Bentham’s Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was influenced both by Hobbes’ account of human nature and Hume's account of social utility. He famously held that humans were ruled by two sovereign masters — pleasure and pain. We seek pleasure and the avoidance of pain, they “…govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think…” (Bentham PML, 1) Yet he also promulgated the principle of utility as the standard of right action on the part of governments and individuals. Actions are approved when they are such as to promote happiness, or pleasure, and disapproved of when they have a tendency to cause unhappiness, or pain. (PML) Combine this criterion of rightness with a view that we should be actively trying to promote overall happiness, and one has a serious incompatibility with psychological egoism. Thus, his apparent endorsement of Hobbesian psychological egoism created problems in understanding his moral theory since psychological egoism rules out acting to promote the overall well-being when that it is incompatible with one’s own. For the psychological egoist, that is not even a possibility. So, given ‘ought implies can’ it would follow that we are not obligated to act to promote overall well-being when that is incompatible with our own. This generates a serious tension in Bentham’s thought, one that was drawn to his attention. He sometimes seemed to think that he could reconcile the two commitments empirically, that is, by noting that when people act to promote the good they are helping themselves, too. But this claim only serves to muddy the waters, since the standard understanding of psychological egoism — and Bentham’s own statement of his view — identifies motives of action which are self-interested. Yet this seems, again, in conflict with his own specification of the method for making moral decisions which is not to focus on self-interest — indeed, the addition of extent as a parameter along which to measure pleasure produced distinguishes this approach from ethical egoism. Aware of the difficulty, in later years he seemed to pull back from a full-fledged commitment to psychological egoism, admitting that people do sometimes act benevolently — with the overall good of humanity in mind.

Bentham also benefited from Hume's work, though in many ways their approaches to moral philosophy were completely different. Hume rejected the egoistic view of human nature. Hume also focused on character evaluation in his system. Actions are significant as evidence of character, but only have this derivative significance. In moral evaluation the main concern is that of character. Yet Bentham focused on act-evaluation. There was a tendency — remarked on by J. B. Schneewind (1990), for example — to move away from focus on character evaluation after Hume and towards act-evaluation. Recall that Bentham was enormously interested in social reform. Indeed, reflection on what was morally problematic about laws and policies influenced his thinking on utility as a standard. When one legislates, however, one is legislating in support of, or against, certain actions. Character — that is, a person’s true character — is known, if known at all, only by that person. If one finds the opacity of the will thesis plausible then character, while theoretically very interesting, isn’t a practical focus for legislation. Further, as Schneewind notes, there was an increasing sense that focus on character would actually be disruptive, socially, particularly if one’s view was that a person who didn't agree with one on a moral issues was defective in terms of his or her character, as opposed to simply making a mistake reflected in action.

But Bentham does take from Hume the view that utility is the measure of virtue — that is, utility more broadly construed than Hume's actual usage of the term. This is because Hume made a distinction between pleasure that the perception of virtue generates in the observer, and social utility, which consisted in a trait’s having tangible benefits for society, any instance of which may or may not generate pleasure in the observer. But Bentham is not simply reformulating a Humean position — he's merely been influenced by Hume's arguments to see pleasure as a measure or standard of moral value. So, why not move from pleasurable responses to traits to pleasure as a kind of consequence which is good, and in relation to which, actions are morally right or wrong? Bentham, in making this move, avoids a problem for Hume. On Hume’s view it seems that the response — corrected, to be sure — determines the trait’s quality as a virtue or vice.
But on Bentham's view the action (or trait) is morally good, right, virtuous in view of the consequences it generates, the pleasure or utility it produces, which could be completely independent of what our responses are to the trait. So, unless Hume endorses a kind of ideal observer test for virtue, it will be harder for him to account for how it is people make mistakes in evaluations of virtue and vice. Bentham, on the other hand, can say that people may not respond to the actions good qualities — perhaps they don't perceive the good effects. But as long as there are these good effects which are, on balance, better than the effects of any alternative course of action, then the action is the right one. Rhetorically, anyway, one can see why this is an important move for Bentham to be able to make. He was a social reformer. He felt that people often had responses to certain actions — of pleasure or disgust — that did not reflect anything morally significant at all. Indeed, in his discussions of homosexuality, for example, he explicitly notes that ‘antipathy’ is not sufficient reason to legislate against a practice:

