

V.—UTILITARIANISM AND NEW GENERATIONS

BY JAN NARVESON

I

ONE of the stock objections to utilitarianism goes like this: "If utilitarianism is correct, then we must be obliged to produce as many children as possible, so long as their happiness would exceed their misery." It has always seemed to me that there is a certain air of sophistry about this argument, and in this paper, I shall endeavor to demonstrate this by exposing the fallacies upon which it is founded. I shall also consider in its own right the question of the nature and extent of our duties in the line of procreation, if any, on the utilitarian principle. To this end, three preliminary matters must be explained.

To begin with, there are two radically different questions here, of which the first is the crucial one. On the one hand, there is the question of whether we should produce person X because X would be happy if produced. Let us call this the question of the 'direct effects' upon the general happiness; clearly, it is what is in point. The other question is this: should we produce person X, if we can foresee that X's existence will have a favorable effect on the happiness of other people besides X, *e.g.* his parents, or people who might benefit from his activities. Later on, I shall suggest that the appearance of plausibility to the objection probably stems from a subtle confusion between these two different questions. I shall spend most of my time on the first question, reserving the second until the final section of the paper.

In the second place, there is some difference of opinion about the way in which the utilitarian theory is to be formulated. Those who have put the objection are assuming that according to the utilitarian, there is a certain sort of mental state called "pleasure" or "happiness", of which it is our obligation to produce as much as possible, by whatever means. Let us call this the "greatest total happiness" formulation. But it is obviously not the one which Bentham and Mill had in mind. Their formulations, as everybody knows, have it that the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" is the end of morality. This view Smart and Flew call the "greatest average happiness" view, though as I shall show below this characterization is somewhat misleading. Now, it supposedly follows directly from the "total" view that we have a duty to produce children if they would be happy; though I am inclined to think that the view involves a further confusion which, if taken account of, might clear even it of this charge to some extent. But at any rate,

it is much less clear that the classical view has any such implication. For that we are to aim at the greatest happiness of the greatest number, does not imply that we are to aim at the greatest happiness *and* the greatest number. In order to make this perfectly clear, note that the classical utilitarians' view may be put this way: everyone should be as happy as possible. Cast into modern logical form, this reads, "For all persons x , x should be as happy as possible", and this is equivalent to, "if a person exists, he should be as happy as possible". This last shows clearly that the classical formulation does not imply that as many happy people as possible should be brought into existence.

The third point is to be clear about the general idea of the utilitarian theory about morality. It is often thought that according to that theory, if we like jam, then we have a duty to eat jam. This is nonsense. The whole point of the utilitarian theory is that people should be permitted, in so far as possible, to do as they please. As in all moral theories, utilitarianism picks out as duties those acts which you should be constrained to do. You may or may not like doing your duty, but if you do not, that is irrelevant. Now, it makes sense to say that you have a duty to do something which you happen to enjoy doing anyway; but it does not make sense to say that you have a duty to do something *on the ground that* you like it. To assert a duty is to deny the permissibility of the opposite. Consequently, if you say that I have a duty to do whatever I like, there is nothing whose permissibility I am denying: if I liked doing A, I still could not have a duty to do A, since I could also do not-A if I liked.

What *is* true is that for the classical utilitarian, the sole ground of duty is the effects of our action on other people, and from this it follows that whenever one has a duty, it *must* be possible to say on whose account the duty arises—*i.e.* whose happiness is in question. In deciding what we are to do, the only consideration which is morally relevant, according to utilitarianism, is how others would be affected. If we cannot envisage effects on certain people which would ensue from our acts, then we have no moral material to work on and we can do as we like.

II

We are now in a position to throw light on the problem before us. The oddity in this kind of question, of course, consists in the fact that if a person is not born, he does not exist. I am neglecting the question about the point at which a person comes into existence. Those who would wish to consider embryos as a kind of person may simply replace 'born' and 'birth' with 'conceived'

and 'conception' throughout. And as we all know, non-existent people are not just a special kind of people; therefore, unborn people are also not just a special kind of people. Further, "people" are among the things you can point to, see, hear, and so forth. There is no such thing as an "abstract person", though we may indeed talk in the abstract about people (concrete).

Consider now the sentential form, "if x were born, x would be happy; therefore, x ought to be born". We assume the utilitarian principle as the suppressed major premiss. Now, there are two types of logical expression which can be substituted for ' x ' in such an argument, namely, proper names and descriptions. Let us examine each in turn. To begin with, no sensible proposition can be formed of the consequent in the minor premiss of an argument of this form, by replacing the blanks (x 's) with proper names, since, for example, "Hiram Jones ought to be born" makes no sense. If 'Hiram Jones' refers, then he already is born and there is no open question left as to whether he "ought to be born"; and if, on the other hand, it does not refer, then it is not (logically) a proper name, there being nothing for it to name.

