**The Emergence of Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism is a 19th century ethical theory, most often attributed to Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick, who adopted the principle that right actions are those that produce the greatest total pleasure for everyone affected by their consequences, and wrong actions are those that do not.

Bentham was motivated by the desire to establish a universal theory which could be applied to all ethical situations, and his influence on 19th century society and beyond was considerable, as he sought a theory of ethics which would iron out the deep inequalities of his time. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, ‘ideal utilitarians’ such as G.E. Moore agreed in principle with the philosophy of 19th century utilitarians, but held that some things other than pleasurable experiences were intrinsically good.

Eighteenth –century England was experiencing radical social changes that were largely influenced by the Industrial Revolution which had brought thousands of working families to the towns from the country. However, rather than finding the streets paved with gold, they faced appalling working and living conditions, and discovered that they had exchanged the rural tyranny of landowners for the urban oppression of factory owners. Homelessness, poverty, overcrowding, alcoholism, child labour, slums prisons and prostitution abounded, while the minority of wealthy industrialists and entrepreneurs enjoyed the fruits of their employees’ labours. The concern for the majority, which classical act utilitarianism encouraged, met the needs of the working classes, and the philanthropic and social reforms that gradually began to take place reflected this: Elizabeth Fry’s prison reform and the Factory Acts are prime examples.

Jeremy Bentham was influenced by ideas springing from the ‘Enlightenment Period’ and by scientific ideas, he placed importance on observation and experience to understand humans. He claimed his two observations and use of his reason – humans are under the ‘governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure’.

Bentham called himself a non-theist. He rejected the term atheist, as he thought it was impossible for any human being to know whether God exists or not. As a non-theist Bentham rejected morality based on divine authority. He believed that there is one single basis for ethics and that is nature. Nature replaces God as the sole higher authority to which human beings must turn in order to understand themselves, the world and moral life. Bentham, however, never attempted to explain what he meant by nature. He assumed that no explanation was required. Bentham developed from this view the idea that morality is the maximization of pleasure in society. He wrote:

*Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.* (Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, W. Pickering, 1823)

Bentham believed that not only is humanity under these twin masters, but that every human should prefer pleasure to pain. Bentham gives no reason for this preference. He argues that is fundamental and needs no evidence. However, he does explain that pleasure and pain are not just physical sensations; they are also the psychological state that comes from feeling pain or pleasure.

Bentham maintained that human beings were motivated by pleasure and pain, and so he can be called a hedonist (hedone is Greek for ‘pleasure’). Bentham believed that all human beings pursued pleasure and sought to avoid pain. He saw this as a moral fact, as pleasure and pain identified what we should and shouldn’t do. As a hedonist, Bentham believed that pleasure was the sole good and pain the sole evil: hence Bentham’s utilitarianism is called hedonic utilitarianism.

**The Emergence of Utilitarianism Homework Questions**

Read the sheet ‘The emergence of Utilitarianism’ and answer these questions on lined paper. You may wish to do some additional research to help you understand the concept of utilitarianism.

1. Why was Jeremy Bentham motivated to establish a new ethical theory?
2. Why did Bentham call himself a ‘non-theist’?
3. What did Bentham mean by ‘two sovereign masters’?
4. Why can Bentham be called a hedonist?
5. How did utilitarianism meet the needs of the working classes?
6. What is meant by the ‘enlightenment period’?