

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Classical Utilitarianism

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Bentham, J. (2017). [Chapters 1, 4, 5]. In J. Bennet (Ed. & Trans.), *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation* (pp. 6–9, 22–29). Early Modern Texts. http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/bentham1780_1.pdf (Original work from 1780/1789/1823)

Comment

Today, Jeremy Bentham's theory is now known as **Classical Utilitarianism**, which makes the following claims about how laws and decisions ought to be made:

1. **Consequentialism:** The *overall* goodness of outcomes (that is, the goodness of the outcomes for *everyone* affected by those outcomes) is the only thing with intrinsic value.
2. **Welfarism:** The overall goodness of an outcome is measured solely by the *well-being* of everyone affected.
3. **Hedonism:** Well-being is nothing other than "happiness", understood as *pleasure and absence of pain*.
4. **The Total View**, which has three claims:
 - 4A. **Quantitative Monism:** Individual well-being is measured *numerically*, and specifically, by *one* numerical quantity. This quantity is usually called **Utility**.
 - 4B. **Sum Ranking:** Overall well-being is the *aggregate* utility for the group. This involves two claims:
 - i. Each person in the group has an *individual* utility value associated with their own personal well-being, and
 - ii. The aggregate utility for the group is calculated by *summing up* these individual utilities.
 - 4C. **Optimization:** More aggregate utility is *always* better than less aggregate utility.

Do not panic if this all looks frightening to you! I will walk you through this during class. One of the most important things to focus on when first reading Bentham is how he understands and measures "happiness".

You should then reflect on why Bentham believes that happiness (so understood) is the proper foundation for how all laws and decisions ought to be made. Do that, and you will be surprised how these complex seeming elements all fit together.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. In chapter 1, Jeremy Bentham argues that happiness, understood as pleasure and absence of pain, ought to be at the root of all moral and political decision making.
What is this argument? What exactly does Bentham mean by "pleasure" and "pain"? (He also tries to explain this later in chapter 5.)
2. In chapter 4, Bentham introduces the elements of his "hedonic calculus" for legislation.
What are these elements? How does Bentham use this calculus to justify the existence of private property?
3. In chapter 4, Bentham also clearly maintains that a person's actions should be evaluated by the net pleasure of all involved (this is his seventh circumstance of "extent"), and not just by the amount of pleasure that person receives by performing it.
What argument could Bentham have to defend this view and reject ethical egoism?
Does this mean that our governments should also care about foreigners as well as non-human animals, since they also experience pleasure and pain?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.