



Is Hume a “Classical Utilitarian”?

Ronald J. Glossop

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I

The central notion of utilitarianism is that a right kind of action or a virtuous quality of character is one which in the long run promotes the welfare of society or, as it is frequently stated, which promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But when we try to use the utilitarian concept as a guide for evaluating various possible ultimate distributions of goods among the members of a society, we find there are alternative ways of making this goal more precise.¹ I intend to review briefly five different ways in which the utilitarian goal can be stated more precisely. Then I will consider which one of these more precise formulations most accurately reflects what Hume seems to have had in mind when he spoke of "public utility"² or "the good of mankind"³ or "the true interests of mankind" (ICPM, p. 13) or "public interest and utility" (ICPM, p. 34).

II

The most effective way of illustrating the vagueness of such phrases as "the welfare of society" or "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is to consider which of various specific but simple distributions of goods would be preferred by a utilitarian. This technique also is helpful in displaying the differences among the various ways of stating the utilitarian goal in more precise terms. Let us suppose that there are units of "goodness" or "welfare" all

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of which are equal to each other. These units of "goodness" or "welfare" can be taken from one individual and given to another. Furthermore, the number of such units is not fixed, nor is the number of individuals among whom the units of value will be distributed. The distribution of goods among individuals is to be considered in a completely abstract way so that no individuals are to be more deserving than any others. In fact, from a utilitarian point of view, various actions and qualities of character are to be evaluated in terms of whether in the long run they hinder or promote the ideal distribution of goods being considered.

To illustrate this technique, let us examine two conceivable distributions of goods.

Individual	Scheme I	Scheme II
A	5	10
B	5	3
C	5	3

In Scheme I there are fifteen units of goodness divided evenly among the three individuals A, B, and C. In Scheme II there are sixteen units of goodness distributed in such a way that A has twice as many units as he had in Scheme I while B and C have only three units each. Given that the utilitarian wants to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number, which Scheme would he choose to promote, Scheme I or Scheme II?⁴

One variety of utilitarianism, the first of five to be distinguished, opts for Scheme II on grounds that the total number of units of welfare is greater (16 to only 15 for Scheme I). The emphasis here is on the first half of the utilitarian formula of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number"; the aim is to increase the total amount of happiness. This view is usually called "classical utilitarianism" on grounds that it supposedly was the view championed by the classical utilitarians (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Adam Smith, Bentham, J. S. Mill, and Sidgwick).⁵

A second variety of utilitarianism would opt for Scheme

I in the comparison given above on grounds that two individuals (B and C) would be better off with Scheme I while only one individual (A) would be better off with Scheme II. The emphasis here is on the second half of the utilitarian formula; the aim is to increase the number of individuals who are better off. This view can be called "self-interest-vote utilitarianism" on grounds that the preferred scheme is the one which gets the most votes when each person votes in terms of his own self-interest.⁶ (Note that this interpretation of utilitarianism can be used only when the Schemes being compared have the same number of persons sharing the goods.)

A third variety of utilitarianism is that which declares the goal to be maximizing the average units of welfare available per person. As long as the number of persons sharing the units of goodness remains the same, there will be no difference between classical utilitarianism and this "average utilitarianism" because increasing the total units of welfare will also increase the average per person. But suppose we compare Scheme III (three individuals each have six units of welfare) with Scheme IV (two individuals each have seven units of welfare). The classical utilitarian would prefer Scheme III (18 units of welfare to only 14 in Scheme IV) while the average utilitarian would prefer Scheme IV (7 units per person to only 6 units per person in Scheme III).

