The Impossibility of the Happiness Pill

Bentham's Argument for Liberal Neutrality

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Berlin once claimed that “Bentham and James Mill believed in education and legislation as the roads to happiness. But if a shorter way had been discovered, in the form of pills to swallow, techniques of subliminal suggestion or other means of conditioning human beings [...] then, being men of fanatical consistency, they might well have accepted this as a better, because more effective and perhaps less costly, alternative.” Berlin’s suggestion in this passage is that Bentham's utilitarianism is illiberal and manipulative.

In this paper I argue that Berlin’s provocative suggestion is quite misplaced since Bentham wouldn’t give such medical treatment, even if it were possible. Indeed, Bentham would reject mass medical treatments for the very reasons that any supporter of liberalism would do – i.e. on the basis of the “best judge argument” in favour of liberal neutrality. However, Bentham presented distinctive grounds for liberal neutrality.

Criticizing the principle of antipathy – according to which motives give actions moral significance and value – Bentham claims that (a) there are no fixed tendencies of motives, and (b) there is no stable connection between motives and actions. (a) is the claim that motives of the same type may lead to bad consequences as well as to good ones, depending on circumstances. A supposedly good motive such as mercy could produce disasters in the heart of judges. Accordingly, general tendencies cannot be derived from observations of the consequences of a given motive in single cases (Introduction: 100, 114, 116). (b) is the claim that the same sort of motives could lead to different actions, depending on the sensibilities of the agent or the external circumstances. A loyal citizen driven by the desire to have revenge will suit his aggressor in front of a criminal court, whereas a wanton knave will respond to aggression with even more aggressive violence. Moreover, often the declared motive is not the real one (Table: 112-13; Introduction: 110-11, 129-30).

These two arguments make empirically impossible the nightmare of an illiberal mass treatment with medicines: if there are no stable connections between motives and actions, it is impossible for any medicine to have uniform effects over persons. Whether contemporary science could disconfirm Bentham’s skepticism and make possible the achievement of happiness through chemistry is not important, here. What is relevant, instead, is that Bentham’s skeptical arguments provide strong foundations to liberal neutrality on the limits of government intervention. In the Introduction, Bentham claims that the legislator is unable to regulate conducts depending on particular circumstances, and that “it is only with respect to those broad lines of conduct in which [...] very large and permanent descriptions of persons may be in a way to engage, that he can have any pretence for interfering; and even here the propriety of his interference will, in most instances, lie very open to dispute.” (Introduction: 290).
For Bentham, then, the boundaries of governmental interference are set by the epistemic limits of our knowledge of how motives, actions and consequences are connected in any single case. In many cases, governmental interference risk being hugely mischievous, and quite counterproductive. However, unlike traditional models, Bentham's liberal neutrality has its root in philosophy of action, rather than in views about autonomy.