

Utility

Theoretical, Practical and Intercultural Perspectives

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The Trouble with Utility

In this issue of *Academic Quarter*, we focus on the concept of utility. References to utility are ubiquitous in both practical and theoretical settings. One of the most widespread ways of arguing for the initiating of or holding on to a certain practice or activity is that it is useful to us, and appeals to utility are a common and important argumentative move in theoretical discussion. One reason why we so often invoke claims about utility is because the concept of utility is a fundamentally normative concept, as seen in the standard dictionary definition of the term, i.e. 'the state or quality of being useful'. This normativity provides utility claims with their justificatory force. However, the term utility is frequently employed without specifying the framework providing utility with its normative pretensions; in such cases, we use utility as if it is a purely descriptive term, and it comes to appear as if questions of utility are purely factual questions. In this way, the normativity of utility is not justified or challenged, but simply axiomatically enforced. Often, we

seem to be more preoccupied with asking if something is useful or not, and how useful it is, rather than asking ourselves why something is regarded or promoted as useful. The consequence of this somewhat muted discourse is that we might experience discomfort with the term and with what it promotes, simply because we are not in agreement with its implicit or pre-established normativity. At the same time, we lack a platform to express and address this disagreement within a particular discourse.

It is possible to argue that this problem of indeterminacy was present even in the introduction of utility into the modern philosophical tradition. Of course, we find references to utility throughout the philosophical tradition. However, utility only comes to take centre stage with Jeremy Bentham's establishment of the foundation of *utilitarianism* in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. This is a theory that – across the various fields of human life – defines right action, the action that is to be done, as the action which succeeds in maximising utility for human beings. In Bentham's work, the question of the nature of utility appears as if it is clearly determined. Being a classical hedonist, Bentham thought that the measurement of utility was to be found in the fact that "Nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters, *pleasures* and *pain*" (Bentham 1781/2000, 14). That is, he understands utility as that which maximises pleasure and minimises pain and this allows Bentham to give a nice and neat definition of what he terms 'the principle of utility':

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question. (*ibid.*)

Nonetheless, even if this way of approaching utility appears neat and definitive, problems arise almost straight away. At the bottom of the very first page of his book, Bentham goes on to elaborate that utility is a property of an object whereby it "tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all this in the present case comes to the same thing)" (*ibid.*). The problem is that even despite Bentham's reassuring parenthesis, benefit, advantage, pleas-

ure, good and happiness really does not, or at least not in many cases, come to the same thing.

The problems of determining the normative grounds of utility implicit in Bentham's work, becomes explicit in the work of his philosophical heir, John Stuart Mill. Mill uses the term and the principal of utility in various ways throughout his life. Most famously, commentators note and debate whether the term is to be understood in a quantitative or in a qualitative manner, following an idea of pleasure and pain being of intrinsic value, i.e. the quality of valuable in themselves, and all other actions, activities etc. having extrinsic value, i.e. in quantity adding or subtracting to the intrinsic value of pleasure or pain. Adding to the debate is also the potential disharmony between Mill's claim of the greatest happiness principle and his well-known remark "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Mill 1867, 14). Some commentators are keen on claiming that Mill's usage and comprehension of utility is dependent on the particular topic which he addresses, others try to make a coherent understanding possible by claiming that Mill uses utility as a complex concept, which consist of different variables which can be combined in different ways (Ebenstein 1985). At the end of the day, Mill's indeterminacy, but perhaps at the same time also quite balanced idea, can be summed up in the following quotation from *On Liberty*: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (Mill 1989/1859, 33).

