Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

The theory of utilitarianism was first fully articulated by Jeremy Bentham who not only wrote about ethics but also about politics as well, his most famous work being *A Fragment on Government*. Because of his interests in both ethics and politics coupled with his desire to improve the social conditions of the masses, he founded a movement known as The Philosophical Radicals. Arguably many of the reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those to do with the treatment of criminals, were the result of Bentham's efforts. Shy but extremely able, Bentham apparently began studying Latin at the age of three and received his degree when only fifteen. However, his friend and follower, James Mill (1773–1836) fathered an even greater child prodigy, John Stuart Mill (1806–73). By all accounts John Stuart Mill began with Greek at the age of three, followed quickly with other languages by the age of eight and finally completed a rigorous classical education by the time he was fourteen. By this time he had become much influenced by Benthamite thinking as his father had been before him.

For Bentham, that which is good is that which equals the greatest sum of pleasure and the least sum of pain. Hence, a right moral decision followed by a truly ethical action would be one which produced the greatest pleasure. The way in which this was to be measured was through the application of the utility calculus, sometimes referred to as the hedonic calculus. *Hedone* is the Greek word for pleasure. Hence, Bentham's version of the theory is occasionally called hedonic utilitarianism.

The hedonic or utility calculus

The utility calculus was supposed to measure the amounts of pleasure and pain according to seven criteria:

- intensity
- duration
- certainty
- extent
- remoteness
- richness
- purity.

The following example may help. Suppose you are a doctor driving to one of your patients, a young mother about to give birth. However, she is in great pain and difficulty and it looks as though she will need a Caesarian section. It is late at night and you come across a car accident down a country road. Two cars are involved and both drivers are injured and unconscious. You discover through trying to
establish identities that one of them is the young pregnant woman's husband. The other is an elderly man. You don't quite know the extent of any internal injuries and are of the opinion that without immediate medical help one of them if not both may die. You are faced now with the moral decision of who to help first:

- the young mother about to give birth?
- the young woman's husband?
- the elderly gentleman?

Any one of them may die if you do not attend to them immediately.

Leaving aside what we may actually feel or believe, the application of the utility calculus may go something like this:

- Attending to the young expectant mother first is the primary concern of the doctor. The death of both mother and child is almost a certainty if he does not act now, whereas the death of either of the two men is not certain. Moreover, the intensity of her pain is clearly greater at present than theirs. There is a greater richness and purity in saving the life of a young child who has, in all probability, a long and happy life ahead. Therefore, the duration and extent of the pleasures experienced by two people, the mother and child, is a clear likelihood.

- Attending to the young husband is the next priority. The pleasure of a new family, its intensity, duration, extent, richness and purity are all clear probabilities. If the doctor had attended to him first and neglected his expectant wife, she would probably have died, and the intensity, duration, extent etc. of the pain experienced by the widowed husband is likely to outstrip any pleasure to be gained from continued life without his loved ones.

- Attending to the elderly gentleman is the last priority. The duration and certainty of his future pleasure is under question owing to his age. He has all but lived his life; this is sometimes known as the 'good innings argument'. According to this line, the value of his life is not now as great as the young married couple's who have much of their lives ahead of them, nor of the young child who has yet to go in to bat, as it were.

Some problems:
One of the problems of Bentham's theory and his hedonic calculus was that its results were based on a quantitative measure. That is, how much sheer quantity of pleasure can be gained from an action. Just by attending to one patient, the young mother, the decision has all but guaranteed that two people will be saved, and that the likely number of years in which they may experience pleasure is probably going to be a lot greater than the number of pleasurable years spent by the elderly gentleman. Moreover, the certainty of saving either the husband or the elderly gentleman is by no means guaranteed, whereas the death of the young mother and her child is almost guaranteed. So, although it may be a difficult decision, the doctor on strict utilitarian grounds would have to save the young mother and child because the quantity of pleasure is the important issue. But, can the quantity of pleasure actually be measured in numbers of years? Furthermore, who will do the measuring?

The second problem is that utilitarianism relies strictly on its predictive value. But who can predict that the child will grow up to be happy and productive, that the old man will soon die anyway, and that the sum total of pleasure to be gained by the young family is going to be greater than the old man's? The child may grow up to be a mass-murderer, the family may then lead a collective life of guilt and misery, and the old man may, like Bertrand Russell, have been destined to make his major mark on political life in his eighties and nineties.

The third problem is to do with what counts as pleasure. Pure emotional and bodily pleasures are clearly quantifiable. But is it just pleasure that we wish to seek or increase and pain that we wish to avoid or minimise? I might be prepared to suffer a great deal of pain in order to gain a minimal amount of pleasure. The quick extraction of a painful tooth might, on the quantity of pleasure theory, be preferable to hours of painful dentistry involving excavating, filling and polishing the tooth, whilst simultaneously suffering the continuing
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pain of the tooth itself, all in order to satisfy some intangible desire to retain all my teeth. Or, supposing I wanted the pleasure of being thought slim, I could, like many slimming fanatics, put myself through continual painful exercises and diets in order to wear jeans one size smaller. Or, more importantly, I could forgo all obvious pleasures of the moment, practise continuously on the piano in order to lead a precarious existence as a second-rate concert pianist combined with the dubious pleasure of fame.