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**UTILITARIANISM:  
ITS HISTORY AND MODERN APPEARANCES**

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As a philosophy, utilitarianism seeks to affect the greatest amount of happiness for the largest number of people. Historically, utilitarianism has undergone numerous changes which have developed the path to this goal. In modern times, utilitarianism can be seen in newer philosophies, such as the Effective altruism movement. This philosophical and social movement recognizes the goal of bringing about the greatest happiness and projects it to the global scale. In doing so, Effective altruism hopes to alleviate some of the most critical problems facing humanity.

**Keywords:** utilitarianism, Effective altruism, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, good, happiness.

**УТИЛИТАРИЗМ:  
ИСТОРИЯ И СОВРЕМЕННОЕ СОСТОЯНИЕ**

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Утилитаризм как философия стремится принести наибольшее счастье максимальному числу людей. Исторически утилитаризм претерпел множество изменений, которые способствовали его развитию. В наше время утилитаризм можно увидеть в новых философских течениях, таких как движение «Эффективный альтруизм». Это философское и социальное движение признает своей целью достижение большого счастья, воплощает его в глобальном масштабе. Тем самым, эффективный альтруизм надеется решить некоторые из наиболее серьезных проблем, стоящих перед человечеством.

**Ключевые слова:** утилитаризм, эффективный альтруизм, Джереми Бентам, Джон Стюарт Милль, Генри Сиджвик, благополучие, счастье.

The Utilitarian school of thought offers a methodology for living one's life in such a way as to actively pursue the most happiness for the greatest number of

people. It presents an interesting research problem how to live a philosophy so as to promote achieve a community's happiness. In an attempt to offer a solution to this problem this article will delve into the school of utilitarianism. Three major thinkers who developed the Utilitarian school of philosophy will be highlighted. The historical background will exhibit how contemporary impressions of utilitarianism have emerged. A case study will be then made to see how utilitarianism has manifested itself in modern times – as seen in the “Effective altruism” philosophy. Utilitarianism is a starting point for altruistic actions, but as a school of thought, it requires additional development to be used as a method for achieving the greatest amount of happiness for all people.

Utilitarians believe that “the best actions lead to the greatest happiness for the largest number of conscious beings” [15, p. 148]. This belief originated in the writings of the 19th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. His ideas are rooted within “psychological hedonism” – the concept that every human being seeks to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, as well as “ethical hedonism”, which believes that a particular action can be called good if the actor receives pleasure from the action. Otherwise, the action should be carefully avoided. This thought can be traced back to the Epicurean school in Ancient Greece, which believed the tendency to look for pleasure and actively avoid pain was deeply seeded within mankind's nature. The ancient philosophy was then developed by Bentham in the 18th century as a rationale of human nature that envisaged men as following one of “two masters”, either pain or pleasure [6]. If pain and pleasure are indisputably part of man's existence, and his confrontation with them is inevitable, why not, then, try to pursue the one most suited to an individual's preferences?

On this foundation, Bentham based his moral philosophy. “Pain and pleasure govern us in all we say and think. They throw out subjectivity. Man serves the state, thinking he can build his own empire. But he will remain subjected to the state all the time”. In his philosophy, all people are moved to action by their very attraction to pursuing pleasure and repugnance towards pain. Even when he believes himself to be acting in accord with his intellectual independence, a person is most likely still being

swayed by an unconscious preference for pleasure and a determination to avoid anything unpleasant. Bentham explained that “nature has placed mankind under the government of pain and pleasure...it is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as what we shall do” [18, p. 11]. A person’s actions, preferences, and very lifestyle can all be traced back to this point.

Bentham’s concern for pleasure starts with the individual and extends to the community. This particular idea has carried on in modern incarnations of utilitarianism. Utilitarian concern, however, extends beyond the individual, into the greater perspective. It is underlined by community orientation. To accurately make decisions which will bring pleasure, and not pain, one must consider the after-effects of an action. Is something good only for me, while at the same time negatively affecting others? This negates the overall pleasure, and therefore from the utilitarian perspective the thing in question is bad. To bring happiness/pleasure to the greatest number of people possible, it is necessary to calculate the effects of one's actions. Such a reckoning may be done using Bentham's calculus, which he formulated specifically for this type of query [6].

