

# *An Analysis of Muller's Utilitarian Thought and Its Contemporary Value*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism and its relevance to contemporary social issues in China. Mill's evolution of Bentham's utilitarianism, emphasizing qualitative differences in happiness, is pivotal. We explore how this nuanced understanding of happiness can be applied to evaluate China's current societal challenges. Specifically, the paper discusses the application of Mill's principles to assess and guide policies in areas such as income inequality, environmental sustainability, and overall societal welfare. The focus is on how these policies may align with the utilitarian goal of maximizing happiness and reducing suffering, considering both individual and collective well-being. The analysis extends to how Mill's ethical framework could influence the moral and socio-economic development in China, emphasizing the balance between personal fulfillment and social responsibility. This study highlights Mill's enduring relevance in ethical philosophy and policy-making, especially in contexts of significant socio-economic transformation

## **1. The meaning of utilitarianism**

When it comes to the word "utilitarian", we often have a prejudice, habitually it is associated with "interests", it is easy to hold preconceived prejudices, but utilitarianism is different from the traditional concept of "utilitarian", ethical "utilitarian" is actually a pursuit of happiness in the process of the behavior of interest and avoidance of suffering, so people judge the behavior in real life according to this meaning. However, utilitarianism is different from the traditional concept of "utilitarianism", the ethical "utilitarianism" is actually a pursuit of happiness in the process of the performance of the behavior of the interest in music to avoid suffering, so that people will be based on the meaning of this layer of judgment of real-life behavior of good and evil. (Liu,2010) Utilitarianism is an ethical doctrine that takes practical efficacy or benefit as its moral criterion, and utilitarianism is one of the most influential ethical theories today (Wu,2018) , it belongs to the category of moral philosophy, and it is "the traditional name for an ethical tradition that evaluates the justification of behaviors, policies, decisions, and choices, either directly or indirectly, on the basis of the tendency for them to enhance the well-being of the people affected by them. A tendency to make things better for the people it impacts."(David,2002). Before Müller, Ibyakuru in the ancient Greek period had put forward the "theory of happiness", and later the British philosopher Bianchin put forward the "principle of maximum happiness" and other theories, Müller on the basis

of which he constantly improved and developed, and used the "utilitarianism". Muller continued to improve and develop on this basis, and used "utilitarianism" to summarize his doctrine, further theorizing and systematizing it. Muller's utilitarianism, as a kind of oriented social norm, is of great practical significance to today's society.[1]

## 2. Overview of Muller's Utilitarian Thought

### 2.1 Pleasureism theory

Pleasureism, as an important part of utilitarianism, can be traced back as far as the doctrine of pleasureism of the ancient Greek Epicurus. In their view, the highest good in life is pleasure, and the purpose of life is to pursue pleasure. Later, Bentham, by way of calculation, suggested that happiness only differs in quantity, and that the qualities are all the same. On the basis of Bentham, Muller inherited and developed the theory of pleasure. Therefore, Muller proposed that "happiness means pleasure and freedom from pain; so-called misfortune means pain and loss of pleasure." (John,2014) In his view, there are not only quantitative but also qualitative differences in happiness. At the same time, he divides pleasure into two categories: the pleasure of reason, the pleasure of feeling and imagination, and the pleasure of the moral emotions and the pleasure of the physical senses. The difference between the two is qualitative and quantitative, and the value of rational pleasure, emotional and imaginative pleasure, and moral pleasure is higher than that of mere sensual pleasure. Therefore, we have to consider both quantitative and qualitative factors in assessing pleasure as well. Even though sensual pleasures are greater in quantity, rational pleasures are more valuable because rational pleasures have both quantity and quality. People who have experienced both kinds of pleasure will abandon their moral-emotional preferences in favor of the more advanced pleasure. Muller famously said, "It is better to be an unsatisfied man than a satisfied pig; it is better to be an unsatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool." (John,2014) .What he emphasizes here is that a man endowed with higher faculties is not satisfied with the pleasures he can seek, and that the pursuit of higher pleasures is never-ending. Human happiness lies not only in the avoidance of physical pleasure and pain, but more importantly in the constant pursuit of spirituality, so that Muller elevates pleasure-ism to a spiritual level of greater value and significance.[2]