A fourth interpretation of utilitarianism is that the welfare of society is promoted when "each man stands to gain" (TJ, p. 33). This interpretation is similar to "self-interest-vote utilitarianism," the second variety discussed. It is more demanding, however. It says that one distribution of goods is to be preferred to another only when every single person is at least as well off. In the language used by those concerned with distributive justice, one distribution of goods is preferable to a second if and only if the first is a "Pareto improvement" on the second (DJ, p. 13). The difficulty with this fourth interpretation of utilitarianism is that with many comparisons it furnishes no guidance. For example, it is useless as a criterion when we must eva-

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luate "trade-offs" where the lot of some persons is improved by virtue of taking some welfare away from others. It should also be noted that if a Scheme were preferable on the basis that every person would be better off, it would necessarily also be preferable on the basis of all three of the more precise formulations of the utilitarian goal discussed above.

A fifth variety of utilitarianism recognizes that the utilitarian principle incorporates a demand for a degree of equality among individuals as well as a demand to maximize the units of welfare (individually or collectively). According to this view one cannot separate the two parts of the formula "the greatest happiness" and "for the greatest number." Some technique is required which "meshes" (DJ, p. 38) the demand for equality among individuals with the demand to maximize welfare.

To illustrate the significance of this fifth variety of utilitarianism, let us consider the following Schemes:

Individual	Scheme V	Scheme VI	Scheme VII
A	20	8	7
B	10	8	7
C	2	7	6
D	2	5	5
E	1	2	5

Which of these Schemes best exemplifies the utilitarian goal of the greatest happiness of the greatest number? "Classical utilitarianism" opts for Scheme V because the total units of welfare is 35 as compared to 30 for Schemes VI and VII. The "self-interest-vote" utilitarian would opt for Scheme VI because it would win over Scheme V (C,D, and E are better off with VI) and also over Scheme VII (A,B, and C are better off with VI). The "average utilitarian" would opt for Scheme V because the average units of welfare per person is 7 as compared to 6 for Schemes VI and VII. The "each-person-must-gain" variety of utilitarian is unable to decide which is preferable among these three Schemes since there is no Scheme where everyone is better off. Yet intuitively it seems that Scheme VII embodies the greatest happiness of

the greatest number better than either Scheme V or Scheme VI. Even though Scheme V has a greater total welfare and a greater average welfare, individuals C, D, and E have been largely left out of the distribution of goods. In Scheme VI individual E has been slighted, but in Scheme VII everyone seems to be getting a good share. Shouldn't there be a more precise interpretation of the utilitarian goal which advocates the selection of Scheme VII?

There are two proposals worthy of mention concerning how to "mesh" the demand for equality with the demand to maximize welfare though neither of the authors of these two proposals views himself as working within the utilitarian tradition. In fact Nicholas Rescher views his principle of maximizing the effective average of the distribution as an alternative to utilitarianism (TJ, 31-38). (It is certainly an alternative to the four previously discussed ways of making the utilitarian goal more precise but whether it is therefore a non-utilitarian view is a matter of dispute.⁷)

The "effective average" is a statistical notion which consists of determining the mean (average) of a distribution and then subtracting one-half of the standard deviation. (The standard deviation is a measure of the spread of a distribution; it is computed by taking the square root of the sum of the squares of the deviations from the mean after that sum has been divided by the number of individuals participating in the distribution.) The effective average of a distribution can be increased in two ways: (1) by increasing the average units of welfare per person, and (2) by distributing the units of welfare in such a way that the number of units for any individual is near the mean or average, that is, by avoiding extremes in the quantity of welfare for any individual. In Schemes V, VI, and VII above, Scheme VII has the highest effective average (5.55) while the effective average for Scheme V is only 3.38, and for Scheme VI it is 4.86.⁸

In his article "Utilities for Distributive Justice"⁹ Geoffrey Ross advances an alternative mathematical