Converting utilitarian calculation into mathematics, in theory, sounds plausible. Bentham’s calculation uses seven factors:

– *Intensity*. What is the intensity of the pleasures in question? Does one cause greater, more pleasing sensations that give way to further pleasure? Or is the pleasure fleeting and not deep?

– *Extent*. How many people will be affected by the pleasure in question? This examines if a pleasure is selfish, or if it opens itself up to other people.

– *Purity*. Hand-in-hand with intensity is the question of purity. Is the pleasurable feeling something without associated pain something that is, in and of itself, purely pleasurable? Alcohol may give one pleasure but drinking to the point of a drunken stupor is pleasurable only during the imbibing process. The after-effects can take hours to wear off and drain the body of energy. The brief experience of imbibing is intensely pleasurable, but its duration is minimal in comparison to the duration of the hangover which follows.

– *Duration*. How long does the pleasure last? This variable may be used when weighing the cost/benefit of two or more pleasures. How long will each pleasure last? Will it be followed by pain?

– *Certainty versus uncertainty*. This asks if, for sure, something will bring a being pleasure. Will the individual absolutely enjoy the effects of action? Or is it something that could also cause pain?

– *Remoteness versus distance*. This practical sub-calculation asks about the proximity of the pleasure in question. How much time is needed to achieve the pleasure in question? Is it something I can immediately enjoy, or is exhausting patience required? [q.v.: 19].

Bentham's hedonistic calculus is a neat method for analyzing the choices one must make in order to gain pleasure. It is not, however, a precise and succinct mathematical method for calculating pleasure. It necessitates the use of reason and considering whether or not a potential clash of interests may occur during the calculation process. The intent of Bentham's calculus was to allow an actor to make a decision based on an accurate estimation of the amount of pain/pleasure an action will cause the individual or their community. The answer will then determine whether or not the action should be done, based on the understanding of what its outcomes will generally be. In such a way, a user's actions will generally be directed towards achieving not just pleasure, but the greatest amount of pleasure possible for them at the specific point of calculation.

As the father of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham formalized utilitarian thinking and set the groundwork for its future development. He defined pleasure and pinpointed consideration points for planning how to obtain the most pleasure. His calculative method for understanding such consideration proposed the idea that humans can take control of their instinctive pursuit of pleasure and make decisions actively understanding how their happiness will be affected. In the 21st century, his contributions to utilitarianism are especially appreciated in the light of the development of such things as *artificial intelligence* which are mathematical and precise, yet eliminate the conscientious factor provided by one's own intellect.

John Stuart Mill carried the torch, so to say, of utilitarianism into the 19th century. Although he was a Liberal thinker, his academic discussions on utilitarianism may be seen in his essay “On liberty”, which was followed by his work “Utilitarianism”. Mill continued to perpetuate utilitarianism, but in a manner that implicated a type of selfishness on the part of the Utilitarian person projected by Bentham’s thinking. Regarding Bentham, Mill said: “He by no means intended by this assertion (Principle of Utility) to impute universal selfishness to mankind, for he reckoned the motive of sympathy as an interest” [9]. Therefore, people act in accordance with interests. Their interests support their desires and their goals. Their goals, in Mill’s thought, were united by a common pursuit of the greatest good. The person is not alone in their pursuit, and so finds themselves part of a greater community. The pleasure sought after becomes a pleasure for all – the greatest happiness.

In his essay work “Utilitarianism” Mill explained: “The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” [8]. However, Mill noted that utility is more than just the blanket term “pleasure”. Utility is more than just the delightful sensations that come from eating a chocolate bar; rather than banal pleasure, it is happiness. Thus, Mill distinguished higher versus lower pleasures – indicating that a person experiences pleasure thanks to a variety of occasions and stimulants. Higher pleasures are associated with the intellect, whereas the lower pleasures may be connected with the physical senses [q.v.: 3]. As not all occasions of pleasure are equal, the differentiation of them should be kept in mind during the utilitarian decision-making process.

John Stuart Mill’s developments in utilitarianism gave one’s pursuit of pleasure and rejection of pain a point. Searching for the greatest happiness is a driving force within each person. Happiness is found within a society, which unites the lone human being with fellows. Together, they can alleviate suffering and facilitate a more

attainable realization of pleasure. Mill brought Bentham's ideas into the realm of something desirable – most people want to have a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. By pursuing the greatest happiness, one also pursues a community. And within the community, it is more possible to achieve goals and dispel pain.

