, or increasing people’s tendency to take the law into their own hands, or making it more difficult for captains to recruit cabin boys.

Second, even if, all things considered, the benefits do outweigh the costs, don’t we have a nagging sense that killing and eating a defenseless cabin boy is wrong for reasons that go beyond the calculation of social costs and benefits? Isn’t it wrong to use a human being in this way—exploiting his vulnerability, taking his life without his consent—even if doing so benefits others?

To anyone appalled by the actions of Dudley and Stephens, the first objection will seem a tepid complaint. It accepts the utilitarian assumption that morality consists in weighing costs and benefits, and simply wants a fuller reckoning of the social consequences.

If the killing of the cabin boy is worthy of moral outrage, the second objection is more to the point. It rejects the idea that the right thing to do is simply a matter of calculating consequences—costs and benefits. It suggests that morality means something more—something to do with the proper way for human beings to treat one another.

These two ways of thinking about the lifeboat case illustrate two rival approaches to justice. The first approach says the morality of an action depends

solely on the consequences it brings about; the right thing to do is whatever will produce the best state of affairs, all things considered. The second approach says that consequences are not all we should care about, morally speaking; certain duties and rights should command our respect, for reasons independent of the social consequences.

In order to resolve the lifeboat case, as well as many less extreme dilemmas we commonly encounter, we need to explore some big questions of moral and political philosophy: Is morality a matter of counting lives and weighing costs and benefits, or are certain moral duties and human rights so fundamental that they rise above such calculations? And if certain rights are fundamental in this way—be they natural, or sacred, or inalienable, or categorical—how can we identify them? And what makes them fundamental?

Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) left no doubt where he stood on this question. He heaped scorn on the idea of natural rights, calling them “nonsense upon stilts.” The philosophy he launched has had an influential career. In fact, it exerts a powerful hold on the thinking of policy-makers, economists, business executives, and ordinary citizens to this day.

Bentham, an English moral philosopher and legal reformer, founded the doctrine of utilitarianism. Its main idea is simply stated and intuitively appealing: The highest principle of morality is to maximize happiness, the overall balance of pleasure over pain. According to Bentham, the right thing to do is whatever will maximize utility. By “utility,” he means whatever produces pleasure or happiness, and whatever prevents pain or suffering.

Bentham arrives at his principle by the following line of reasoning: We are all governed by the feelings of pain and pleasure. They are our “sovereign masters.” They govern us in everything we do and also determine what we ought to do. The standard of right and wrong is “fastened to their throne.”²

We all like pleasure and dislike pain. The utilitarian philosophy recognizes this fact, and makes it the basis of moral and political life. Maximizing utility is a principle not only for individuals but also for legislators. In deciding what laws or policies to enact, a government should do whatever will maximize the happiness of the community as a whole. What, after all, is a community? According to Bentham, it is “a fictitious body,” composed of the sum of the individuals who comprise it. Citizens and legislators should therefore ask themselves this

question: If we add up all of the benefits of this policy, and subtract all the costs, will it produce more happiness than the alternative?

Bentham's argument for the principle that we should maximize utility takes the form of a bold assertion: There are no possible grounds for rejecting it. Every moral argument, he claims, must implicitly draw on the idea of maximizing happiness. People may say they believe in certain absolute, categorical duties or rights. But they would have no basis for defending these duties or rights unless they believed that respecting them would maximize human happiness, at least in the long run.

"When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility," Bentham writes, "it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself." All moral quarrels, properly understood, are disagreements about how to apply the utilitarian principle of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, not about the principle itself. "Is it possible for a man to move the earth?" Bentham asks. "Yes; but he must first find out another earth to stand upon." And the only earth, the only premise, the only starting point for moral argument, according to Bentham, is the principle of utility.³

Bentham thought his utility principle offered a science of morality that could serve as the basis of political reform. He proposed a number of projects designed to make penal policy more efficient and humane. One was the Panopticon, a prison with a central inspection tower that would enable the supervisor to observe the inmates without their seeing him. He suggested that the Panopticon be run by a private contractor (ideally himself), who would manage the prison in exchange for the profits to be made from the labor of the convicts, who would work sixteen hours per day. Although Bentham's plan was ultimately rejected, it was arguably ahead of its time. Recent years have seen a revival, in the United States and Britain, of the idea of outsourcing prisons to private companies.

Rounding up beggars

Another of Bentham's schemes was a plan to improve "pauper management" by establishing a self-financing workhouse for the poor. The plan, which sought to reduce the presence of beggars on the streets, offers a vivid illustration of the utilitarian logic. Bentham observed, first of all, that encountering beggars on the streets reduces the happiness of passersby, in two ways. For tenderhearted souls, the sight of a beggar produces the pain of sympathy; for hardhearted folk, it generates the pain of disgust. Either way, encountering beggars reduces the

utility of the general public. So Bentham proposed removing beggars from the streets and confining them in a workhouse.⁴

Some may think this unfair to the beggars. But Bentham does not neglect their utility. He acknowledges that some beggars would be happier begging than working in a poorhouse. But he notes that for every happy and prosperous beggar, there are many miserable ones. He concludes that the sum of the pains suffered by the public is greater than whatever unhappiness is felt by beggars hauled off to the workhouse.⁵

Some might worry that building and running the workhouse would impose an expense on taxpayers, reducing their happiness and thus their utility. But Bentham proposed a way to make his pauper management plan entirely self-financing. Any citizen who encountered a beggar would be empowered to apprehend him and take him to the nearest workhouse. Once confined there, each beggar would have to work to pay off the cost of his or her maintenance, which would be tallied in a “self-liberation account.” The account would include food, clothing, bedding, medical care, and a life insurance policy, in case the beggar died before the account was paid up. To give citizens an incentive to take the trouble to apprehend beggars and deliver them to the workhouse, Bentham proposed a reward of twenty shillings per apprehension—to be added, of course, to the beggar’s tab.⁶

Bentham also applied utilitarian logic to rooming assignments within the facility, to minimize the discomfort inmates suffered from their neighbors: “Next to every class, from which any inconvenience is to be apprehended, station a class unsusceptible of that inconvenience.” So, for example, “next to raving lunatics, or persons of profligate conversation, place the deaf and dumb . . . Next to prostitutes and loose women, place the aged women.” As for “the shockingly deformed,” Bentham proposed housing them alongside inmates who were blind.⁷

Harsh though his proposal may seem, Bentham’s aim was not punitive. It was meant simply to promote the general welfare by solving a problem that diminished social utility. His scheme for pauper management was never adopted. But the utilitarian spirit that informed it is alive and well today. Before considering some present-day instances of utilitarian thinking, it is worth asking whether Bentham’s philosophy is objectionable, and if so, on what grounds.