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computation for solving the problem of

meshing the demand for equality and the demand for maximizing welfare. (Ross does not deal with the issue of the relation between his proposal and the meaning of "utilitarianism".) He calls his approach the "welfare-measure" method. It consists of arranging the individuals in order starting with those who have the most units of welfare and proceeding to those who have the fewest. One computes the mean of the distribution. He then computes the mean for succeeding distributions as the top individual is deleted each time. He then totals these calculated means and divides by the number of persons in the original distribution. The resulting figure is the per capita welfare measure. The larger it is, the better is that distribution of goods. The per capita welfare measure for Scheme VII above is 5.416. For Scheme V it is only 2.984, and for Scheme VI it is 4.334.¹⁰

It will be noted that the mathematical computations of Rescher and Ross both result in ranking the desirability of the three schemes just as we would on the basis of intuitive judgments. Ross gives a persuasive argument for the superiority of his approach to that of Rescher (pp. 250-51), but that issue lies beyond the scope of our concerns here. Our interest is merely in noting that efforts are being made to find precise ways of indicating how the demands for equality and for maximization of welfare can be "meshed" in a way that corresponds to our intuitive judgments about the most desirable abstract distribution of goods. Thus, techniques are being developed to show how a fifth variety of utilitarianism can be formulated which will indicate in a precise way how to mesh the double demand implicit in the notion of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

III

Having considered these five ways of understanding the

utilitarian goal of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," we can now turn our attention to the problem of what version of the utilitarian goal was espoused by Hume. This problem is a difficult one because Hume did not explicitly deal with these distinctions. It is a problem of current interest because in the widely read A Theory of Justice John Rawls at one point says that "the kind of utilitarianism espoused by Hume... is not strictly speaking utilitarian" (p. 32) while at the same time his discussion of classical utilitarianism (pp. 183-92) relies more heavily on Hume than on any other thinker. Furthermore, his view that Hume's ideal sympathetic spectator approach leads naturally to classical utilitarianism is open to question.

Let us consider first Rawls's comment that Hume is not a utilitarian in a strict sense. At this point in his discussion (TJ, pp. 32-33) Rawls is dealing with Hume's argument against Locke's contract theory of the origin of government and political obligation. Rawls correctly notes that Hume is arguing that every single person will be better off in the long run if government is instituted. In other words, in this argument Hume is appealing to the fourth interpretation of the utilitarian goal mentioned above. That view of the utilitarian standard of evaluation is indeed different from the standard of "classical utilitarianism." When Rawls says that Hume is not strictly speaking a utilitarian with regard to this argument concerning the institution of government, he is simply noting that this argument does not require the classical utilitarian understanding of the utilitarian goal. But the fact that Hume appeals only to the fourth interpretation of the utilitarian goal in this one argument does not preclude his suggesting the correctness of some other more precise interpretation on other occasions.

Rawls apparently agrees with this last sentence since he relies heavily on Hume in his discussion of classical utilitarianism. He does so because he believes that classical utilitarianism "is closely related to the concept of the impartial sympathetic spectator," (TJ, 184) a concept

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which is central in the moral and political philosophy of Hume.

...[T]here is a natural derivation of the classical principle of utility along the following lines. An institution is right, let us say, if an ideally sympathetic and impartial spectator would approve of it more strongly than any other institution feasible in the circumstances. For simplicity we may assume, as Hume does, that approval is a special kind of pleasure which arises more or less intensely in contemplating the workings of institutions and their consequences for the happiness of those engaged in them. This special pleasure is the result of sympathy. In Hume's account it is quite literally a reproduction in our experience of the satisfactions and pleasures which we recognize to be felt by others. Thus an impartial spectator experiences this pleasure in contemplating the social system in proportion to the net sum of pleasure felt by those affected by it. (TJ, pp. 185-86)

A rational and impartial sympathetic spectator is a person who takes up a general perspective.... So situated he is equally responsive and sympathetic to the desires and satisfactions of everyone affected by the social system.... Thus he imagines himself in the place of each person in turn, and when he has done this for everyone, the strength of his approval is determined by the balance of satisfactions to which he has sympathetically responded. (TJ, p. 186)

It seems to me that in these passages Rawls has given us a fairly good summary of the basic structure of Hume's moral and political philosophy.¹¹ It is only the last sentence in each of the paragraphs cited above which raise crucial questions. Rawls conclude that the approbation of Hume's impartial spectator would be dependent on "the net sum of pleasure" and thus that the aim should be the maximization of pleasure regardless of how many people are sharing this pleasure. That is, Rawls concludes that the spectator would be an advocate of classical utilitarianism rather than average utilitarianism.