Henry Sidgwick is the final utilitarian thinker proposed for historical consideration. His main contribution to the philosophy was made by his book "Methods of Ethics". A major part of Sidgwick's ethical contribution to utilitarianism consisted of his discussion on rationally making ethical decisions [4]. A writer of his times, Sidgwick was the product of the staunchly Protestant Victorian society. He continued the development of utilitarianism, carefully confronting the religious biases of a society that firmly differentiated between religion and science.

Sidgwick's "method of ethics" supports the rational approach to utilitarian decision making. This method is explained as being "...any rational procedure by which we determine what individual beings 'ought' – or what is 'right' for them – to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary action [11]". As humans are rational, this ethical reasoning lies within the mind of every person. What is required is self-awareness, as the being must be able to place what "ought" to be done within the context of one's life and circumstances. Each person knows their own life the best, and therefore knows the most precisely how they can and ought to act.

What is especially interesting in Sidgwick's work for the modern reader is that he emphasized people should not be overly burdened by morality. This does not mean they should not practice ethics if those ethics are not fun or fashionable. Rather, morality be should liveable and attainable for each person. It is a compliment to every person's life, not extra and additional work. Sidgwick's determination to do so can be seen throughout his philosophical career. This connects, again, with rationality, as Sidgwick's thought developed the idea that it is "reasonable to desire, and so attaches moral to natural properties, by the ordinary gamut of philosopher's strategies – appeals to logic, coherence, plausibility, and judgement after reflection" [5]. Morality, ethics, and ostensibly utilitarianism, do not require decisions to be made using extensive philosophical deliberation and qualifications. The person can, on

their own and using their rationality, consider the logic, coherence, and plausibility of an issue within (as was said before) the context of their own life. Then, after applying utilitarian decision-making, they may consider and judge their actions.

Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick were major thinkers of the Utilitarian school. Their works together shaped and formed the foundation from which other Utilitarian schools came to develop. In their thoughts, it is possible to see the underlining presence of hedonism, urging followers to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The role of the individual evolved to the role of the community, as John Stuart Mill searched for the Greatest Good. Henry Sidgwick opened the Utilitarian school to rationalism, and with it the idea that the individual can determine what is best for themselves. Their thoughts continue to influence modern philosophical thought, causing (as will be seen in the following case studies) many to consider how to bring benefit to the greatest number of people possible. The study will advance to presenting a modern rebirth of utilitarian thought, known as *Effective altruism*. The point of analysis is to see utilitarianism in contemporary practice and understand how its strengths can be mobilized for the benefit of humanity, especially in the modern, globalized world.

The modern age of globalization has caused the overlapping of various countries and communities, and therefore their traditions, societies, and economies. Thanks to the ongoing development of technology, the average person is aware of the many opportunities available to them, as well as the gaping lack of opportunities that their neighbors may face. Technology and globalization together have also made it possible for a person in the middle of the suburban community in Canada (for example) to be aware of the abject poverty faced by populations in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The *Effective altruism* movement emerged in the 2000's as a method of effecting the most good for society. The movement has three main targets, which are areas perceived to be the most urgent in contemporary times. It looks to alleviate extreme poverty, lessen animal suffering, and ensure the long-term future of humanity. The adherents of *Effective altruism* look to affect the most change possible

with what they have available in terms of resources. That could be the time one has available for working to end a problem the financial resources one can put towards a solution, or the talents one has, such as organizational abilities, etc. To prioritize and select from the many aspects that each of these topics present, *Effective altruism* advises to focus on issues that affect the most people, are the most ignored, and have the greatest ability to be solved [1]. *Effective altruism* intends to make a change, do it as effectively as possible, and truly and positively affect the areas it targets. With this, it reaches out beyond philosophical boundaries and invites the individual to recognize their responsibility and act to benefit humanity.

The founders of *Effective altruism* were influenced by Peter Singer's utilitarian thoughts [15]. This philosophical approach has breathed a new spirit into the philosophy of utilitarianism. The school of thought believes that every human person has a responsibility for their neighbor, and the responsibility is presented regardless of distance. *Effective altruism* hopes to "make the world as good a place as is possible" [7, p. 11]. This ambition is further facilitated by globalization, which has brought the world and its peoples closer together. With the added factor of technology, which has facilitated a greater awareness for more people of the most pressing issues of modern times, the responsibility to one's neighbor has increased, as our "neighbors" now include those distantly located around the globe. At the same time, technology also means it is easier to assist these people, and more possible to help them in ways that are the most beneficial for them. Technology and modern developments, therefore, compliment Singer's urge to help our neighbors, even far distant ones, and assist well-intentioned people to help those in need to the greatest and most effective extent possible.

