



Philosophy: Morality and Justice - Audio

Classical and modern utilitarianism

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In this recording, Alex Barber the author of Book Three talks about Utilitarianism in its classical and modern forms, with Brad Hooker, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading.

Alex Barber

Brad, you're a Utilitarian but you're not a classical Utilitarian in that you don't try to defend Jeremy Bentham's or John Stuart Mill's version of that view. I want to come to your views in a moment but let's talk first about the classical version. What did Bentham and Mill agree about?

Professor Brad Hooker

Bentham and Mill agreed that moral and political justification should focus on the gains and losses to welfare or what they called utility. They also agreed that gains and losses to welfare or utility should be assessed impartially. And by impartial assessment what they meant was that a gain or loss to any one person should count for the same, exactly the same, as the same size gain or loss to any one else. And in addition to that they also agreed that welfare should be understood hedonistically that is as pleasure minus pain.

Alex Barber

Mill and Bentham were both classical Utilitarian but they did disagree about some things.

Professor Brad Hooker

That's right. They disagreed in their conception naturally of pleasure minus pain. Bentham was a quantitative hedonist or he thought that only really the quantity of pleasure minus pain matters. In the quantity of pleasure or pain he took into account intensity and duration but not quality. Mill thought that was a mistake that you should include not only intensity and duration but also the quality of pleasures and pains and in particular Mill thought that pleasures that come from the higher sensibilities, or the intellect, were better than pleasures that come from the animalistic sensations. They also disagreed. Bentham held a view which we now know of as Act Utilitarianism. Now what was Mill? Well, Mill was sometimes – sometimes he says things that look Act Utilitarian. Sometimes he says things that look rule Utilitarian and when students ask well which was he? Well the answer is they hadn't quite formulated the

distinction at the time so he veers back and forth between these two views. So an Act Utilitarian applies the test of utility to acts and a rule Utilitarian applies the test of utility to rules and then says that the right acts are the acts which comply with rules with the most utility.

Alex Barber

And can you give an example where an Act Utilitarian would do one thing whereas a Rule Utilitarian would do some other thing.

Professor Brad Hooker

Yes. Suppose that you and I happen to be in the locker room at the local swimming pool at the same time. And in my wallet is fifty pounds and in your wallet is very little and you're quite hungry. We're not friends or anything but you happen to notice that my wallet is fatter than yours and you are quite hungry. And it occurs to you that you could take five or ten pounds out of my wallet and give yourself lunch with this five or ten pounds and thereby maximise utility because probably it's not going to harm me very much to lose the money and it would prevent you from a very hungry afternoon. So in that case an Act Utilitarian might think that the right thing to do was indeed to steal the five or ten pounds whereas a Rule Utilitarian would say gosh imagine a society where people went around stealing five or ten pounds from other people whenever they thought this would produce a bit more utility, especially utility for themselves. Surely that would be a very unhappy society. People would be very nervous about other people. And consequently a Rule Utilitarian would think that such an act of stealing would be unjustified and an Act Utilitarian might think that such an act of stealing might be justified.

Alex Barber

So there are these two important differences between Bentham and Mill. Do you think that Mill managed to plug all the holes in Bentham's theory? Let's start with what he says about pleasure, with what Mill says about pleasure as set against what Bentham thinks about pleasure.

Professor Brad Hooker

Bentham's quantitative hedonism does run into serious problems. If your welfare consists only in the quantity of pleasure you experience then presumably whenever you are aiming to maximise your welfare you would just maximise the quantity of pleasure you experience. But on that basis would you choose to live the life of a contented pig rather than a dissatisfied genius? If your bliss was built on ignorance and lack of ambition would that be a better life than one that involved a bit more dissatisfaction but which contained ambition and knowledge? Now in response to worries like this Mill of course developed the qualitative hedonism, which makes a distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures being the ones that come from more refined sensibilities and intellectual capacities. And the

lower pleasure is coming from more animalistic appetites. And Mill defended the distinction between higher and lower pleasures by claiming that those who were acquainted with both competent judges would always prefer the higher pleasures over the lower pleasures. Now opinion has been divided about whether Mill was successful in that line of argument. But more interesting it seems to me is the whole question and I think to most contemporary philosophers more interesting is the question well is hedonism itself just too restrictive, no matter what version of hedonism. Is hedonism itself just too restrictive. And the arguments against thinking that hedonism is correct as a complete account of welfare are going to be ones that we are actually quite familiar with in contemporary culture. For example movies like The Matrix and The Truman Show, illustrate that somebody might seem to have introspectively discernible sensations or experiences which taken as experiences seem very desirable. But because they involve massive illusion and perhaps in a kind of way a fraud and distortion, are less good than a life would be that involved a bit more dissatisfaction but where the person was actually involved in real relationships of friendship and really had knowledge of their surroundings and were really achieving things.