This conclusion depends on assuming that the spectator represents some kind of single mind of the social organism (see TJ, p. 23) and that he will be sympathizing directly with pleasures (and pains) rather than with persons

who are experiencing pleasures and pains. But for Hume sympathy depends on the total complex of the feelings of various individuals rather than on sensations taken separately as if they might just as well occur in one mind as another. Hume notes, for example, that contempt from strangers who are near plus that of relatives who are far away does not affect us as much as when the contempt is present in a person who combines the features of being near to us and related to us (THN, p. 323), a fact which is explicable only if we sympathize with persons rather than sensations taken independently. Hume's whole outlook when he deals with ethical issues focuses on the durable aspects of character rather than on separate actions or sensations. For example, he argues that we take note of individual actions only to the extent that they indicate some durable quality of character (THN, p. 411, p. 575, and p. 584). It would seem that Hume's sympathetic spectator would empathize with each person's total experience rather than with individual pleasures and pains taken separately. A small pain experienced by a person who is generally happy would not have the same quality for a sympathetic spectator as the same small pain experienced by a person who was already miserable. Consequently, I find it difficult to believe that Hume would adopt the view that Rawls ascribes to him, namely classical utilitarianism. If a sympathetic spectator were presented with one situation where there was a low level of happiness among a very large number of people and another where there was a high level of happiness among a much smaller number of people, I believe the spectator would be more pleased by the second situation because he sympathizes with the people and not with the separate pleasures and pains. In other words, it seems more plausible to conclude that Hume's sympathetic spectator view with its emphasis on empathizing with persons as individuals would lead to average utilitarianism than to conclude that Hume is a classical utilitarian (as that term has been used by Rawls and others).¹²

Thus, if forced to choose between interpreting Hume as a classical utilitarian or as an average utilitarian, the latter seems more plausible. But the same considerations concerning the sympathizing spectator's tendency to empathize with persons rather than with separate sensations which led us to doubt the correctness of interpreting Hume's view as classical utilitarianism should also lead us to question the propriety of interpreting him as an average utilitarian. As we noted above, the quality of a small pain depends on the general situation of the person who feels it. Also the same pleasure may greatly enhance the happiness of a person whose life is generally unhappy but be of little significance to a person whose life is full of joy and happiness. There is a principle of diminishing returns which applies not only to material goods (a second bicycle for a child does not produce nearly the satisfaction as the first one does) but also to immaterial goods (such as security, liberty, and so on) and even to pleasures and pains. As Hume himself notes:

... [W]herever we depart from this equality we rob the poor of more satisfaction than we add to the rich, and ... the slight gratification of a frivolous vanity in one individual frequently costs more than bread to many families, and even provinces. [ICPM, pp. 24-25]¹³

Consequently, it seems that Hume's sympathetic spectator will be concerned not only about the average number of goods per person in a society but also about the manner in which they are distributed. The spectator will be averse to adding units of welfare to those who already have a great deal rather than to those who have less because his sympathetic pleasure would be increased more by the latter distribution. At the same time the spectator's pleasure will also be increased to some extent by the addition of more units of welfare anywhere in the system. In fact, the spectator is confronted by the very kind of "meshing" problem we considered when discussing the fifth view on how to make the goal of utilitarianism more precise. Hume's impartial sympathetic spectator undoubtedly would approve of

Scheme VII rather Schemes V or VI (see page). Once we realize that the impartial spectator sympathizes with persons rather than separate sensations of pleasure and pain, we can see the inappropriateness of viewing Hume as either a classical or an average utilitarian. Hume also would not favor the "self-interest-vote" type of utilitarianism since it takes no account of the degrees of happiness or misery felt by the various individuals.¹⁴ On the other hand, the kind of utilitarianism which views the goal as meshing the desire to increase the quantity of welfare and the desire to promote equality in the distribution of the goods available seems to capture the view which would appeal most to a sympathetic spectator.