Peter Singer's philosophy, which has inspired *Effective altruism*, is grounded in "practical ethics formulated in the spirit of utilitarianism" [17, s. 73]. It looks at the topics through the lenses of secular utilitarianism. From the start of Singer's philosophical work, he was interested in those issues related to poverty. Specifically, he has focused on when poverty causes the most harm and suffering to people. In his writings (motivated by utilitarianism), he developed the concept of how to account



for and assist all people who can be affected by his actions [16, s. 59]. In 2021 one person can affect another immediately, regardless of time and space. Mobile applications make it possible to instantly transfer sums of money between continents. Therefore, something can be done to help even those living in extreme poverty, who are cut-off from communication and technology.

Singer agrees that it is important to help the poor with those basics which everyone human person requires food, shelter and hydration. From a utilitarian perspective, this looks to ensure the happiness of the individual. Yet Singer does not stop with the individual. Rather, he looks at the bigger picture and projects his ambitions to the global level. There, he asks how to ensure the happiness of not just the individual, but also the greatest amount of people possible. He looks to change humanity through the work of humanity.

Despite the magnitude of a global approach, Singer remains a practical philosopher. He emphasizes that people can help with what they have at hand, and this altruistic action will endow their life with happiness and a sense of purpose [15, p. 155]. Therefore, he encourages people to consider how they can help their neighbors (both immediate and distant) with the resources they have available. This line of thinking makes the concept of helping the impoverished in far-off lands not only possible, but realistic. An individual does not have to be Bill Gates to effect helpful, needed change. They only need to channel their thoughts and consider, “what can I do that will bring the most impact?” The beneficiaries of their help will experience pleasure, and the giver will often also experience a feeling of happiness as a result of their actions, knowing they have affected a positive change.

The globalization process consists of “the spread of products, technology, information, and jobs across national borders and cultures” [2]. It has allowed vast numbers of people around the world to share their political, cultural, economic and philosophical views with each other. Through globalization the worldviews of individuals are expanded, as they are now able, via the products they buy in stores or the smartphones, they hold in their hands to imagine people in far distant places. They can think of them, consider their problems, experience joy in relation to their

achievements, and feel pain when reflecting on their sufferings. The process of globalization “has enabled unprecedented levels of prosperity in advanced countries and has been a boon to hundreds of millions of poor workers...” [12, p. XVI]. It has also created awareness in many people in the developed world of the existence of the suffering experienced by the poor populations in underdeveloped countries. This knowledge, in turn, has introduced a responsibility for the plight of the needy to those in a position to help. It is no longer possible to plead ignorance as an excuse for deafening one’s ears to suffering.

In reflection of this, technology emphasizes Singer’s “duty to give”, which says, “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it”[10]. Thanks to one’s handy smartphone and a stable Internet connection, an individual can use their power (a bank account supported by a regular paycheck) to prevent something bad from happening (starvation or disease, for example) without sacrificing anything of moral importance (such as a job, which would most likely be lost if one were to take extended leave to go on aid-work in less-developed countries). Every person (if they so desire) can interact with the globalization process and enjoy the benefits of internationally available entertainment and education. They can also make this action profoundly meaningful by learning of the plight of the suffering and finding ways to help them.

To illustrate his point of the individual’s responsibility to those in far-distant places, Singer famously provided his followers with the analogy of a drowning child. When a person sees a child who is drowning, he is morally obliged to help the child. Even if he is wearing expensive leather shoes, he should risk ruining or losing those accessories to save the person in need (the child). Similarly, when the ordinary person sees someone suffering, they are likewise obliged to help. Their knowledge of the event introduces a responsibility to help (again, the duty). Singer believes those who are materially in a position to help the less well-off are morally obliged to do so, regardless of distance because it remains the morally right thing to do [13, p. 231]. The analogy of the drowning child can be easily transferred to the modern, globalized

world simply because of technology. With the smartphone, computer or television one may view news reports on drowning children (for example) and be able to instantly donate sums of money that can come to relieve their suffering, and even mitigate future drowning via the construction of better infrastructure.

