

**We
need
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talk
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About the new eugenics. Third edition.

Angelina Souren

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Third edition
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by

ANGELINA SOUREN

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“There is only one success: to be able to live your life in your own way.”

– Christopher Morley

2. Utilitarian reasoning

The thought experiment in Chapter 1, about the country of which the annihilation supposedly would benefit everyone, hence justifying the country’s destruction, is an example of utilitarian reasoning.

Although the word “utilitarian” is often used as almost synonymous with “spartan” these days, that is not at all what I am referring to when I use the terms “utilitarian” and “utilitarianism”. Instead, I have a way of thinking, a philosophy, in mind, or more precisely, the way this philosophy is often applied in practice. The word “utility” within the context of utilitarianism stands for something close to “pleasure” or “usefulness”.

Utilitarianism was a school of thought that had a huge impact on 19th-century Britain, where it sprung up and blossomed. It still exercises a strong influence. Utilitarianism appears to go a long way toward explaining why we don’t accept ourselves and each other the way we are, and why we have so much inequality and bias in British society. Could it also have a lot to do with why Britain has this strange hierarchical class system that divides people into undeserving, lower types of people and entitled, higher types of humans?

The idea behind utilitarianism as a school of thought was that the right thing to do was that which produced the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. A simple example of what it can mean in practice would probably be that if you are stuck in an elevator for a long time, say, after an earthquake, it would be okay to start eating one of the people in the elevator as that person’s demise might ensure the survival of the others who are stuck on the elevator. Who would you be willing to kill and eat, and why would you pick that specific person?

Unfortunately, utilitarian reasoning makes it possible to define for yourself what “good” is and hence claim that you are justified to do something intrinsically bad (harmful to someone else) because it benefits you. It can include attaching a higher value to certain people to arrive at a greater amount of good that would be accomplished for them. You could probably say that what happened in Nazi Germany was an example of utilitarian reasoning. Nazi-style eugenics even bears some resemblance to specific ideas that the founders of utilitarianism entertained.

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I want to emphasize, however, that this discussion is not about what utilitarianism should be or how it was intended. It is about its actual application. You can use a fishing pole to catch fish and you can use it to grab someone else's bucket of fish. You might even be able to hit someone over the head with the heavy end of a fishing pole and then take that person's catch. It's not the fishing pole's fault. It can be used for good and it can be used for bad. Most people use it for good. The same holds for water. YouTube has plenty of videos showing people who give water to parched wildlife, but water is also part of a torture method used at Guantánamo Bay. It is not the water's fault.

When you start talking about guns, something shifts because it is harder to do any kind of good with a gun. Utilitarianism is somewhere in between. It is not an innocent kind of reasoning. It is not intrinsically neutral but intrinsically biased, just like a gun is intrinsically positively biased toward the person holding the gun. A gun represents power and so does utilitarian reasoning; they both seem to create as well as support a power imbalance.

This has allowed utilitarianism to result in callous excesses and the abandonment of morality or justice to make way for cold-hearted calculations. The idea of "what is the morally, ethically right thing to do" is sometimes sacrificed in favor of "what is the cheapest thing to do" or simply "what do I like best" in utilitarian reasoning.

I found out about utilitarianism after I relocated to Britain, and I often found myself shocked by the displays of callousness around me. I had never encountered anything like it before and I wondered where it came from.

I also saw a lot of unhappy people, more than I'd ever encountered elsewhere. One of the first clues as to what was going on came when I spotted a job advert in a window one day, for a store manager, listing a surprisingly low salary. As I was self-employed and working with clients in other countries, I had not caught on yet at that point that so many salaries in the U.K. were much lower than in my home country.

I spoke with one landlord who considered it not sad but a great inconvenience to himself that one of his tenants had tried to commit suicide. It made him angry. He considered such tenants bad tenants. This also went for tenants who called him if the heating or the washing machine provided by him was not working. On one occasion, he confided

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in me that he felt that people who aren't educated were objectionable to him. I was so shocked that I was unable to reply at the time. The same person also advises the courts in child custody cases. How on earth can he keep his personal bias out of the advice he offers the courts?