Alex Barber

So what is welfare if it's not pleasures of these kinds, if it's not psychological states?

Professor Brad Hooker

I mean I accept that a huge component of welfare is pleasure in the absence of pain. The question is whether those are the only ingredients of welfare. It seems to me that other components of welfare are going to be friendship knowledge, achievement and autonomy.

Alex Barber

Well, let's take the example of friendship. If at the end of my life I look back on some friendship I had with somebody and I think well that wasn't particularly pleasant. Wouldn't it be reasonable for me to say that wasn't in my interests, that that friendship was actually bad for my welfare?

Professor Brad Hooker

I agree that if a friendship results in massive suffering and very little pleasure then on balance it wasn't good for the person who experienced the friendship. The cases that are more interesting are ones where a friendship will involve perhaps a little bit less pleasure for somebody than to not have had that friendship in the first place. I mean suppose I form a friendship with someone and it goes along quite well and then she gets sick and she suffers terribly and because of my sympathetic concern for her so do I over the last few years of her life. So that when you look at it just in terms of pleasure and pain I have to admit that I got more pain out of that friendship than I got pleasure. Nevertheless I might still think that my life

was better for me because of that friendship than it would have been if I'd had no such friendship at all.

Alex Barber

One question that's occurring to me about this revised conception of welfare that's not purely hedonistic conception of welfare is how you would rank the different elements of welfare because the other element of Utilitarianism of course is consequentialism which is all about maximising welfare for everybody and Bentham offers a way of ranking welfare in terms of saying that some pleasures last longer, they're more intense than others and similarly with pain. Mill gives us a way of ranking pleasures in terms of whichever the competent judge would prefer, that's the pleasure of the highest quality. How would you rank the different elements of welfare that you listed before, knowledge, friendship and pleasure among others?

Professor Brad Hooker

I have to admit that a terrible danger here is artificial precision. I don't think there is a precise fact of the matter about how much exactly you need a pleasure; how much you need a friendship; how much you need a knowledge or achievement or autonomy in a particular persons life to maximise that persons welfare. And perhaps it varies between people to some extent. These are the same ingredients for everyone but how to put these ingredients together might vary depending on the person.

Alex Barber

So you would move away from Bentham's attempt to give very precise rules about how to make everybody experience more pleasure and less pain

Professor Brad Hooker

I'm afraid I do. I'm open minded that perhaps the future might be surprisingly quantifiable in the way that the present doesn't seem to be but I have to say that I think current experience seems to suggest that false precision about these matters is one of the dangers to be avoided.

Alex

Do you think Mill's Rule Utilitarianism when he was being a Rule Utilitarian represented a real improvement over Act Utilitarianism?

Professor Brad Hooker

Oh I do. I think it's a massive improvement. Remember that Act Utilitarianism holds that an act is right if and only because it maximises utility. So Act Utilitarianism is going to be committed to thinking that an act of killing or stealing or breaking a promise or telling a lie is morally right as long as it produces at least slightly more utility than any of the alternatives

available to the agent. Actually the idea that killing an innocent person is morally right as long as it produces at least slightly more utility than not killing the innocent person, that idea is extremely counter intuitive. And those kinds of counter examples to Act Utilitarianism had seemed to many people absolutely fatal to the theory. But can Rule Utilitarianism do any better? Well, according to the best formulation of Rule Utilitarianism an act is morally wrong if it would be forbidden by a code of rules whose acceptance by more or less every one would maximise the expected utility. And when we ask ourselves with the acceptance of the code of rules forbidding killing innocent people or stealing or breaking promises and telling lies then we say yes the code of rule the acceptance of which would produce maximised utility would indeed forbid these acts. And so Rule Utilitarianism can explain why those acts are wrong.

Alex Barber

Why would it forbid them?

Professor Brad Hooker

Rule Utilitarianism would forbid such acts because when we imagine people with all the human weaknesses to which humans are prone, trying to apply the rule maximised utility we run into two problems. First of all there's the terrible problem well could they even calculate the utility consequences? Could they get the information they would need in order to calculate the utility consequences? And in very, very many cases, perhaps most cases the answer to that question is no. But even if they could begin to calculate the utility consequences can we trust them to calculate them impartially. And the answer to that question has also got to be no. So Rule of Utilitarianism would say look it would actually produce way less utility if people ran around trying to calculate the utility consequences on case by case basis rather than just sticking to these tried and tested rules.

Alex Barber

But doesn't Rule Utilitarianism face objections of it's own?