### 2.2 The principle of maximum happiness

"The pursuit of the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is the "principle of the greatest happiness" proposed by Bentham, on which Müller also made further refinements, in the book *Utilitarianism*, Müller reiterated the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the standard of ethical behavior utilitarian principle as the first or highest principle of ethics. In Muller's view, the moral and intellectual development of the individual is necessary for his or her happiness and necessarily promotes social development and the public good. He argues that "the utilitarian standard of behavior does not refer to the greatest happiness of the actor himself, but to the greatest happiness of all concerned." Therefore, in order to achieve the highest ideals of "love thy neighbor as thyself" and "do unto others as thou wouldst have them do unto thee," Müller also provides two means here. Firstly, the law and social arrangements should be organized in such a way that the happiness or interest of each individual is as much in line with the overall interest of the society as possible. Second, the shaping of human character by education and public opinion should be fully utilized to link the happiness of each individual's heart with the overall welfare of society. Muller's utilitarianism has a certain altruistic color. Utilitarian morality holds that people can sacrifice their own interests for the good of society, and that such behavior is praiseworthy, for example, a person sacrifices himself to save others, and that such a sacrifice is valuable; obviously, the only self-sacrifice that utilitarianism favors is the one that is made for the sake of the well-being of

another person or for some means conducive to the well-being of another person, not the one that does not bring about the well-being of any other person. Self-sacrifice. Therefore, the utilitarian principle of "maximum happiness" holds that the quality and quantity of each person's happiness is not the most important measure, but rather the maximum happiness of all concerned is the utilitarian standard of behavior. Although we cannot say with certainty that a person with a noble character will be happier than others, we can say with certainty that a person with a noble character will bring happiness to others, and thus society as a whole will benefit. In this way, it seems that any other person will be more or less happy because of his noble character, and even if his happiness will be diminished because of his noble character, it will be his happiness alone, and it is obviously absurd to say that "his happiness will be diminished because of his noble character", so it is a utilitarian purpose to cultivate the noble character of every person. Therefore, the cultivation of the noble character of each individual is the fundamental way to achieve the utilitarian purpose.[3]

### 2.3 The principle of final and binding force

For any moral standard that people assume, what is his binding force? And why should people follow it? In response to this question, Muller searched for the factors affecting morality from the intrinsic nature of human beings, and put forward the theory of intrinsic sanction of morality, which holds that only the constraint of intrinsic force can fundamentally guide human beings to make moral choices. Muller pointed out, "As far as intrinsic constraints are concerned, there is only one intrinsic constraint of duty, no matter what our standard of duty is, and that is our inner feelings." (John,2014). In his view, whatever binding forces other moral systems have, utilitarianism also has, and there is no reason to say that utilitarianism does not have these binding forces. At the same time, he gives a twofold answer, namely intrinsic and extrinsic binding. The so-called extrinsic binding forces are the desire to find favor with one's fellow man and the master of the universe, the unwillingness to find unhappiness, and the sympathetic love for one's fellow man and the reverence for the master of the universe, and so on. There is only one kind of inner binding, as opposed to outer binding, and that is our inner emotions. According to Müller, any virtuous person who has received a good upbringing will experience varying degrees of pain when he or she does something against his or her conscience, and this righteous, selfless emotion is the essence of conscience. Of course, Muller also mentions that this binding force is useless for those who do not possess the moral emotion of conscience, and they will not follow any moral code including the intrinsic binding force unless they receive the extrinsic binding force, so that the unity of the intrinsic binding force and the extrinsic binding force is also realized to some extent. From this point of view, the ultimate binding principle of utilitarianism is in line with human nature and is constantly demonstrating its rationality as civilization progresses.[5]

### 3. The Relevance of Muller's Utilitarianism

After exploring the ideas of his predecessors and repeatedly thinking about them, Muller has made a systematic generalization and elaboration of utilitarianism, especially correcting and further developing the errors and limitations of Bentham's ideas, which is mainly embodied in three aspects: firstly, Muller believes that there is not only a quantitative difference in happiness, but also a qualitative difference. Secondly, he emphasized that "maximum happiness" as a criterion for evaluating utilitarian behaviors refers to the maximum happiness of the greatest number of stakeholders, not the maximum happiness of the actors themselves. In addition, Müller proposed that the principle of utilitarianism is not only externally binding, but also internally binding as "conscience". As the founder of modern utilitarianism, Muller has a significant position in the history of ethical development.

Although Muller's utilitarianism was questioned and criticized by many in the society at that time, Muller's inheritance and critical development of the idea had a great influence on the society

at that time. Muller developed and inherited Bianchin's thought, and took the maximization of each person's happiness as the standard of evaluation of happiness, which embodied the western "humanistic" thought, and at the same time, Muller's utilitarianism theoretical thought also fit the liberalism trend at that time, which provided a powerful weapon for the western bourgeois revolution (Wei,2019),and promoted the social progress and development to a certain extent. progress and development to a certain extent.

Utilitarianism is a tradition of the West for thousands of years, he won praise in theory and practice at the same time, but also triggered some controversy in the academic community, utilitarianism, although there are certain flaws, but we still can not deny that it is equally far-reaching significance for today's society.