Maybe surprisingly, he is actually a good man. He is not a bad person at all, not at all. So how could a person like that say such horrible cruel things? Maybe Aldous Huxley answered that in *Brave New World*: "One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them."

Another landlord I talked with told me how he had tricked an older lady with beginning Alzheimer's disease out of her home and got her to move into a bigger flat, with more rooms than she was able to use. He also said to me about a new building he was constructing that it was "only for tenants, so it does not have to be very good".

Thankfully, there are still plenty of kind and compassionate people in Britain, in spite of that trend of unfettered greed at the expense of everything and everyone else. Appalled, I have watched all sorts of people make fun of and seemingly enjoy other people's hardships in Britain, though. Iain Duncan Smith (or "IDS") comes to mind as an example.

There seems to be a general lack of conscience and accountability in the country, certainly also on the side of the government and among politicians, particularly on the side of the Conservatives but also on the side of what used to be called UKIP but is called the Brexit Party at the time of writing (and Labour and the LibDems may not be as far behind as they think they are). Also in everyday life, there is an acceptance of callousness and of lying that I had not witnessed before. No, it does not compare at all to what Donald Trump has been doing, because when he lies, he actually believes that he is telling the truth. (He's not trying to fool you. He's trying to reassure himself.) It is not the kind of "lying" that comes from genuinely perceiving a different truth either (although that, too, occurs a lot among Conservatives, I must say, because they live in a bubble or, as one of their greatest local fans would call it, "they are blinkered").

Where did all of this come from, I wondered? I set out to understand. I started reading books about Britain's history. I sometimes asked people questions, such as why they were much more sociable than others around them. Victorianism (Puritanism) provided half of the answer to explain the mystery that the U.K. presented to me, but something was still missing. Eventually, I stumbled upon utilitarianism and saw that this was the missing information that I had been looking for.

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Two privileged white men drove utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who invented it and his disciple John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who carried it forward. They did not set out to harm anyone, but their experience of the world appears to have been very limited. (I'll come back to that.)

Bentham was ahead of his time, surely, in his endeavors to make homosexuality a private matter instead of a crime. Unfortunately, he apparently overlooked that the way he phrased his ideas might also clear the way for considering child sex abuse merely a private matter.

Mill pushed feminism because he noticed the extent to which society and its customs had held back his wife. It is interesting that he appears to have used the phrase "social disability" to describe that phenomenon. It is interesting because it hints at the notion that many "disabilities" are not problematic by themselves but because of hindrances that society inadvertently creates for people who do not match the traditional ideal of the wealthy white male Olympian sports hero.

Utilitarianism had a massive impact on British society because Bentham and Mill weren't academics tucked away behind desks in ivory towers. Bentham was a legal reformer and Mill was a civil servant and a national politician (Member of Parliament, or MP), a public figure. Notably many of Mill's general ideas were well known among the working class.

While utilitarianism isn't the overall encouragement of spartan conditions but the application of calculations in decision-making and policy development, Bentham certainly envisaged spartan conditions for specific groups of people.

Bentham proposed to round up the beggars because their visible presence decreased the happiness of the more fortunate, according to him. He wanted them in workhouses, in an order that, also according to him, would reduce unhappiness. He also wanted the deaf and dumb "next to raving lunatics, or persons of profligate conversation", aged women next to "prostitutes and loose women", and the blind next to the "shockingly deformed".

This is the opposite of accepting human diversity. This is a way of classifying humans, of declaring some humans as less worthy, as less valuable. This constitutes avoidance of anyone who is non-mainstream. This declares people who aren't the traditional sports hero type lesser

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beings. It also ignores and insults their intelligence.

