

For Semester - IV

Paper - C-8 (Modern Western Pol. Thought)

Unit - 6 : Bentham on Utilitarianism

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## MEANING OF UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism as a school of thought dominated English political thinking from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. Some of the early Utilitarians were Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), Hume, Helvetius, Priestly, William Paley (1743–1805), and Beccaria. But it was Bentham who systematically laid down its theory, and made it popular on the basis of his innumerable proposals for reform. “Bentham’s merit consisted, not in the doctrine, but in his vigorous application of it to various practical problems” (Russell 1961: 741).

Through James Mill, Bentham developed close links with Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) and David Ricardo (1772–1838), getting acquainted with the ideas of the Classical economists. This group collectively styled themselves as Philosophic Radicals, with the aim of transforming England into a modern,

liberal, democratic, constitutional, secular, and market state. Utilitarianism was used interchangeably with philosophic radicalism, individualism, laissez faire and administrative nihilism (Mack 1955: 77).

Only in England, which throughout the nineteenth century was the most highly industrialized country in the world, did liberalism achieve the status at once of a national philosophy and a national policy. Here, contrary to the expectation implied by Marxism, it provided the principles for an orderly and peaceful transition, first to complete freedom for industry and the enfranchisement of the middle class and ultimately to the enfranchisement of the working class and their protection against the most serious hazards of industry. This was possible because the cleavage between social and economic classes in England never coincided exactly with the lines between political parties. Even in its earlier stage, when its economic theories in particular represented clearly the interest of industrialists, English liberalism in intention at least was always a theory of the general good of the whole national community. . . . It was the Philosophical Radicals, however, who provided the intellectual structure of early liberalism and therefore its programme (Sabine 1973: 610-611).

The basic premise of Utilitarianism was that human beings as a rule sought happiness, that pleasure alone was good, and that the only right action was that which produced the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Bentham and the Utilitarians reiterated the ideas of the Greek thinker Epicures, who had stated that individuals sometimes pursued pleasure wisely, and at other times unwisely.

In the hands of Bentham, the pleasure-pain theory evolved into a scientific principle to be applied to the policies of the state, welfare measures and for administrative, penal and legislative reforms. He shared Machiavelli's concern for a science of politics, not in the sense of understanding the dynamics of political power, but in the hope of promoting and securing the happiness of individuals through legislation and policies.

Utilitarianism provided a psychological perspective on human nature, for it perceived human beings as creatures of pleasure. Using the yardstick of utility, Bentham and his followers desired the restructuring of government and legal institutions so as to maximize individual happiness. In the process, they realized the imperative need to codify laws, making them instruments of reform and happiness.

Bentham was confident that his utilitarian principles could be the basis of law. At one point, he even advertised that he could draw up a new code of law for any nation on earth, cutting across diverse cultural and psychological contexts. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham wrote:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what shall we do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve

but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while . . . the principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law (Bentham 1962: 1).

Bentham contended that human beings by nature were hedonists. Each of their actions was motivated by a desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Every human action had a cause and a motive. "Take away all pleasures and all pain and you have no desire and without a desire there can be no action" (Bentham *ibid*: 40). The principles of utility recognized this basic psychological trait, for it "approves or disapproves every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question . . . not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government" (Bentham *ibid*: 40).

Bentham viewed hedonism not only as a principle of motivation, but also as a principle of action. He listed 14 simple pleasures and 12 simple pains, classifying these into self-regarding and other-regarding groups, a distinction that J.S. Mill borrowed in elaboration of the concept of liberty. Only two, benevolence and malevolence, were put under other-regarding action. Under self-regarding motives, Bentham listed physical desire, pecuniary interest, love of power and self-preservation. Self-preservation included fear of pain, love of life and love of ease.

In addition to these, Bentham also laid down social and dissocial categories. The social category was subdivided into social and semi-social. Social motive based on goodwill was associated with the pleasure and pain of sympathy, the pleasure and pain that an individual derived from contemplating the (un)happiness of others, without being affected personally. Semi-social motives included the love for regulations, the desire for amity, and a feeling for religion. Each had a social connotation, namely the overall happiness of others, but these were primarily self-regarding. The dissocial motive was essentially one of displeasure, associated with the pleasure and pain of antipathy and resentment. For Bentham, there was an interest corresponding to every motive.

Bentham described four sanctions or sources of pain and pleasure. The first of these was physical sanction: the source of constraints which arose from human nature and natural circumstances. The second was political and legal sanction: the source of constraints was in the form of rewards and punishments that were meted out by the political authority. The third was moral or popular sanction, meaning the influence(s) on individual behaviour exerted by collective opinion, or by the (dis)approval of those the person was in contact with. The fourth and final sanction was religious sanction, stemming from the hope of divine rewards or the fear of divine punishment.