This last Millian move can claim some justification. After all human beings have many diverse and different interests, and many things can thus be considered of utility. However, this also leaves us without any transparent and coherent understanding of utility, and this, amongst other things, moves many moral philosophers in the 20th Century to abandon utilitarianism in favour of other moral theories, mainly focused on conceptions of the good, but also haunted by problems of indeterminacy much similar to those arising with regard to utility. One could ask why philosophers make such efforts to determine the normative framework and justification of utility. Why not simply instead accept that it is a heterogeneous term that involve a large number of very different concerns? There are however at least two problems with relying on a pre-

sumed silent agreement about the nature of utility in particular cases. The first is that no such agreement may exist – the philosophical discussions can be taken as an indication of exactly this fact. The other is that without a clear understanding of utility, we risk – without actively choosing to do so – simply to accept and conform to a given normativity without any critical questioning. That is, we may come to legitimise, promote and /or excise choices or practices, whose underlying normative credentials we are unaware of, and which we would not endorse or would even disapprove of, if we came to understand them properly.

Utility Today

The indeterminacy inherent in the understanding of utility that has haunted philosophy can also be found in references to utility in public discourse. This would not be a problem, if such references were rare, but this is definitely not the case. If we wish to endorse or justify a particular behaviour, initiative or change, utility is a superb concept to apply. We find references to utility in discussions on priorities in the health care sector, in regard to the purpose and structure of education and educational institutions; utility is invoked as a valuable variable in employment politics, in textbooks on organisational change and leadership, in endorsement grants for the arts and the sciences, and in the numerous cost-benefit analyses decision-makers and debaters relay on each and every day. Also in our private lives, utility is present as a principle, a variable or simply as justification. We use the concept when we plan our activities, when we make choices and when we judge on matters at hand, whether it is a question of preparing dinner, buying a second car or not, dressing our children in the morning or making a choice of supporting a particular charity or non-governmental organisation.

However, these employments of utility can be problematic. Because in each and every case, the meaning and reference of utility may be taken for granted and perfectly well accepted, but when we look across different cases, we find that utility can come to denote almost anything. The problem is here that as utility travels across cases and discourses, it may take a particular meaning or conceptualisation with it from one area into a new one. We see this when particular practices or initiatives are being promoted as utile, because conducive to economic growth, in areas where the concern

for increasing wealth may not be our primary concern, such as kindergartens or the arts. Here, we need to make explicit the underlying normative understanding of utility in order to be able to discuss whether economic growth is a justified concern with regard to early childcare or artistic excellence. Another frequent problem is that the object of utility is left unspecified. If we for example argue that a shift from a focus on care to a focus on rehabilitation in nursing homes would result in increased utility, we need to specify, whether utility here concerns the inhabitants of the nursing home, the staff or the budget – or whether it is a lucky case where it is useful for all. Finally, the horizon of utility claims is often unclear. What may give an increase in utility right now, may not contribute to utility in the long run.

These and similar problems of specification are always potentially present when invoking utility claims. This gives cause for a struggle to establish the meaning and reference of utility, which in turn, as in some cases, may lead to altering the originally positive evaluation of the normativity of utility into a negative one. At the end of the day, we, just like the philosophers, get confused about utility, and become uncertain of how to use and how to regard the concept. But at the same time, we cannot seem to escape it or avoid it, and we certainly cannot seem to be indifferent to its forceful nature.

An Issue of Utility

The pervasiveness of references to utility in all areas of life and the problems inherent in such references are our motivation for making utility the central theme of this issue of Academic Quarter with the hope of helping to further a much-needed discussion of the nature and uses of utility. These expectations have not been disappointed: the articles of the issues address the notion of utility from a wide range of perspectives, and they all address the issue of how to handle the slippery nature of utility.

In the issue, we have ordered the articles in three overall groups, according to their way of treating the subject matter of utility. First, we have a group of articles written from the perspective of a theoretical position on utility. In *Freedom of Expression in the Era of the Privatization of Reason* Henrik Jøker Bjerre elaborates on the use and role of free speech. Taking his departure in Kant and Mill, free speech is set in a liberal tradition of public reason, which allows its