Bentham could just as easily have reasoned that the sight of the wealthy, average-bodied and healthy caused the beggars, deaf and dumb and blind discomfort and hurt. He could have said that it was the others' duty to increase the happiness of those whose visible presence, he thought, was offensive. He could have decided that this meant that the well-to-do had to adopt a beggar in their household or that intellectuals had to take people who were less intelligent under their wing and that those with 20/20 vision should take a blind person by the arm. But he didn't.

Instead of looking to maximize happiness, he focused on reducing unhappiness in his own group of people. It reflected his own discomfort, the unease he must have felt when he saw people who were in very different circumstances. "Oh, my god, that could have been me, that beggar there on the corner. I don't want to be confronted with that. Off to the workhouse you go." We currently see this approach a lot in the U.K. Towns criminalize homelessness, while economic homelessness continues to skyrocket. Many people, also those in work, frequently find themselves faced with the choice "do I top up my prepaid electricity, do I buy food or do I set something aside for the rent while the electricity goes off and I have nothing to eat?" Homeless people are forcibly removed from underpasses and doorways. Poor families sometimes get relocated across distances of hundreds of kilometers, away from friends and family. New residential buildings sometimes have a door at the back to be used by their poor residents; flats for poor people are often included in buildings that predominantly house the rich because it can result in planning permission.

Bentham's disciple John Stuart Mill pushed utilitarianism further into inequality by distinguishing between lower and higher pleasures. Biological pleasures, such as the pleasure derived from enjoying a sheer necessity – food – or from enjoying sex were lower pleasures, in his view. Mill considered reading Shakespeare a higher pleasure. You could just as easily declare food a higher pleasure, however, as Shakespeare and chess are no good and not enjoyable to anyone who has not eaten any food in a long time.

Yet even today, many still consider it better to read Shakespeare or play chess than to watch Grey's Anatomy, play football or enjoy the Simpsons, even though in practice, most people like the Simpsons more and therefore derive more pleasure from it, as political philosopher Michael Sandel has often pointed out in his classes at Harvard Law

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School and in his books. Can't we just say that they're both equally valuable and be done with it? There is nothing wrong with playing chess and there is nothing wrong with playing football.

If you use utilitarian reasoning, you can also see a string necklace of genuine pearls as more useful to a rich socialite than to the average Goth, even though the Goth might sell the necklace and get a year's worth of food out of it as the Goth's pleasure would rank lower than the socialite's pleasure because the Goth's pleasure would be seen as a lower pleasure. It might even justify stealing the pearls from the Goth to give them to the socialite.

Does all of this also help explain why some people perceive humans with lower IQs as less valuable? Bioethicist Julian Savulescu has argued that people with average IQs lack the ability to enjoy intellectual activities and that by "enhancing" the human race so that these so-called higher pleasures would become available to everyone, we would do ourselves a favor and increase our collective joy. But who determines what the greater joy is? Just like beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is pleasure.

Having a high IQ provides no protection against poverty or illness, or even against car accidents or child abuse, and a high IQ does not guarantee financial success either. "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" was the heading for an article in MIT's Technology Review in November 2019. Financial success or success in business is mostly due to chance, it turns out.

By the way, France had briefly seen something similar to utilitarianism before Bentham came along. It was proposed by Claude-Adrien Helvétius in the 18th century. In the country that now has "brotherhood, equality and freedom" as its national motto, these ideas were condemned so strongly – partly even banned – that they soon disappeared again.

The division in higher and lower pleasures was mainly Mill's response to criticisms on Bentham's utilitarianism. In Britain, many saw Bentham's utilitarianism as a doctrine for swine (the mere chasing of pleasures), to which Mill retorted that it was better to have an unhappy human than a happy pig, and so he came up with the division into lower and higher pleasures. Obviously, he saw no point in trying to make a pig happy as that would only result in "lower" pleasures, according to him.

