

# Utilitarianism of Mill and Bentham: a comparative analysis

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the process of history, mankind has never stopped exploring happiness. The thinkers in different times are constantly approaching the truth of happiness in the dispute of opinions according to the theme of their own era, but they have never been truly opened. The mystery of happiness can only be surmised and guessed at its true appearance based on the unpredictable presentation it has showed to us. Ancient Greece pursues the happiness of morality; Christianity aspires to the happiness of the other side of the world; for modern society, people's interpretation of happiness is more complicated. For example, Kant reasoned out the consistency of morality and happiness from the strict moral principle; Marx established the collective care of all human happiness based on the historical materialism; those people in Schopenhauer's arguments were always in the view of negative happiness in pain and boredom; Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory promoted self-realization; and Rawls revealed that life always gives him more happiness than he expects (Shao 2013). These explanations and discourses showed the true meaning of happiness from different angles, but they did not give us a unified opinion about what happiness is. The purpose of this essay is to explore the fundamental principle of morality, 'the greatest happiness principle,' in the Mill's utilitarian thought of happiness. Based on his theory of happiness, compare it with the concepts of morality and justice, analyze the differences in the utilitarian theories of Mill and Bentham.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Utilitarianism; Happiness and morality; Happiness and justice*

## **1. Mill's utilitarianism**

### **1.1 Happiness and morality**

The 'the greatest happiness' is the universal moral principle established for society in the sense of moral norms and rules. Mill (1863) said, "... there should be a fundamental moral principle or rule, as a basis for all morality, if there are several different fundamental moral principles or rules, there should be a clear prioritization order." The relationship between morality and happiness here is clear. However, the morality involved in defining the concept of happiness is different from that of Mill; it is the internal morality of an actor; it is expressed as a strict requirement for the

behavior of an actor; and is a measurement of one's character.

Mill (1863) believes that morality, like money, rights, and fame, has no value in itself. The reason why people want to ask for these things is they are attracted by another purpose. The existence of another purpose allows people to associate morality with happiness, interests, benefits, and so on. Therefore, morality is actually a means to obtain happiness, which is a bridge to achieve the purpose. Because of the strengthening of people's consciousness often sees morality itself as a source of happiness, even as a more important good than purpose, people are dedicated to it just as much as any other good. it. As a result, happiness is a concrete whole, and whether morality is as a means of wishing for happiness or an integral part of happiness is included in the great concept of happiness (Macleod 2018).

Mill's exposition of morality, from the means of obtaining happiness to being part of happiness, is explained on the same methodology as money, rights, and reputation. But he also said that morality is the primary good in all means that are conducive to the ultimate goal, "unless people love the morality themselves as a worthwhile thing...or they are not in a healthy, utilitarian mentality that is most conducive to public well-being (Macleod 2018)."

### ***1.2 Happiness and justice***

Mill profoundly recognized the serious threat posed to utilitarianism by the principles of justice. Mill (1863) said that "the concept of justice that appears to be contrary to interests does not in fact separate from interests, however, people believe that the sense of justice it evokes points to an intrinsic essence of things. The sense of justice is the natural instinct of people inspired by this intrinsic essence of things. In this way, justice is seen as an absolute thing that is different from any interest in its genera." Objectively, the things pointed out by justice are indeed coincident with the part of 'public interest.' Subjectively, the things that the sense of justice requires are contrary to personal interests, and they also have considerable binding force (Macleod 2017). As a result, Mill made an in-depth survey of justice along the minds of most thinkers, trying to reveal whether the things pointed to by justice or injustice have some common attributes, and whether these attributes can form our universal law, thus thoroughly clearing the haze for utilitarianism.