normative force to be linked to the utility it brings to the progress of society. Bjerre when addresses the contemporary discussion of free speech in an attempt to utilize the same liberal tradition, looking closer at populism and other forms of collective or shared speech. Søren Engelsen is concerned with practical reason in his article *Emotioners (u)nytte En fænomenologisk analyse af emotioner i praktisk rationalitet*. Through a phenomenological approach, Engelsen shows that emotions play a vital role in practical judgment, and he argues that instead of overlooking or disregarding this emotional component, we should instead make best use of it, seeing the positive cognitive potential of emotions as well avoiding their possibly distorting influence. In this way, the article focuses on the utility of emotions. The last text in this group is Patrik Kjærdsdam Telléus *Discovering utility between the descriptive and the normative*. Telléus looks closer at the concept of utility as it is understood by Mill in his *Utilitarianism*. Here, he emphasises Mill's thoughts on moral reasoning in the sense of a virtuous character, but as such, the role of facts also play a vital part of moral reasoning. Bringing the concept of utility to a more general concern, Telléus uses his reading of Mill to claim that moral concepts, like utility, simultaneously inhabit both a descriptive and a normative nature.

Next is a group of texts that addresses the uses of utility in practical discourses. In the article, *e-learning in the digital age. The utility of the entrepreneurial self*, Birte Heidkamp and David Kergel investigate claims about the usefulness of e-learning in contemporary literature and argue that the discussion is guided by a neoliberal understanding of utility in learning. Here useful learning is that which fosters important skills, understood as that which helps develop the learner according to a neoliberal ideal of an entrepreneurial self. Our understanding of utility of educational methods is also the topic of the next article by Diana Stentoft, *Tensions and co-existence. Exploring multi-faceted articulations of intentions of problem-based learning in higher education*. Here, Stentoft identifies how the intentions behind and the understanding of the utility of problem-based learning are diverse and possibly incompatible. Simultaneously, PLB is being promoted because it supports learning situations, because it furthers important skills and because it ensures the societal usefulness and employability of learners. However, these intensions may conflict, and this leaves unanswered the question of

whether we introduce PBL for the benefit of the students or for a wider societal interest in employable human resources. Finally, in *The utility of psychiatric diagnosis: Diagnostic classifications in clinical practice and research in relation to eating disorders*, Gry Kjærdsdam Telléus addresses the issue of the use and abuse of psychiatric diagnosis. Kjærdsdam Telléus argues in support of the diagnostic system, claiming its usefulness for clinical practise as well as psychiatric research. The case of eating disorders provides an illustrative example, and distinctions between popular and professional uses and attitudes toward diagnosis, and between the validity and the utility of diagnosis, are drawn in order to enhance the understanding of the practise of diagnosis.

Our last collection of contributions gathers around an intercultural perspective. Utility might for some appear as a purely western concept, due to its apparent relation to the economical and sociological thinking and development of our modern western societies. However this idea is challenged by the investigations and clarifications we find in this final section. Prem Poddar, in *The Uses of Kautilya's Arthashastra*, discusses the interpretations and influences of the 4th century BCE Indian philosopher Kautilya on modern western writings on statecraft, especially the ideas of Amartya Sen. Podder traces both similarities and deviations, and by that he adds to the comprehension of an intercultural history of ideas, and simultaneously illustrates the complexity of the utilitarian roots and principles in modern welfare states. In *Den lille og den store nytte – et interkulturelt perspektiv på forholdet mellem nytte og frihed*, Jesper Garsdal and Michael Paulsen also look eastward, and elaborate on connections between western and eastern philosophies, that are stronger than traditionally articulated. By way of classical Chinese philosophy, Garsdal and Paulsen look closer at the modern Chinese philosopher Yan Fu's translations of western philosophy, and especially his reading of Mill. Creating this 'dialectic hermeneutics' enables a reading of utility in, what the authors call, a small version and a large version. By connecting to a similar analysis of the concept of freedom, an argument for a cultivated balance between harmony and conflict is established.

It is our hope that the reader of this issue of *Academic Quarter* will find inspirations for further reflections and, not to forget, uses of the unquestionable questionable concept of *utility*.

References

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