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Isn't this also what we saw in Britain when its Tory governments imposed austerity measure after austerity measure primarily on those who would be hardest hit by these measures, not caring how many lives were lost as a result, even laughing about it out loud when suicides were mentioned in Parliament? (Tories are Conservatives on the far right, with extreme, feudal views.) Isn't that also utilitarian reasoning when many U.K. politicians consider it desirable to have millions and millions of Brits – including children and chronically ill people – live in extended deep poverty and consider it fine to lie to the British public about anything as long as it will get them (re)elected? Austerity became an even crazier story when it turned out that the U.K. government had hundreds of billions available to spend on everything to do with Brexit, even when it was not sure yet whether Brexit would go ahead.

The 19th century heavily stamped its mark on Britain and many people in Britain still hanker after those days. Many have also said this within the context of Brexit, as surprising as it may sound. We're well into the 21st century and no other country appears to display this kind of hang-up, although you sometimes see something similar among certain extremists who still yearn for the Ottoman Empire of the past. At the same time, there is also a rebellion in British society against many of those 19th-century values, sometimes also leading to excesses.

Of John Stuart Mill, we know that he looked down on the British working class. He considered them nothing but liars.

Mill put great emphasis on intellectual pleasures. How could he not? He was home-schooled and his father started him on reading classical Greek at age 3. He began learning Latin soon after and read Homer in the original Latin at age 7 or thereabouts. I think it is fair to say that Mill's views on life were probably somewhat distorted. Wouldn't he in fact have declared a large part of his own life a failure or a life of cultural poverty if he had openly placed at least as much value on other types of pleasure than the ones he had indulged in?

His mentor Bentham went to Oxford University at age 12, where he studied law. As he was well to do, he did not need a job and was free to pursue his own pleasures. He was one of the founders of what later became University College London. He also founded a utilitarian newspaper called the Westminister Review. I think that we can surely also say of Bentham that he wrote from the exclusive perspective of a privileged man. As he never required any form of employment, he can't have experienced what it is like to be without a limitless supply of safety and security or to be in desperate need of food and shelter.

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In spite of that, Bentham did feel that the principle of right and wrong was often no more than an expression of personal likes and dislikes. Legislation should, therefore, be based on calculations and on maximizing happiness, he said. However, in utilitarianism, happiness is not defined by the person experiencing happiness or unhappiness, but by the person who has the upper hand.

Bentham wasn't a strong believer in individual rights, even though he felt that everyone should at least have the right to be protected from physical harm. Keep this in mind, for example, for when you get to the Ford Pinto example.

Bentham seemed to believe that violations of rights were linked to people's abilities, in the sense that less "able" people would not notice certain things done to them or happening around them, making the offenses less serious or maybe even permissible in those cases. It is important to note this. Is it acceptable for a shopkeeper to shortchange someone with an IQ of 85 and, for instance, sell him or her a phone that won't work or to give a blind person a torn and dirty dress because that person might not notice it?

(This is why we now have universally declared human rights. They were put in place after the atrocities that happened in Nazi Germany when many people were declared undesirable and disposable merely because they were not the blond, blue-eyed sports hero type. Britain was one of the architects of these universally declared human rights, even though the Tories have been ridiculing them as an evil EU invention that forces Britain to let terrorists into the country and provide prisoners with their daily dose of pornography.)

While Mill was not keen on the British working class, he wasn't very fond of the British in general either. He considered them "parochial" and took pride in being able to read and communicate in French. Mill first visited France at the age of 14 and reported that he enjoyed the "free and genial atmosphere of Continental life" very much. What would have happened to that if France had not rejected the ideas of Helvétius? Mill also noticed that the French didn't suppress their feelings, whereas 19th-century Britons did. Both Mill and his father didn't know what to do with emotions. Again, is it any wonder that the younger Mill placed so much emphasis on intellectual pleasures?

What Mill had not foreseen, it seems, is that this suppression or

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dismissal of feelings combined with utilitarian calculations could result in an occasionally somewhat psychopathic application of utilitarianism, the sweeping aside of moral principles to make way for (financial) cost-benefit analyses. As I've already mentioned, the problem with the utilitarian approach is that it can too easily be twisted to suit one's personal aims.