Bentham was confident that a society in which the individual tried to maximize his *own happiness* would be far better than one in which he had to maximize the happiness of others. In this context, he believed that Christianity placed excessive reliance on altruism, for if the precepts of Jesus were taken

literally, that would lead to the destruction of society. Like Epicures, Bentham regarded security as the ideal. For Bentham, security preceded liberty. They were both anti-religion. Bentham's dislike, or even hostility, towards religion, and the Church of England in particular, was because of his awareness of the superstitious and irrational side of human nature. It was for this reason that he regarded religion as an enemy of reason. In this, he voiced the views of the mainstream eighteenth-century philosophers. He was convinced that every reasonable person would accept the principle of the greatest happiness as a basis of society. He also expected that each individual would pursue his own happiness rather than something else. To tell the individual to behave differently, contrary to one's disposition, would be futile.

Bentham realized that a self-interested person would perform his duties, as his main concern was in discerning factors influencing particular behaviour. He refused to be judgemental about human behaviour and action per se. He hoped to provide the legislator with an exhaustive list of pleasures and pains, motives and sanctions, and factors that influenced human conduct and behaviour, with the purpose of changing social arrangements and individual actions. Bentham emphasized the fact that the individual either pursued his happiness without hurting anyone, or pursued actions that were actually conducive to the happiness of others. The legislator on his part, through rewards and punishment, could secure such behaviour, so as to ensure that the stock of happiness in the community did not diminish.

Bentham was sanguine that an adult individual was the best judge of his own happiness, fully capable of pursuing it without harming the happiness of others. He saw an integral link between the happiness of an individual and that of the community, and offered the principle of utility as a yardstick to a legislator to frame laws in order to obtain the overall happiness and welfare of the community. He repeatedly stressed that a person's actions and policies had to be judged by his intention to promote the happiness of the community. The end and the goal of legislation was to follow the rule, "each is to count for one and no one for more than one", suggesting that in spite of his repeated emphasis on the community, his was essentially an individualistic philosophy, for he understood social community as a fictitious body of individuals. He was concerned with the *distribution* of happiness as much as the *amount* of it.

Bentham distinguished pleasures quantitatively rather than qualitatively, regarding pushpin as good as poetry. He did not differentiate between pleasures, and in that sense he was not an elitist. He did not assign any inherent grading to activities and treated them at par in terms of their contribution to individual happiness. Interestingly, Rawls, though a critic of Benthamite Utilitarianism, retained Bentham's outlook in judging human contentment and excellence by asserting that even an individual who enjoyed counting the blades of grass was essentially fulfilling his moral nature.

In his desire to emulate Newton, Bentham laid down principles in morals and legislation. By doing so, he disproved Burke's assertion that a "science of politics did not and could not exist" (Doyle 1963: 231). He was convinced

that pleasures and pains could be measured mathematically by taking into consideration factors like intensity, duration, certainty and propinquity or remoteness. Such a formula was called the "felicific calculus". Bentham conceived the principle of utility as having the same status in the moral world, as axioms in geometry have in the world of mathematics.

He taught men to govern by the simple rule of the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" which, in practice, could be discovered by a "felicific calculus". Thus, he sought to establish an external standard, mathematically calculable, whereby to measure the legislator's accomplishment. His contention was that he had made legislative reform a matter not of "caprice" or of unenlightened benevolence, but of logic (Bronowski and Mazlish 1960: 431).

Curiously, the phrase "greatest happiness of the greatest number" used for the first time in 1776, and frequently associated with Bentham, did not reappear for the next 40 years. Though he did not innovate the phrase, he was undoubtedly its best popularizer. Initially, he used the phrase "greatest happiness of all", which he gave up, for it suggested that the interests of some could be subordinated to those of others. It also implied that the happiness of the majority was all that mattered. If the suffering of one person was greater than the accumulated happiness of many, that was not acceptable. Therefore, he substituted the phrase with "greatest happiness of the greatest number", using it with greater frequency in the 1820s in his crusade for radical reforms. Bentham was categorical that since persons differed very little in their capacity to experience pain and pleasure, they had to be treated equally in a manner that gave their pleasures due regard and consideration. In fact, Bentham was not happy about the word "utilitarian", but continued to use it for want of any other alternate and effective word. For a while, he thought of using 'eudaimonologist' or 'felicist'.

Bentham remained convinced throughout his life on the science of legislation, retaining his belief that an expert legislator could skillfully legislate with a view to ensuring the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In order to do this, a legislator should be able to understand human actions and encourage those with appropriate sanctions that could contribute to the greatest happiness.

The medieval conception of the magistrate administering the law of God by a system of rewards and punishments according to a divine scale of good and evil reappeared in Bentham's philosophy in the guise of a legislator determining good and evil according to the criterion of human happiness now accurately ascertained by scientific methods (Doyle 1963: 235).

Bentham also discussed indirect legislation, namely public instruction and propaganda, through which the legislator could influence human conduct, strengthen moral or popular sanction (i.e. general opinion), and change people's behaviour via their love for reputation. "Since according to Bentham 'society' was nothing but a convenient fiction for an aggregate of individuals, the recipe for success consisted of knowing how to manage 'others'. A man must keep well with public opinion" (Wolin 1960: 346). For instance, drunkenness and

idleness, which caused crime, could be tackled by promoting the consumption of non-alcoholic drinks, cultivating innocent amusements like gardening, music, athletic and sedentary games. Unemployment could be prevented by providing for public works. In this, he was a predecessor of Keynes. Moreover, the love of reputation in a human being could be cultivated by inculcating the value of virtue through stories and literary works that presented good in attractive and vice in ugly terms. Bentham's schemes of the panopticon and the National Charity Company aimed to balance the claims of humanity with those of the economy, to ensure human welfare without incurring heavy expenses, wastage, inefficiency and patronage.