Notice, incidentally, that the point just made does not depend upon the temporality of personal existence. The name 'Hiram Jones' refers, logically speaking, no matter when Jones is alive. But whether or not Jones lives in the future, it is still true of him, whenever he may live, that he was born, and consequently it is in any case nonsense to say that he ought to be born.

Nor am I denying that we may sensibly ask, once he *is* born, whether he *should have been* born. This is in many cases an interesting question, though not a very practical one under the circumstances. Some people should not have been born; and as there are other people whose existence is a good thing, we may say of them that they, in the same sense, "should have been born"; though of course they *were*, and it is not a point of much practical importance so far as it concerns the individual the desirability of whose birth is in question. Hitler should not have been born, Churchill should have been born, and there are other cases where it is debatable—though I admit that all such questions, are, as we say, "merely theoretical". What I am claiming is that, if we regard 'Hitler' and 'Churchill' as proper names, Hitler's mother and Churchill's mother could not have presented themselves, prior to their conceptions, with sensible questions of the form, "ought we to give birth to Hitler?", "Ought we to give birth to Churchill?" The latter appear to be parallel to, "ought I to spank Adolph?", "Ought I to spank Winston?"; but they plainly are not.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we complete the argument-forms by replacing our 'x' with descriptions. Thus we might say, "someone should be born who would bring peace to the world"; and supposing that we could know that *our* boy, if born, would bring peace to the world, we might argue that this is a good reason for bringing him into existence. As indeed it is, but we have shifted our question here, and are no longer answering the one we set out to discuss. For we began by resolving to discuss the question, whether the *direct* effects of bringing someone into the world could be a reason for so doing, and "bringing peace into the world" is not of this kind. I said at the outset that the distinction between direct and indirect effects in reference to this question was a vital one, and I am about to show why. So far, then, the question is whether we could argue as follows: "our boy, if born, would be very happy; therefore we ought to produce him." In order to show why this argument is not sanctioned by the principle of utility, whereas the former perhaps is, we must turn again to the third point argued above.

III

Three possible outcomes of an act are of interest from the utilitarian point of view. The act either will (1) increase the general happiness, (2) decrease the general happiness, or (3) have no effect on the general happiness. Neglecting such interesting but here irrelevant questions as how you decide which in fact will result, there is an important question as to just which of the three is such as to give rise to a duty, if any; but let us say for purposes of the present discussion that, in cases where the different things we can do would some of them eventuate x in (1), others in (2), and others in (3), it is our duty to avoid (2) and prefer (1). In other words, it is only with increases and decreases in the general happiness that we are morally concerned if we are utilitarians. And this means that when we specify the individuals who would be affected by our actions, as we must on the utilitarian view, the characteristic about those people with which we are morally concerned is whether their happiness will be increased or decreased. If an action would have no effects whatever on the general happiness, then it would be morally *indifferent*: we could do it or not, just as we pleased. Hence whether to do it or not would be a non-moral question, which could only be solved by non-moral considerations. If I were to have a candy bar, this would normally have no effect on the happiness of others; hence whether I am to do it or not is entirely a question, according to the utilitarians, of whether I want to or not, which is not a question about what I

morally ought to do but rather one about what I *like* to do. Now, to which of these types does our present question belong: is it a moral or a non-moral one? I will show that it is ordinarily a *non-moral* one, and that in the case where it is a moral one, then it is because of its indirect effects. "Direct effects," I shall show, can only give rise to the duty *not* to have children and can never give rise to a duty to have them. Having children, in other words, is normally a matter of moral indifference. Let us see why this is so.

In order to show that the general happiness would be increased by our having a child, the argument would have to go as follows. Imagine that the total number of people is N , and that the total happiness is H , the average happiness therefore being $N/H = 1$. Now suppose that we have good evidence that any child produced by us would be twice as happy as that, giving him a value of 2.

Then the average happiness after he is born will be $\frac{N+2}{H+1}$, which

$$\frac{H}{N}$$

$$\frac{H+2}{N+1}$$

would be somewhat larger, therefore, than before. Does this give us a moral reason to produce children? No. We have committed a fallacy.