Unintentionally, Bentham and Mill had created a theoretical instrument that allowed people to do harm and explain it away, more or less according to the following reasoning.

1. All my actions are allowed unless they cause harm (Mill in *On Liberty*).
2. If my actions cause harm, then a simple calculation usually suffices to justify my actions anyway (Bentham and Mill).
3. If my calculation doesn't seem to add up in my favor, then I can assign higher values to some effects of my actions relative to other effects, for example by declaring myself more important than someone else, and then I can still get away with doing harm because it allows me to claim that I still do more good than harm (Mill, in *Utilitarianism*). It's a matter of weighting the accomplished pleasure, gains or happiness in order to be able to dismiss someone else's discomfort, loss or pain.

Thus, utilitarianism fosters inequality.

By the way, I sometimes wonder if utilitarianism also resulted in the view that seems to be held in some circles that a person is naive or unsophisticated if he or she objects to a certain course of action because he or she considers it morally wrong (even though someone else stands to gain a lot of money or power from it).

Here are some examples of how utilitarian reasoning can work out in practice.

- If ten robbers kill one rich person to steal that person's gemstones, you can say that more people will benefit from the theft of the gemstones and that it outweighs the harm done by killing the rich person. But if one poor person steals the gemstones, then you can say that the rich person loses more than the poor person gains because the poor ("inferior") person is assessed as not able to appreciate the monetary or aesthetic value of the gemstones, hence unable to derive any pleasure from them. (This is an example I've made up.)

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- When the Ford Motor Company in the United States refused a recall of its Pinto model, it reasoned that remedying the problem with the Pinto would be more expensive than paying out damages for the (apparently inferior) people who were killed or injured as a result of Pintos bursting into flames. The pleasure for the company was greater if it simply paid out for the victims than if it prevented their deaths and injuries. (This example comes from Michael Sandel's publication "Justice – What's the right thing to do".)
- When British politician Iain Duncan Smith openly doubled over with laughter in a televised session of Parliament when another politician was in the middle of explaining the plight of poor ("inferior") people with handicaps and chronic illnesses ("inferior"), and mentioned that deaths had occurred as a result of harsh measures implemented by that specific politician, that laughing politician was applying his own utilitarian views. Cutting financial support for the country's poorest and most vulnerable made it possible for him to balance the country's books at the expense of the people whose income got cut and still have more than enough left in the country's coffers to use for purely political purposes. Utilitarian reasoning could even see those deaths as positive as those people now no longer needed to be supported, which could easily be put in terms of achieving greater overall happiness. In the period between the 2016 Brexit referendum and the December 2019 election, huge amounts of money still turned out to be available that dwarfed the peddled financial benefits of Brexit and those benefits – the so-called Brexit dividend – had turned out to be a complete lie. (This is an example from real life.)
- When governments deliberately keep a large section of the population disproportionately poor, enabling such governments to realize major budget cuts in times of economic crisis such as the one that precipitated around 2008 as a result of bankers' misconduct, you also have utilitarianism in action. Such governments treat the poor like cattle that they sell off to be slaughtered or buy to be fed depending on the country's financial situation. It is easy to see this as the result of a simple utilitarian financial cost-benefit analysis. If you keep a large group of people disproportionately poor and relatively uneducated, at all times, then it becomes much harder for them to fight back against anything you

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do to them and it also becomes near-impossible for them to work their way out of poverty. It means that you can use them as a tool, as a commodity. Like cattle. This was the situation that Iain Duncan Smith made use of. If this situation had not already existed, cuts would not have had such dramatic consequences for so many. (This is an example from real life.)