Professor Brad Hooker

It does and many people have thought these objections were fatal. The most common objection to the Rule of Utilitarianism is that it's incoherent. Since Rule Utilitarianism sometimes requires us not to maximise utility. How can it be that Rule Utilitarianism, which is fundamentally Utilitarian sometimes, tell us not to maximise utility? But I think that objection is mistaken because it's assumes that Rule Utilitarianism includes an over riding duty to maximise utility. And I don't think that the code acceptance of which by everyone would produce the most utility would include a rule that's an over riding rule always maximise utility. So I think that the objection that Rule Utilitarianism is incoherent actually won't wash.

Alex Barber

Bentham didn't think that his utility principle could be defended or that it needed to be defended because it was just so glaringly obviously true. And he comes across a quite dogmatic and almost insulting to those who disagree with him. How would you argue in favour of Utilitarianism in your version of it anyway or do you agree with Bentham that it doesn't need a defence?

Professor Brad Hooker

Oh I certainly think it needs a defence and it seems to me the way to argue in favour of Rule Utilitarianism or indeed any other kind of Utilitarianism is not to start with a Utilitarian premise but instead to start with the contention that of all the moral theories out there this form of Utilitarianism makes the best sense of our considered moral convictions. Now what I mean by making the best sense of our considered moral convictions? Well, for one thing we want a moral theory that agrees with our considered moral convictions about what's right and wrong in specific cases and that was remember my objection to Act Utilitarianism. In addition to that not only do we want agreement about what's right in specific cases but we also want a moral theory which provides an impartial unifying fundamental principle that justifies our various specific moral convictions.

Alex Barber

But don't our considered moral convictions change over time, making it impossible to provide an impartial justification of any moral theory? I'm thinking for example that in Ancient Greece slavery was regarded as perfectly okay. In fact unavoidable. But now we don't take that view.

Professor Brad Hooker

Oh I agree that perhaps a Rule of Utilitarian view wouldn't be defensible to an Ancient Greek person who defended slavery. I admit that if somebody has a certain set of convictions then perhaps Rule Utilitarianism is not going to make best sense of them. But what I'm trying to do is offer Rule Utilitarianism as a theory that at least you and I and the people I am likely to run in to could agree to and in justifying it to those people I am going to ask what convictions do they share and then I'm going to put forward Rule Utilitarianism as the best explanation for why those convictions are correct. I admit actually I want to say emphatically that perhaps no fundamental impartial unified principle is adequate. My contention only is this that if there is a fundamental unified impartial principle that will succeed in justifying our various moral convictions then the theory that is constituted by that principle must be the best moral theory from our point of view.

Alex Barber

What has classical Utilitarianism's legacy been in terms of social policy?

Professor Brad Hooker

Classical Utilitarianism has been a source of reform and many of the policies that we now take for granted. Mill was himself one of the great champions of equal rights for women as an example and Bentham one of the great early champions of considering the suffering of animals as well as humans. Utilitarians have tended to favour egalitarian social policies but I think what's more important than the particular social policies that Utilitarians have supported are now supporting, is the general approach to social policy which is that proposed social policies should be assessed in terms of the consequences on the welfare of everyone impartially calculated and that the indirect as well as direct effects need to be taken into consideration. Rule Utilitarianism does this and in effect I think it's established itself as the default approach to social policy decisions.

Alex Barber

But hasn't this dominance of Rule Utilitarianism in recent social policy sometimes had quite a pernicious affect and I am thinking here of a tendency to promote only those policies whose affects can be measured such as for example the ability to spell or do arithmetic or bringing down crime or getting more money. Isn't there a danger that social goods that are harder to measure like liberty or spontaneity or social cohesion or tradition, these are all left to look after themselves

Professor Brad Hooker

I mean I agree that perhaps reading Bentham too much might push people towards looking for social policies with clearly quite quantifiable outcomes and in fact that can have bad consequences because many of the most important things are not precisely quantifiable at all and what we have to make do with is impressionistic and fairly vague judgements about when something is better or worse than something else. My view of welfare is that it is quantifiable yes but certainly not precisely so and sometimes very hard to measure.

Alex Barber

So you're a Rule Utilitarian. Are there any aspects of the theory or your version of it that leave you uneasy?

Professor Brad Hooker

Well first of all I don't really call myself a Rule Utilitarian but instead a Rule Consequentialist and the difference is that it seems to me that in addition to considering the amount of welfare when we assess rules, we should also consider how that welfare is distributed whether

equally or unequally. And for this reason I call myself a Consequentialist rather than a Utilitarian but more generally what's a problem for Rule Consequentialism is that first of all there maybe some counter examples or sets of counter examples that you propose to me now or somebody else proposes tomorrow that show that the theory in fact will not cohere with our considered moral convictions. So there's that potential fatality to the theory. In addition to that I am not at all sure how the theory should accommodate fairness and in fact that's the research I am doing now.

Alex Barber

Brad Hooker thank you very much.