

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 bad consequences for society as a whole—weakening the norm against murder, for example, or increasing people's ten-

dency to take the law into their own hands, for captains to recruit cabin boys.

Second, even if, all things considered, the costs, don't we have a nagging sense that the less cabin boy is wrong for reasons that go beyond social costs and benefits? Isn't it wrong to exploit his vulnerability, taking his life away—even if doing so benefits others?

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

If the killing of the cabin boy is worthy of the name of a moral objection, the second objection is more to the point. It rejects the idea that the thing to do is simply a matter of calculating the costs and benefits. It suggests that morality means something more than to do with the proper way for human beings to live.

These two ways of thinking about the lifeboat case represent two rival approaches to justice. The first approach, called utilitarianism, holds that the right action depends solely on the consequences it produces. The second approach, called deontology, holds that the right action is the one that accords with certain principles or rules. The second approach says that consequences are not the only thing we care about, morally speaking; certain duties or principles demand our respect, for reasons independent of their consequences.

In order to resolve the lifeboat case, and other moral dilemmas we commonly encounter, we need to turn to the traditions of moral and political philosophy. Is there a way of weighing lives and weighing costs and benefits, in a way that respects human rights so fundamental that they cannot be overridden? And if certain rights are fundamental, are they rational, or sacred, or inalienable, or categorical? 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 cer-

tain absolute, categorical duties or rights. for defending these duties or rights unless them would maximize human happiness,

“When a man attempts to combat the writes, “it is with reasons drawn, without that very principle itself.” All moral quarrels disagreements about how to apply the utilitarian principle of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, not about whether it is possible for a man to move the earth?” must first find out another earth to stand upon. The only premise, the only starting point for Bentham, is the principle of utility.³

Bentham thought his utility principle could serve as the basis of political reform. One of his projects designed to make penal policy more efficient was the Panopticon, a prison with a central tower that would enable the supervisor to observe the prisoners without being seen. He suggested that the Panopticon be run by a contractor (ideally himself), who would manage the profits to be made from the labor of the prisoners, who would work sixteen hours per day. Although Bentham's Panopticon was never adopted, it was arguably ahead of its time. It was revived, in the United States and Britain, as a model for prisons and later for corporations.

Rounding up beggars

Another of Bentham's schemes was a plan for “the improvement of the poor” by establishing a self-financing workhouse, which sought to reduce the presence of beggars. It is a vivid illustration of the utilitarian logic. Bentham argued that encountering beggars on the streets was a nuisance to passersby, in two ways. For tenderhearted so-

tain 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 pro-