First of all, our country is currently in an important period of social transformation, facing many social problems, and people's values are constantly changing. Collective interests, as a collection of interests of certain social members, are essentially a unified whole in which the interests of each member are organically linked.(Liu,2010).The realization of personal value is inextricably linked to collective and societal values, as expressed in Muller's utilitarianism. This philosophy upholds the altruistic notion that the collective good supersedes individual interests, and therefore advocates for individuals to consider the promotion of both personal and collective interests. Emphasis is placed on the contribution of individuals to society as the primary means of realizing personal value. It is only through social recognition that personal value can be ultimately and satisfactorily attained. Therefore, in our daily life, we have to consciously safeguard the collective interests and social public interests. For those who disregard the collective interests and social interests, it is not desirable for them to test the law and falsely promote public interests in order to achieve their own purposes and maximize their own interests, because they will soon find that their interests are also invisibly harmed by others. This also makes every person pay attention not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others, which is not only conducive to enhancing people's sense of social responsibility and establishing collective and socially oriented values, but also conducive to the building of a harmonious socialist society.[5]

Secondly, Muller advocates a noble personality and moral education for everyone, which is in line with our current education ideology, "teaching and educating people" is more important than imparting textbook knowledge, but also the ideological and moral education of students, and the cultivation of a sound personality is more important than the teaching of ordinary knowledge. When a person has a sound personality, his behavior will be within the scope of morality and law, because he is bound by his conscience, and he will have a bottom-line requirement for himself in his heart. Our country is also developing ideological and political education to cultivate students' good character and habits of conduct, so that this moral code of good conduct can be internalized in the heart, which is also the ultimate binding force in building a harmonious socialist society. Only in this way will our country be able to forge a social consensus, enhance common beliefs and value identities, improve national and ethnic cohesion, and work together to maintain and stabilize the balance and stability of the social order, while society at large is free to forge ahead.

In addition, with the rapid development of China's economy, people's thinking began to appear a variety of changes in the understanding of happiness and pleasure has also undergone a huge transformation, money worship and hedonism also began to emerge, especially our younger generation, in the choice of spiritual abundance or go to the enjoyment of the two, many people chose the latter. The status quo makes us have to reflect on, in the rapid economic development today, what is our real happiness in the end? Is what we are pursuing what we really want? On this issue, Muller's principle of maximum happiness emphasizes that we should not only pursue personal happiness, but also realize the maximum happiness of the greatest number of people. Therefore, it is imperative to adopt a proper perspective towards money, where we delight in the joy it brings instead of being shackled by it. Moreover, this perspective should amalgamate an individual's pursuit of happiness with the greater public good, akin to the adage of "the gift of roses, the hand that leaves a trace of fragrance". On one hand, individuals should strive to maximise their

personal interests, whilst on the other hand, they should inspire others and bolster their own morale. On the other hand, it is conducive to enhancing people's sense of social responsibility and moral honor, and helping others while also reaping the joy of spiritual satisfaction. Only in this way can people truly realize the unity of intrinsic value and in value, and experience true happiness. These ideas, which are becoming more and more valuable in today's moral construction, are the essence that we can learn from and draw on in the process of building a harmonious socialist society.

The idea of utilitarianism in ethics is worth recognizing in all its aspects. Of course, any theory or doctrine can be recognized within a certain range, but if it exceeds its range or degree, it will be counterproductive. Every kind of theory has its own brand of the times, but these theories do not lose their own value with the development of the times. Every advance of society will inevitably be accompanied by the emergence of new theories, but only the combination of the past and present can better guide us to live. Theories are theories, and only through self-discipline and the fulfillment of one's duties and obligations in practice can we achieve a kind of truth, goodness and beauty in the whole society.

With the deepening of reform and opening up, utilitarianism is no longer an unfamiliar academic term in our country, whether as an important part of Western culture or as an influential social and ethical trend, it has had a wide impact on the moral construction and economic life of our country. These influences are both positive and negative. So, how to utilize the "double-edged sword" of utilitarianism in today's vigorous development of socialist market economy and comprehensive construction of a moderately prosperous society? The key is to give full play to the inherent advantages of socialism, absorb and draw on the reasonable factors of utilitarianism, and direct people's desires and pursuits to the right path that is truly beneficial to individuals and society.

#### 4. Conclusions

Müller's utilitarianism is a way of thinking that says people should act in a way that not only benefits themselves but also doesn't harm others or the group as a whole. It emphasizes social responsibility. However, this idea has some limits. It mainly works well when people have a strong moral education. Müller's utilitarianism suggests the principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.' This means that when making decisions, individuals should think about what brings happiness to the most people. To follow this principle, people need to consider others' interests, have a sense of what is morally right, and think about both their own well-being and the well-being of others. However, some people make use of Muller's utilitarianism, and although it is his act that is conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, the act itself is wrong from the point of view of the supreme good, which is why it is necessary to cultivate first of all a higher moral quality, a supreme good and a rational heart.

Although there are some deficiencies and limitations in Muller's utilitarian thought, in the critical period of building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way, Muller's utilitarian thought still has certain value and revelation for the construction of socialism in the times. As a truly modern thought, its spirit has had a great influence on all fields of politics, economy and culture, and it is of great importance to our country's market economy construction at the present stage.

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