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LEAVING OMELAS

The Failure of Utilitarian Hedonism

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Synopsis

In Western philosophy, hedonistic theories of what is "good" in life comprise a major body of ethical theory. Early hedonistic theories were egoistic, where good was measured in terms of individual pleasure or happiness. For example, in ancient philosophical thought, Democritus and Aristippus thought good to be the simple pursuit of pleasure and Socrates considered it to be the pursuit of personal well being (happiness).

In the early modern period, philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) converted egoistic hedonism into its present form of utilitarian hedonism by developing a quantitative form of hedonism based on his principle of utility, wherein "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" becomes the universal moral standard.

Recognizing notable flaws in Bentham's utilitarianism, J. S. Mill (1806–1873) modified utilitarian hedonism in the direction of a more qualitative interpretation and presented it in light of an ethical theory identifying the good with all intrinsic values, rather than with the usual hedonistic goals of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.

Even with Mill's modifications, however, utilitarian hedonism has difficulty overcoming the following objections: (1) It sidesteps the charge that it is egoistic by appealing to the best for the most, but it is not purely altruistic either. (2) All forms of hedonism use a hedonic calculus, but how realistic is such a method? (3) It creates more than a few awkward situations in real life. (4) Critics object that utilitarianism and hedonism are incompatible with everyday moral decisions. (5) It is a naturalistic ethic and confuses so-called factual judgments of reality with value judgments of how reality "really" is.

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The ringing of the boats in the harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public building, processions moved.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle!

All at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. The young riders stroke the horses' necks and

soothe them. They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded.

The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked; the eyes disappear.

"I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

Now do you believe them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman.

Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

> *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 we shall 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.*
>
> *—Jeremy Bentham*[1]

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is an allegorical tale[2] regarding a Utopian society where happiness is contingent on the sacrifice of one child for the sake of the community. The point of the short story is that the promotion of one's own good or the good of an entire community at the expense of the other can lead to some pretty dire ethical results. The *ethical egoist* (someone who says that everybody should pursue their own best interest) will pursue his own best interest while the *ethical utilitarian* would, ideally, desire the good for everyone concerned and count all as equal. Both are ethical hedonists, in that ethical judgments are based on our desiring pleasure over pain and making happiness the goal of life.

The utilitarian hedonist takes into account her own pleasure and happiness when choosing to act and is concerned with how the act will affect everyone, whether or not they are directly involved in its consequences. Utilitarianism is best described in three stages.[3]

First, the principle of utility is considered. "Utility" basically means "usefulness" but is further defined by the utilitarian as "that which promotes the greatest balance of good over evil." Put simply, utilitarianism is the *doctrine that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest balance of good over evil.*

But what is the "good" in this case?

Second, like hedonism, utilitarianism defines the good as pleasure. Therefore, utilitarianism is the *doctrine that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest balance of pleasure over pain.*

Another question arises. Whose pleasure is to be maximized?

Third, utilitarianism judges the rightness of an action by its *consequences* and it does so by judging the rightness of an action as a function of the production of pleasurable consequences.

The egoist and the utilitarian hedonist part ways at a critical juncture. The former is motivated out of self-interest and strives for self-satisfaction and the latter is motivated out of an interest for the greatest possible number of persons and desires their satisfaction most. Where egoism drives egoistic hedonism, social or utilitarian hedonism substitutes its benevolence principle, the idea that *happiness should be distributed as widely and as equally as possible among all people*. Thus, utilitarianism is, finally, *the doctrine that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number.*

BENTHAM'S VERSION: QUANTITY OVER QUALITY

Utilitarian hedonism has as its founding fathers the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Bentham placed an emphasis on the quantity of happiness and Mill placed an emphasis on the quality of happiness.

For Bentham, a moral decision consists of considering the courses of action, taking into account how each course will affect the people involved, and counting yourself one of those people. Once this is done, the person is able to calculate both the pleasures and pains that will result from the action, and then choose the action that results in the greatest amount of pleasure over pain.

Bentham's quantitative notion of pleasure begs the question of how we determine what is the most pleasure. Bentham proposes seven ways in which we can measure, or account for, the quantity of happiness:

Intensity: How strong is it?
Duration: How long will it last?
Certainty: How likely is it to occur?
Propinquity: How near at hand is it?
Fecundity: What is its ability to produce further pleasures?
Purity: What freedom from ensuing pains does it produce?
Extent: What is the number of people affected by it?