Mill (1863) believes that "even if justice is understood from the perspective of equality, the concept of justice still varies from person to person, even beyond the understanding of other angles, and always changes with their utilitarian concepts." In discussing this point of view, he elaborated on the existence and equal distribution of slavery. He said that "from the perspective of equality, slavery should be firmly denied, but its existence is indeed reasonable and righteous, because it promotes social progress, which shows that utilitarianism is not the basis for the existence of the reality of justice (Liu 2007)." Different people have different understandings of the distribution of equality, but in reality they are all based on utilitarianism, which denies the position of equality as a basis for justice from the internal differences of equality and establishes the utilitarianism as a basis for justice. Then from the

perspective of etymology, Mill confirmed the concept of justice in its historical evolution. He concluded that “the concept of justice constitutes the ‘original idea’ or ‘primitive element’, which is undoubtedly compliance with the law.” But the laws that Mill said should be followed are not already enacted laws. If all the daily behaviors of human beings are under the strict control of the law, it will limit individual freedom and cause inconvenience to the actors (Wu 2016). Therefore, Mill uses morality as the basis and complement of the law to regulate human behavior. Moreover, Mill (1863) suggests that the concept of legality and morality also contains the obligation to ‘rightfully force a person to fulfill it’. This distinguishes morality from law and interests and values, but the problem is that so far, the difference between justice and general morality has not been explained yet. Thus, Mill introduced the ethical writers’ division for moral obligations, that is, completely obligatory obligations and incomplete mandatory obligations. Mill (1863) stated that “in philosophers’ more precise language, a completely obligatory obligation is an obligation that can make a person or persons have a corresponding right; without full obligatory obligations are moral obligations that do not create any rights; and Mill is quite certain and firmly convinced that this division is exactly the same as the division between justice and other moral obligations, so that justice is the ability to allow one or some people have the moral principles of determining rights and it is distinguished from generosity and benevolence. Furthermore, opponents categorize human beings as subjects that can demand rights of generous and benevolent, piece together the subjects of rights and rights to blur the clear boundaries between moral categories and concepts of justice. Mill (1863) argues that it is untenable, because the general human being is an ABSTRACT. empty concept, it does not play any role in the division of the two, so the relationship between division of justice and general morality has no meaning.

## **2. A critical discussion of Mill and Bentham’s utilitarian thoughts**

The three elementary factors of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism consist of the principle of pleasure and pain, consequentialism, and the principle of utility. The first is the principle of pleasure and pain, which includes two basic arguments - the pursuit of happiness and avoidance of pain that are the ultimate causes of human behavior; and the calculation of pleasure and pain. In Bentham’s view, all human behavior motivations derive from in pleasure and pain, and our thoughts, words, and actions are all governed by them. In other words, the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain are the deepest motivation, in certain sense, the ultimate goal of human behavior (Bentham 2009). In addition, the pleasure and pain of behavior is also the only basis for judging good and evil behavior. However, the different pleasure and pain produced by different behaviors, in the view of Bentham’s utilitarianism, is only the difference in quantity (Gong 2003). Bentham (2009) believes that the pleasure of a child’s thumbtack game is the same as the nature of pleasure that adults get from poetry. It is the basic and important argument of Bentham to regard different qualities of happiness as the same things in nature, because happiness is only a difference of quantity, how to calculate the amount of happiness produced by behavior is of great significance to Bentham.

The consequentialism considers whether a behavior is good or not, which mainly depends on whether one behavior will bring good results. That is, as long as one behavior can bring pleasant results, then this behavior is ethical behavior. In the point of Bentham's view, the inner motive is always attributed to some kind of happiness or pain, but the pain itself is a kind of evil, and it is the only evil. Otherwise, the good and evil is meaningless. In the same way, every happiness is good (Scheffler 1994). Bentham (2009) emphasized that everyone's motive is to seek happiness. Then it is straightforward to draw the conclusion that no motive is evil.

Bentham's utilitarian principle includes two aspects. One is personal pleasure or happiness. From the perspective of Bentham, utilitarianism refers to any kind of behavior for promotion of happiness, in other words, any tendency toward happiness as utilitarianism and the tendency to deviate as scourge. In Bentham here, happiness is the personal pleasure measured by the calculation of personal pleasure and pain. The second is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, that is, social interests, and personal happiness is also personal interest. He said, "social interests are one of the most common terms that may appear in ethical vocabulary (Bentham 2009)." Bentham then regarded the social interest as a simple sum of personal interests, thinking that everyone is striving to maximize their happiness, naturally, it also enhances the interests of society (Gong 2003). He completely ignored the qualitative difference between the two.