Besides laws and indirect legislation, Bentham regarded private ethics as the third mode of influencing human behaviour. Its purpose was not to judge or arbitrate morals, but to teach and instruct individuals to maximize their own happiness. In this context, he suggested the use of a savings bank or General Goodwill Fund, where acts of beneficence that did not benefit the agent could be deposited and from which they could be withdrawn in due course. Unlike the moralists, Bentham did not emphasize the need to make sacrifices with a view to promoting general happiness. In general, he recommended economy of sacrifice. Though one could argue that it was desirable to sacrifice a lesser quantity of happiness for attaining a greater quantity, it was equally true that a large amount of happiness would remain intact if less quantity was sacrificed. Bentham's view of human nature was guided by a favourite statement from Helvetius, that "to love one's fellowmen, one must not expect much from them".

Bentham regarded punishments as both reformatory and deterring, controlling the actions of human beings. Fond of moral arithmetic, and for the purpose of laying down ground rules, he stated nine points. By stating these simple ground rules, Bentham hoped that they would become guidelines for both legislators and judges. The nine points were as follows.

- (1) The punishment must be great enough to outweigh the profit of the offence to the offender.
- (2) The greater the mischief of the offence, the greater the punishment should be.
- (3) and (4) are corollaries of (2).
- (5) Punishment should never be greater than the least amount required to make it effective.
- (6) The sensibility of the offender must always be taken into account.
- (7) The more uncertain it was that the offender would suffer it, the greater the punishment should be.
- (8) The more distant it was, the greater it should be.
- (9) If the offence was of a kind likely to be habitual with the offender, the punishment should be increased to outweigh the profit not only of the immediate offence but also of the other offences probably committed with impunity.

Bentham's concern to define punishment as precisely as possible, to establish a definite ratio between the degree of punishment and the magnitude of the crime, emanated from the hope of confining pain as narrowly as possible by making it more objective (Wolin *ibid.*: 328).

Bentham's defence of the principles of utility led him to plead a case for democracy, manhood, and later on universal suffrage, including female enfranchisement. Suffrage and democracy were crucial for the realization of the greatest happiness principle. In his *Plan for Parliamentary Reform*, he contended that community interest would emerge the moment the government took cognizance of the people, for they would not wish to be governed badly, nor would they desire a sacrifice of universal interest for something narrow and sectarian.

It was for this reason that Bentham supported universal suffrage, for it not only safeguarded people's interests, but also checked governmental abuse of that interest. Universal suffrage would make governments more accountable and less whimsical. As a result, he drafted a complete scheme of parliamentary democracy in his *Constitutional Code*, pleading for secret ballot, delineating a scheme for elementary, secondary and technical public education, and rejecting plural voting. He was convinced that a good government was possible only by what he called the "democratic ascendancy". He recognized that misrule in England was due to many reasons, including defects in the electoral system. He was equally concerned with the need to explore and combat methods by which the "subject many" were not dominated by the "ruling few". In *Church and Englandism*, he attacked the established church as a close ally of the political elite, for it taught intellectual submissiveness among its followers.

From 1809 to 1823, Bentham devoted his time and energies to weeding out religious beliefs and practices, and eventually religion from the minds of individuals. He was an atheist and a denouncer of organized religion. He subjected religious doctrines, rituals and practices to the test of utility, and found them inadequate, reconfirming his atheism and his desire to build a rational society according to secular notions. He confidently and outrightly denied the truth of religion, of the existence of an immortal soul, of a future life and of the existence of God. Here, he was influenced by his radical friend Francis Place (1771-1854). He had immense faith and confidence in the power of reason to tell us what *was*, and what was to be *expected*. In this, he was influenced by the thinkers of the French Enlightenment (Voltaire, Helvetius and Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789)), and like them, believed that in order to recreate it was necessary to destroy. His hatred for religion, like Voltaire, increased with the passage of time. He was anti-clergy and disagreed with religion as an instrument of moral improvement. Like Holbach, he regarded religion as a source of human misery.

Bentham sought to use the institutions of conventional religion to serve secular ends and public service. He advocated that the clergy could serve as disseminators regarding job vacancies, or compile statistics to aid endeavours at poor relief. The church could be used as a bank for the poor at the Sunday services. The clergy could become moral instructors in the

panopticon. He believed that people had a right by law to leave their bodies for dissection.

In a secular utilitarian society, there would be no God and no idea of an immortal soul. There would be no supernatural sanction for morality. A good deed would be remembered for one's family and commemorated by one's fellow citizens. Instead of religious rewards and punishments, there would be verdict by future generations, renewable every century in the case of great men.