



PHIL 474/673 -Natural Rationality – week 3

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HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF NATURAL RATIONALITY (II)

1.1 The “Newton of Moral Science” and the science of the mind

- Newton’s Rational Mechanics (*Principia Mathematica*, 1686) as a new standard for science: simplicity, explanatory and predictive power (Halley comet)

But may we not hope, that philosophy (...) discover, at least in some degree, the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations? (Hume, 1748/1999, I)

- Everybody wanted to be the Newton of Moral Science (Hume, Kant, Smith, Bentham, etc.)

1.2 Actions and their goals

- Aristotle: eudemonism (pursuit of happiness)
- Epicureans: hedonism (pursuit of pleasure)
- Utilitarianism: actions should follow the *principle of utility*
- Hume :

In all determinations of morality, this circumstance of public utility is ever principally in view (Hume, 1777/2004, II, I) Utility entails social virtues (contrast with contemporary economics)

- Utility meant “wantability”, “likeability” and morality

1.3 Bentham, An introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation

- Bentham: *Panopticon* (design for a prison where the prisoners would be observed without knowing it)
- Greatest Happiness Principle: central tenet of utilitarian moral theory
- Advocated the separation of church and state, freedom of expression, equal rights for women, the end of slavery, the abolition of physical punishment (including that of children), the right to divorce, free trade, defended homosexuality. [wikipedia]
- Animal rights: “The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” Chapter XVII, n 122

- Synthesis of British/Scottish associationism, empiricism, newtonism, liberalism, egoism and naturalism

1.4 Chapter 1: Utility

- Man is governed by pain and pleasure = causal account of utility
- Bentham's Newtonism: pleasure, pain and self/collective interest. Seeking "good" things, avoiding "bad" ones
- Utility motivates and justify actions
- Synthetic criteria: currency for decision (benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness and avoiding mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness)
- Utilitarianism: individual vs. collective
- Society as a "fictitious body": the interest of the community is the sum of the interest of its members ["methodological individualism"]
- Actions that follow the principle of utility are said to follow a law or dictate of utility: actions are justified by the rules that make them rational
- Utility as motivation and justification, cause and reason, fact and norm
- Justification: the principle of utility is impossible to prove, since it is "used to prove every thing else". We follow the principle even without knowing it. A priori truth?
- "You can hardly escape maximizing your own utility, except through inconsistency." (Sen, 1977)
- Even the rejection of the principle of utility is founded on the utility of another alternative principle

1.5 Chapter 2: How principles against utility are wrong

- Any other principle is wrong: "to state it is to confute it"
- Thus the utility principle is self-evident, its negation self-contradictory
- The Principle of Asceticism (e.g. Quakers or Spartiates) rejects pleasure, but it cannot help us run our public life.
- It amounts to "falling in love with pain", which just another application of the principle of utility.
- The Principle of Sympathy and Antipathy: making decisions according to subjective approbation.
- Too subjective, based on opinion and taste, while utility is an objective assessment of actions. May lead to fights, war, etc.
- Distinction: motives vs. reason. Sympathy/Antipathy can be a cause of action, but not a justification.
- Actions can only be justified by their utility.

1.6 Chapter 3 kinds of pain and pleasure

- Four sources: physical, political, moral (popular) and religious
- Sanctions for actions.
- The physical is the "groundwork of the political and the moral"

1.7 Chapter 4: measuring utility

- Pleasures and pains can vary in intensity, duration, certainty and propinquity
- Other parameters: fecundity (leading to similar sensations) purity (not leading to opposing sensations) and extent
- Hedonic calculus: balancing pleasures and pains

As to the proposition that passion does not calculate, this, like most of these very general oracular propositions, is not true. When matters of such importance as pain and pleasure are at stake, and these in the highest degree (the only matters, in short, that can be of importance) who is there that does not calculate? Men calculate, some with less exactness, indeed, some with more: but all men calculate. (Bentham, [1781] 1996, Chapter XV)

- Hobbesian “computationalism”:

When man reasoneth, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total, from addition of parcels; or conceive a remainder, from subtraction of one sum from another(...) In sum, in what matter soever there is place for addition and subtraction, there also is place for reason; and where these have no place, there reason has nothing at all to do. (...) For reason, in this sense, is nothing but reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts; (Hobbes, 1651, Chapter V)

- Legacy: Mills, Jevons, Edgeworth (idea of a *hedonimeter*) – formalization of utility
- Today: behavioral economics, neuroeconomics
- (Kahneman *et al.*, 1997) Experienced utility (Bentham) vs. Decision utility (economics)

1.8 Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill (1863)

- Mill: coined the word “utilitarianism”
- (Mill, 1848/1909) *Principles of Political Economy* (liberalism)
- Influenced by Bentham
- Main claim: *“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.” Utilitarianism Chapter 2 (Mill, 1871)*
- A “theory of morality” grounded on a “theory of life”; the “end of human action” and “the standard of morality” (ibid.)
- Distinction between mental/intellectual and bodily pleasures
- Link between utility and preference: we prefer what has more utility
- Objections: if happiness is impossible, then utilitarianism is not justified (‘ought implies can’)
- Answer: happiness does not need continuous and perfect pleasure, but just enough
- The rightness of conduct is not individual, but collective utility
- The Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) is utilitarian morality
- It is not the motive or the person that makes the action right, but the *consequences*

Collective learning:

The proposition that happiness is the end and aim of morality, does not mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that persons going thither should not be advised to take one direction rather

than another. (...) Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanack. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. (Ibid)

1.9 Ideas, questions

- For Hume, Bentham and Mill, utility was social: cultural, moral and political
- Is our natural rationality social/moral?

1.10 Links

<http://www.utilitarianism.com/>

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