Above three principles laid the foundation for the most basic theory of Bentham's utilitarianism, and emerged later did not leave these basic factors. After Bentham, Mill made a major revision and development of utilitarianism. In Mill's time, Bentham's utilitarianism was ridiculed as the creed of pigs who had fun in the mud, because Bentham did not make a distinction on quality of happiness. Mill acknowledged this criticism. Therefore, for Mill, the first was to make a qualitative distinction between pleasure. Mill proposed a distinction between high-level pleasure and low-level happiness, and affirmed that high-level pleasure must be qualitatively superior to low-level pleasure. He believes that those people who are competent enough to be familiar with these two kinds of happiness will place that kind of superior quality happiness on them, and because the qualitative superiority outweighs the quantitative aspects, therefore, the amount will become insignificant aspects (Smart and Williams 1973).

Mill's second improvement is to put forward the argument of morality and self-sacrifice. Bentham's utilitarianism is a perceptual happiness theory, nevertheless, Mill's is based on perceptual pleasure or happiness that is a good utilitarianism. He suggests that happiness or pleasure is the only thing that people can desire. According to it, he further argues that reasonability of the means of achieving happiness such as money, reputation, power, and morality. Moreover, he claims that morality changes from a tool for happiness to the purpose of happiness itself. In fact, Mill's argument for moral happiness is the theoretical premise that he tends to emphasize public happiness. However, Bentham's utilitarianism has the dual principle of personal happiness and public happiness and argues that the two is consistent under the premise of personal happiness, for this reason, Bentham is

tending to personal happiness or personal interests. But for Mill, he tends to public welfare. In the eyes of Mill, it is in the face of public happiness that the distinction between moral happiness, money, power, and fame are revealed (Smart and Williams 1973).

The important supplement of Mill to utilitarianism is that utilitarianism and justice are internally consistent. First of all, he examines human practice through the utilization of concepts of justice, noting that the concept of justice inherently implies a concept of (equality) rights. In addition, he examines the significance of the concept of justice by pointing out that the notion of justice is linked to the awareness of observance of law. The act prescribed by law is the obligation that people must perform. Through inspections, Mill (1863) points out that even if it is a mandatory obligation, it is also an obligation that has considerable rights. In other words, behind the obligation is the concept of rights. Wherever there are rights, there is an issue of equality or justice. Mill (1863) suggests that there is a right that society should protect and make everyone enjoy, this is security, which is equal for all and constitutes the minimum requirement of justice.

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up, Mill's utilitarian thought of happiness not only inherited the ideological tradition of classical utilitarianism, but also extracted the essence of theory from ancient Greek families. He not only paid attention to the individual's sensuous physical happiness, but also interpreted the human's behavioral norms from the theory of benefit effectiveness, as well as pursued advanced rational and moral happiness and encouraged people to have a world of emotions and feelings of openness. This not only avoided emotional unreliability and vulgarity, it also inhibited the rational analysis of the grand forces of dismantling all the theoretical buildings, thus achieving the theoretical unity of morality and interests, sensibility and rationality, and individual and society. Although it received a lot of criticism in the ideological world, it did not prevent it from having such a huge influence. Instead, it continued to grow and grow stronger in the critique and accusations. This is not only because it is the spiritual theme of that era, but also the true portrayal of people's voices; it can solve people's ideological and spiritual confusion in that era, it also has an undoubtedly great role in solving the spiritual crisis of modern society.

Utilitarianism has been in the mainstream of Western ideology for centuries, and it was not until Rawls' theory of justice came up, which broke its status as a dominant position. The utilitarianism with such a great attraction, the brilliance and shining point of its thoughts must not be complete in one sentence. At the same time, the contemporary values of Mill's utilitarianism are certainly not illustrated by the stipulated items, that is, "different people have different views," its profound meaning and realistic value still need to be further explored.

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