Singer's ethics are based on the idea of duty. Henry Sidgwick advised decision-making from reason, and Singer's reason for helping is rooted in our ability to understand duty. In his ethics, he instructs that we, those who are well off, have the duty to unite together and end poverty in the world. It is not heroism on the part of the person, it is their duty. Mankind has "the duty to do the most good possible", and this duty is all the more important when one is in a position to help materially [14, p. 28]. Therefore, when we consume goods that are not necessary to us, our development, or our work, we are in a sense depriving the poor from something they could receive from us. When we use luxuries, we should consider what is more important than human life. Is a new Mercedes-Benz with custom-designed leather seats worth more than the happiness of children in an under-developed country? For the cost of a coach purse, one could give those same children the opportunity to attend school, eat a nutritious meal or wear clothing that protects them from the elements. This may be directly connected to the pond metaphor by saving one's shoes, one would deny the drowning child their life. And is a pair of shoes really worth the life of a child?

For Singer the globalized nature of the world means that distance does negate duty. Once somebody's awareness has been drawn to the problem, their innocence of the problem is void. They are now knowledgeable of the issue and obliged to help, as the world's development into a "globalized village" and the images on the television place those in need within the immediate vicinity [13, p. 229-243]. In life, each person has the option to cause harm or offer help. It is possible, by doing nothing and continuously consuming commercial goods, to harm those in distant lands. Those whose lives are run by exploitive corporations which pollute and destroy their lands. Alternatively, the privileged can offer help. In this way, the world community is brought closer together. Each person has a responsibility for their brothers and sisters.

Fulfilling the responsibility promotes happiness, and one might envisage the “greatest happiness possible” idea of Mill as being fulfilled one person at a time, as practitioners of *Effective altruism* work together to make an impact.

Peter Singer’s proposed method of ending world hunger is one that looks to his followers. He does not call upon states to assist but believes that people must act on their own. Each individual knows their personal circumstances and abilities. It is up for them to determine how they can affect the most positive change. In terms of help, Singer’s initial ideas are rooted in utilitarianism. He recommends doing the most good for those in need by resigning from anything that can be considered luxurious. However, his radicalness is tempered by his emphasis that this is not a requirement, as it could be a lifestyle too demanding for the ordinary person [16, s. 59]. The ordinary person is instead given the suggestion to alleviate poverty in a more realizable way.

For those who are financially able to, Singer proposes a system of self-taxation. This freely chosen method of altruism is livable, achievable, and not as demanding as his *prima facie* ideas of giving away anything unnecessary. To act in accord with this system, Singer recommends a form of tithing, offering an estimated 10% of individual income to the task of eliminating extreme poverty [15, p. 150]. By people contributing their 10%, a kind of community of altruistic donors is achieved. In this way, the well-off and affluent can together end hunger. This method has propelled the *Effective altruism* movement, which believes that the work of helping the poor should not be merely a gesture. It should also be effective, which means it should bring about the most good possible.

Utilitarianism is a starting point for altruistic actions, but as a school of thought, it requires additional development to be used as an instrument in achieving the greatest amount of good for all people. The psychological hedonism introduced by Jeremy Bentham instituted the idea of man being bound to pain and pleasure. John Stuart Mill gave man a purpose, something to pursue. The principle of “the greatest happiness” served as a compass for the individual’s navigating a world separated by pain and pleasure. Henry Sidgwick further added man’s rationality to the equation –

acknowledging that pain and pleasure constrain actions but proposing that man's rationality allows him to make decisions in pursuit of what is right, what is possible in a person's life, and what he ought to do.

All these historical developments affected and formed utilitarianism. In the 21st century advances, such as those, made by the *Effective altruism* school, have served to make utilitarianism something that works to alleviate critical problems around the world. *Effective altruism's* realization of utilitarian premises can be an example to other philosophies that wish to transfer their reflections into practical usage. *Effective altruism's* example serves as an answer to the research question posed at the beginning of this article – how to live a philosophy in such a way as to promote achieving the community's happiness? The answer is the philosophy must be a part of one's life, not an addition. *Effective altruism* works using what is available and requires nothing extra. It allows the individual and their available resources to affect the most good and bring the most happiness to the world community. It does not seek problems where there are none, but tries to solve the most pressing, existing quandaries (according to its methodology) that require an answer. In this way, philosophy enables the individual to come closer to achieving the utilitarian goal of bringing the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people.

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