The circumstances from which this antipathy may have taken its rise may be worth enquiring to.... One is the physical antipathy to the offence.... The act is to the highest degree odious and disgusting, that is, not to the man who does it, for he does it only because it gives him pleasure, but to one who thinks [?] of it. Be it so, but what is that to him? (Bentham OAO, v. 4, 94)

Bentham then notes that people are prone to use their physical antipathy as a pretext to transition to moral antipathy, and the attending desire to punish the persons who offend their taste. This is illegitimate on his view for a variety of reasons, one of which is that to punish a person for violations of taste, or on the basis of prejudice, would result in runaway punishments, “...one should never know where to stop...” The prejudice in question can be dealt with by showing it “to be ill-grounded”. This reduces the antipathy to the act in question. This demonstrates an optimism in Bentham. If a pain can be demonstrated to be based on false beliefs then he believes that it can be altered or at the very least ‘assuaged and reduced’. This is distinct from the view that a pain or pleasure based on a false belief should be discounted. Bentham does not believe the latter. Thus Bentham's hedonism is a very straightforward hedonism. The one intrinsic good is pleasure, the bad is pain. We are to promote pleasure and act to reduce pain. When called upon to make a moral decision one measures an action’s value with respect to pleasure and pain according to the following: intensity (how strong the pleasure or pain is), duration (how long it lasts), certainty (how likely the pleasure or pain is to be the result of the action), proximity (how close the sensation will be to performance of the action), fecundity (how likely it is to lead to further pleasures or pains), purity (how much intermixture there is with the other sensation). One also considers extent — the number of people affected by the action.

Keeping track of all of these parameters can be complicated and time consuming. Bentham does not recommend that they figure into every act of moral deliberation because of the efficiency costs which need to be considered. Experience can guide us. We know that the pleasure of kicking someone is generally outweighed by the pain inflicted on that person, so such calculations when confronted with a temptation to kick someone are unnecessary. It is reasonable to judge it wrong on the basis of past experience or consensus. One can use ‘rules of thumb’ to guide action, but these rules are overridable when abiding by them would conflict with the promotion of the good.

Bentham’s view was surprising to many at the time at least in part because he viewed the moral quality of an action to be determined instrumentally. It isn’t so much that there is a particular kind of action that is intrinsically wrong; actions that are wrong are wrong simply in virtue of their effects, thus, instrumentally wrong. This cut against the view that there are some actions that by their very nature are just wrong, regardless of their effects. Some may be wrong because they are ‘unnatural’ — and, again, Bentham would dismiss this as a legitimate criterion. Some may be wrong because they violate liberty, or autonomy. Again, Bentham would view liberty and autonomy as good — but good instrumentally, not intrinsically. Thus, any
action deemed wrong due to a violation of autonomy is derivatively wrong on instrumental grounds as well. This is interesting in moral philosophy — as it is far removed from the Kantian approach to moral evaluation as well as from natural law approaches. It is also interesting in terms of political philosophy and social policy. On Bentham’s view the law is not monolithic and immutable. Since effects of a given policy may change, the moral quality of the policy may change as well. Nancy Rosenblum noted that for Bentham one doesn’t simply decide on good laws and leave it at that: “Lawmaking must be recognized as a continual process in response to diverse and changing desires that require adjustment.” (Rosenblum, 9). A law that is good at one point in time may be a bad law at some other point in time. Thus, lawmakers have to be sensitive to changing social circumstances. To be fair to Bentham’s critics, of course, they are free to agree with him that this is the case in many situations, just not all — and that there is still a subset of laws that reflect the fact that some actions just are intrinsically wrong regardless of consequences. Bentham is in the much more difficult position of arguing that effects are all there are to moral evaluation of action and policy.