The effort to work out a mathematical formulation of the kind of meshing which corresponds to our intuitions of what is a desirable distribution of goods continues. Whether Rescher's notion of the effective average or Ross's notion of the per capita welfare measure or some other method is the best answer is yet to be determined. But whatever mathematical computation is proposed for accomplishing this meshing, the ultimate standard for validating the mathematical calculation is our own intuitions of the desirability of one Scheme of distributions as compared to another. As we view these abstract Schemes and try to feel ourselves into the places of the individuals in the Schemes, we are in fact playing the role of Hume's impartial sympathetic spectator.¹⁵ It is no accident then that any mathematical computation which corresponds with our intuitions will constitute the further fleshing out of Hume's theory of the foundations of moral and political philosophy.

Is it appropriate to classify this "meshing" view of the goal as a utilitarian view? To me it seems perfectly appropriate. We have just noted how it develops naturally out of the ideal sympathetic spectator approach which is fundamental in the views of such utilitarians as Hume and Adam Smith. To conceive of the ultimate goal as "meshing" considerations of maximum welfare and equality in no way

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detracts from the basically teleological pattern of thinking which evaluates kinds of actions and qualities of character in terms of their tendency to promote this ultimate goal. The ultimate utilitarian goal of "the welfare of society" or "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" has frequently been stated in vague terms. As we seek to make its meaning more precise, why not go back to the origins of utilitarianism in the ideal sympathetic spectator theory of Hume? Then it becomes apparent that the "meshing" view of the utilitarian goal merely carries out the implicit directions of the ideal sympathetic spectator theory which forms the cornerstone of Hume's moral and political philosophy.

Ronald J. Glossop,
Southern Illinois University

1. See, for example, Nicholas Rescher's Distributive Justice (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) (hereafter referred to as "DJ"), pp. 8-11 and 25-44.
2. An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, edited by Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957) (hereafter referred to as "ICPM"), p. 14.
3. A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1888) (hereafter referred to as "THN"), p. 580.
4. This technique of comparing Schemes is an oversimplified version of most actual situations not only by virtue of the small numbers of persons and the notion that there are units of goodness which can be known to be equal but also by the absence of negative units of goodness representing badness, e.g. pain. Still the technique is valuable for sorting out various meanings of utilitarianism.
5. See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) (hereafter referred to as "TJ"), pp. 22-24.
6. Rescher discusses this view on pp. 32-34 of DJ, but his point would have been clearer if he had always listed the units of goodness in descending order so that the most units of goodness in each Scheme go to Individual A, the next most to Individual B, and so on. See my review of Distributive Justice (Journal of Philosophy, LXVI (1961), 213-21), pp. 215-16.
7. See my review cited in the previous footnote, pp. 216-17.
8. See the appendix for detailed calculation of the effective average for these three Schemes.
9. Theory and Decision, IV (1974), 239-58.
10. See the appendix for detailed calculation for the per capita welfare measure for each of these three Schemes.
11. See my "The Nature of Hume's Ethics", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, XXVLL (1967), 527-36, reprinted in J. H. Gill's Philosophy Today #3 (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 197-211.