- When a group of people zips around through the streets, high on excitement because someone has just jumped off a bridge to commit suicide, that's utilitarianism in action. The pleasure experienced by the people excited by the suicide outweighs the lack of pleasure experienced by the person who committed suicide. It gets even worse – or better; if you happen to use a utilitarian point of view – when a group of people egg someone on to jump off a building. (These too are real-life examples.)
- When police officers sided with youngsters who threw eggs and stones at the house of a Frenchwoman in Devon, was that based on a utilitarian calculation? Was the “fun” that was enjoyed by the British youngsters more important than the discomfort, anger and fear experienced by the Frenchwoman? (This is an example from real life.)
- Landlords or builders who openly state that a new building is only for tenants, and therefore doesn't have to be very good or who use unsuitable materials when those materials are cheaper also practice utilitarianism. They consider lowering their expenses the greater good over raising the comfort of tenants or even lowering the tenants' costs of living (which would benefit these landlords too, but they appear to be blind to that). (These are examples from real life.)
- Convicting a person who is known to be innocent in order to pacify a larger group of people who genuinely believe that this person is guilty, that's utilitarianism. (This example is often mentioned in explanations of utilitarianism.) By the way, in Britain, there is no compensation for such wrongly convicted and imprisoned people, and even people entitled to compensation, such as the victims of the Windrush scandal or disabled people who experienced illegal cuts to their financial support, often wait many years to receive that compensation.
- The casual acceptance of mass child sex abuse too can be seen as a form of utilitarianism. How important is the misery of a few children when compared against the perverse pleasures experienced by a

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large number of employees of a children's home or a TV personality? This type of utilitarian attitude allows anyone to brush the children's interests aside as of insufficient significance. (This is an example from real life.)

- When shop staff deliberately takes advantage of persons they consider mentally (or physically) inferior, that's utilitarianism. (This is an example from real life.)
- When there is a greater chance that a poor ("inferior") person who stole a sandwich and was identified on CCTV is arrested and prosecuted than someone who commits far more serious crimes, could that too be an expression of utilitarianism? (This is an example from real life.)
- Constant lying can easily be seen as a form of utilitarianism as well. The gains you accomplish by the lying outweigh the harm done to the people you lie to, says the utilitarian calculation. (This is a general observation.)
- In London, some buildings have (back) entrances for the poor and (front) entrances for the wealthy. (Allowing less well-off tenants in their buildings can help developers get planning permission.) I hear the echo of Bentham's teachings in this, too, in the idea that the rich might be offended (harmed) by seeing the less well-off tenants using the same entrance. In New York, a block was found to have been approved with a so-called poor door as well at about the same time as this phenomenon came to light in London. There, it caused a roar. Mayor Bill De Blasio said that he would take action to prevent this from happening in the future. By contrast, poor doors were already becoming standard practice in London by then.
- When Britain's leaders fed the voters lies, for example about the ability of EU citizens to claim benefits as soon as they set foot in the country (which they couldn't), they were also applying utilitarianism. This kind of lie brought these politicians votes (on false grounds) and helped foster more negativity toward foreigners. When that results in less interaction with those foreigners, there is also a smaller chance for Brits to discover the truth.
- In 2006, Prime Minister Tony Blair argued in a BBC interview that children should be taken away from certain parents, even before

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birth, even if for no other reason than that those children supposedly would “only grow up to become hooligans” and that this would cost society too much money later. This too is sheer utilitarianism. It declares some parents’ happiness less valuable because of their socioeconomic status. (In the distant future, society may decide to make parenting a profession and require training and licenses before parents are allowed to have children, but that is a far cry from taking children away from their parents in the present situation, just because the parents are of a certain class.) Sadly, Blair managed to turn this into law right before the end of his final term.

Doesn’t particularly the kind of thinking shown in the latter example – social engineering – make the step to mandatory eugenics uncomfortably small? Isn’t Tony Blair’s approach very similar to what several Tory politicians have been saying, namely that the poor shouldn’t be allowed to reproduce? There is little room for respect for individual humans who are perceived as “inferior” or “diminished” in these skewed expressions of utilitarianism.

“Britain now finds itself at the forefront of the new eugenics”, wrote Fraser Nelson in British magazine *The Spectator* in April 2016. He pointed out that Britain had also laid the foundation for old-style eugenics. That too emerged in the 19th century, along with Victorianism and utilitarianism. Is their co-incidence a mere coincidence?