Philosopher Barbara MacKinnon notes that "By applying these seven criteria—someone has likened them to a moral thermometer—we ought to be able to grind out, like a machine, what course of action would deliver the most pleasure."*4*

MILL'S VERSON: QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

John Stuart Mill, Bentham's successor, was certainly the most famous utilitarian of all. His book *Utilitarianism* is a classic of philosophical literature and a more critical analysis of the idea that happiness for the greatest number is possible. Regarding hedonism, he writes: "By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure…pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain."[5]

Bentham and Mill agreed on the principle of utility— that actions are right if they produce pleasure, happiness, or satisfaction of needs and are distributed among as many people as possible.

Where Mill split with Bentham was over Bentham's purely *quantitative* view of pleasure. Mill believed that it is not as important as the consideration of *quality*. He writes: "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone."[6]

For Mill, it is better to be a dissatisfied human than a satisfied pig. For both Mill and Bentham, the action is to be pursued that makes for the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For Bentham "greatest" meant "most" and for Mill it meant "best."

But who decides what is the "best" and the "most"? Mill argues that the decision belongs to anyone who has experienced both: "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure."[7] In other words, those who have experienced both will in most cases choose the higher or more qualitative pleasures for the most. Mill explains that "no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs."[8]

SOME OBJECTIONS

Let's consider a few of the most popular objections to the ethical theory of utilitarian hedonism. First, utilitarianism sidesteps the charge that it is egoistic by appealing to the best for the most, but it is not purely altruistic either. We are to distribute happiness to the greatest number of people, but we are also to recognize that each one of us is one of those people. How does this fare, for example, with the one child who is tortured in Le Guin's story, "The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas"?

Second, all forms of hedonism use a hedonic calculus. While this calculus may add up on paper, how realistic is it when we take it to the streets? We *may* be able to foresee *some* of the consequences of our actions, but who can really foresee all of them, to say nothing of the consequences of the consequences, and so on?

Third, utilitarian hedonism creates more than a few awkward situations in real life. Writes MacKinnon, "We are told to act so as to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. But is not ten parts of happiness distributed over two people—five parts of happiness each—as much the greatest happiness for the greatest number as ten parts of happiness distributed evenly to ten people?"[9]

Fourth, critics object that utilitarianism and hedonism are incompatible with everyday moral decisions. People for the most part understand what it means to tell the truth and to keep their promises. But what about situations where breaking a promise would promote the happiness of someone you love

or others? What about moral dilemmas where the principle of utility and the idea of justice conflict? Would you be willing to offer up to Nazi soldiers Jewish refugees hidden in your basement if it meant you wouldn't have to lie to save them?

Finally, like hedonism, utilitarianism is a naturalistic ethic—it takes its cue from nature, or from what *is*. Now, like the citizens of Omelas who achieve the greatest happiness from torturing a starving child, the utilitarians' moral world is wide open to the charge of the naturalistic fallacy. They are trying to derive an *ought* from an *is*. Are not their so-called factual judgments of their reality confused with value judgments of how their reality "really" is? Is it possible that they might actually be enslaved by the "natural masters" of pain or pleasure, preferring to exalt the good of pleasure above the demagogue of pain at all costs without ever considering what they "ought" to be doing instead?
An endless night falls on the theory of utilitarian hedonism after only a cursory questioning. We stand outside the gates of Omelas and watch those who choose to walk away pass by, alone, going west or north towards the mountains.

Strange! Weren't we once the ones leaving, too? Where did we go? To whom did we run for a chance at a new life?

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notes

1 Jeremy Bentham, **Introduction to the Principles of Morality and Legislation** (1823 ed.; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1907), 1.

2 Written by Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" was first published in the magazine New Directions in 1973. It was subsequently printed in her short story collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004). Excerpts from the story appearing at the beginning of this article are used by permission of the Virginia Kidd Literary Agency, P.O. Box 278 538, East Hartford Street Milford, PA 18337 USA. Le Guin devised the town's name by reading a roadside sign backwards as it appeared in the rearview mirror of her car—"Omelas" is an anagram of Salem, Oregon.

3 There is hardly enough space in this article to give a full account, either historically or philosophically, of utilitarian ethics. For further exploration I suggest the following: Mel Thompson, *Teach Yourself Ethics* (Oxford: Teach Yourself Publications, 2003), 63–77; Donald Palmer, *Why It's Hard to Be Good: an Introduction to Ethical Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 184–226; Theodore C. Denise, et al., *Great Traditions in Ethics*, twelfth ed., (Florence, KY.: Wadsworth Publishing, 2007), 156–169; Fred and Christina Sommers, *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, sixth ed., (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2008), 93–110.

4 Barbara MacKinnon, *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Florence, KY.: Wadsworth, 2004), 48.

5 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Oskar Priest (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 10–
11. 6 Ibid., 11–12. 7 Ibid., 12. 8 Ibid., 12. 9 MacKinnon, Ethics, 50.

6 Ibid., 11–12.

7 Ibid., 12.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 MacKinnon, *Ethics*, 50.