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12. Rawls admits that average utilitarianism is a more plausible view than classical utilitarianism; but since he assumes that the sympathetic spectator must empathize with separate sensations rather than with persons, he concludes that average utilitarianism represents a break from the Humean impartial spectator tradition (TJ, pp. 161-62). This assumption seems to be the result of another assumption that Rawls makes, namely that questions of how goods are going to be distributed must fall under the concept of right rather than under the concept of good (TJ, p. 25). But I do not understand why a certain pattern of distribution of goods cannot be part of one's ultimate goal nor why the impartial spectator must concentrate on being impersonal rather than on being impartial (see TJ, pp. 27 and 190).
13. This principle of diminishing returns is spelled out at greater length by Richard Brandt, Ethical Theory (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 415-19.
14. On the basis of self-interest-vote utilitarianism a five-person distribution of 20, 18, 16, 2, and 1 would be preferable to one of 19, 17, 15, 14, and 14 because the first three individuals would vote for the first distribution while intuitively the second distribution seems much more desirable.
15. It could be argued that even Rawl's original choosers would prefer a strategy of meshing equality and the maximization of welfare to the maximin strategy he suggests they would adopt. The basic thrust for this argument is already present in Rescher, DJ, p. 38.

Computation of the Effective Average of Schemes V, VI, and VII

Scheme V.

Ind.	Units	dev.	dev. ²
A	20	+13	169
B	10	+3	9
C	2	-5	25
D	2	-5	25
E	1	-6	36
Total	35		264

Mean = $35 \div 5 = 7.00$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{\sum d^2}{n}}$$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{264}{4}} = 7.23$$

$$EA = M - \frac{1}{2}SD$$

$$EA = 7.00 - 3.62 = \underline{\underline{3.38}}$$

Scheme VI.

Ind.	Units	dev.	dev. ²
A	8	+2	4
B	8	+2	4
C	7	+1	1
D	5	-1	1
E	2	-4	16
Total	30		26

Mean = $30 \div 5 = 6.00$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{\sum d^2}{n}}$$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{26}{5}} = 2.28$$

$$EA = M - \frac{1}{2}SD$$

$$EA = 6.00 - 1.14 = \underline{\underline{4.86}}$$

Scheme VII.

Ind.	Units	dev.	dev. ²
A	7	+1	1
B	7	+1	1
C	6	0	0
D	5	-1	1
E	5	-1	1
Total	30		4

Mean = $30 \div 5 = 6.00$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{\sum d^2}{n}}$$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{4}{5}} = .89$$

$$EA = M - \frac{1}{2}SD$$

$$EA = 6.00 - .45 = \underline{\underline{5.55}}$$

APPENDIX (Cont.)

Computation of the Per Capita Welfare Measure of Schemes V, VI, and VII

Scheme V.

<u>Ind.</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Mean Calculation</u>	
A	20	7.00	(For each individual we average his score with all others who are below him in the distribution. For example, for individual C we take the average of 2, 2, and 1 which is $5 \div 3 = 1.67$.)
B	10	3.75	
C	2	1.67	
D	2	1.50	
E	1	1.00	
Total Welfare Measure		<u>14.92</u>	
Per Capita W.M. = $14.92 \div 5 =$		<u><u>2.984</u></u>	

Scheme VI.

<u>Ind.</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Mean Calculation</u>	
A	8	6.00	(For example, for individual B we take the average of 8, 7, 5, and 2 which is $22 \div 4 = 5.50$.)
B	8	5.50	
C	7	4.67	
D	5	3.50	
E	2	2.00	
Total Welfare Measure		<u>21.67</u>	
Per Capita W.M. = $21.67 \div 5 =$		<u><u>4.334</u></u>	

Scheme VII.

<u>Ind.</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Mean Calculation</u>	
A	7	6.00	(For example, for individual A we take the average of 7, 7, 6, 5 and 5 which is $30 \div 5 = 6.00$.)
B	7	5.75	
C	6	5.33	
D	5	5.00	
E	5	5.00	
Total Welfare Measure		<u>27.08</u>	
Per Capita W.M. = $27.08 \div 5 =$		<u><u>5.416</u></u>	