Suppose that we live in a certain country, say, Fervia, and we are told by our king that something is about to happen which will greatly increase the general happiness of the Fervians: namely that a certain city on Mars, populated by extremely happy Martians will shortly become a part of Fervia. Since these new Fervians are very happy, the average happiness, hence the "general happiness" of the Fervians will be greatly increased. Balderdash. If you were a Fervian, would you be impressed by this reasoning? Obviously not. What has happened, of course, is simply that the base upon which the average was calculated has been shifted. When the Fervians are told that their happiness will be affected by something, they assume that the happiness of those presently understood by them as being Fervians will be increased. The king has pulled the wool over their eyes by using, in effect, a fallacy of four terms: 'Fervians' refers to one group of people on one occasion—"The general happiness of the Fervians₁ will be increased",—and another on another occasion—"Hence, the general happiness of the Fervians₂ has been increased". Because the Fervians₂ are a different group from the Fervians₁, although including the latter, it is a mere piece of sophistry to say that an increase in the happiness of the Fervians has come about as a result of this new acquisition of Martian citizenry. The fraud lies in the fact that no *particular* Fervian's

happiness has been increased ; whereas the principle of utility requires that before we have a moral reason for doing something, it must be because of a change in the happiness of some of the affected persons.

The argument that an increase in the general happiness will result from our having a happy child involves precisely the same fallacy. If you ask, "whose happiness has been increased as a result of his being born?", the answer is that nobody's has. Of course, his being born might have indirect effects on the general happiness, but that is quite another matter. The "general populace" is just as happy as it was before ; now, what of our new personnel? Remember that the question we must ask about *him* is not whether he is happy, but whether he is happier as a result of being born. And if put this way, we see that again we have a piece of nonsense on our hands if we suppose that the answer is either "yes" or "no". For if it is, then with whom, or with what, are we comparing his new state of bliss? Is the child, perhaps, happier than he used to be before he was born? Or happier, perhaps, than his alter ego? Obviously, there can be no sensible answer here. The child cannot be happier as a result of being born, since we would then have a relative term lacking one relatum. The child's happiness has not been increased, in any intelligible sense, as a result of his being born ; and since nobody else's has either, directly, there is no moral reason for bringing him into existence.

IV

But, you say, would not the world be better off than it was before, even though in your sense the general happiness has not been increased as a result of his being born? As Smart has put it,

. . . would you be quite indifferent between (a) a universe containing only one million happy sentient beings, all equally happy, and (b) a universe containing two million happy beings, each neither more or less happy than any in the first universe? Or would you, as a humane and sympathetic person, give a preference to the second universe? I myself cannot help feeling a preference for the second universe. But if someone feels the other way I do not know how to argue with him. It looks as though we have yet another possibility of disagreement within a general utilitarian framework.¹

This being the remark of one of the few thorough-going proponents of the utilitarian theory extant, it is in order to point out what is wrong here. It is true, of course, that utilitarianism is supposed

¹ J. J. C. Smart, *Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics* (Melbourne, 1961), p. 18.

to appeal to "sympathetic and benevolent" men (—as well as everyone else!). And no doubt a person who was sympathetic and benevolent by nature might be inclined to prefer Smart's second universe to his first. But I suggest that if he does, the inclination is morally irrelevant; and the reason Smart would not know how to argue with a person preferring the first or being indifferent, is that there is no moral argument at issue here. How large a population you like is purely a matter of taste, except in cases where a larger population would, due to indirect effects, be happier than the first, the latter possibility to be discussed below. And having children is also purely a matter of taste, for the same reason, and with the same exception.

Consider what a person who would claim that the larger universe is the better "because there is more happiness in it", is asserting. According to utilitarianism, as I pointed out earlier, all obligations and indeed all moral reasons for doing anything must be grounded upon the existence of persons who would benefit or be injured by the effects of our actions. From this it follows that a man's objective moral goodness is a function of the number of people whom he benefits or injures, for any given population of the universe. But the man who says "the more happiness, the better" is going far beyond this view. For he is saying that if the universe does not contain the possibility of your doing good or harm, then it is your duty to go out of your way to create situations in which you *could* do good (or harm). To put it another way: the existence of duties and of moral reasons for doing things depends, in the utilitarian conception, upon the existence of people. Consequently, one can increase the number of situations in which one has duties and moral reasons, as opposed to merely personal reasons, for doing things by increasing the population. But on whose view of morality is it our duty to go out of the way to create duties for ourselves? We believe that it is our duty to keep promises; must we also insist that, as a corollary, we must make as many promises as possible?

Such a view, incidentally, might lead to some weird consequences. Imagine a universe in which everyone is perfectly happy on account of his own efforts, so that nobody ever has a moral reason to do anything therein. Our so-called "utilitarian" who argues that we must increase the population for moral reasons, would have to say that such a universe is less desirable than one in which many people could be made happier by the efforts of others, and this in turn would, I suppose, have to be reckoned a worse one than one in which there were some sufferers whose suffering could be relieved by others! But that such is

not the utilitarian view should, I think, be perfectly evident. Quite the contrary: given a universe, it follows from utilitarianism, at least as Mill and Bentham construed it, that it would be best off if everyone in it were perfectly happy by his own efforts, and worse off if people had to constrain themselves from self-seeking by assisting others.

It must always be borne in mind that I am not arguing that there is no reason of *any* kind for preferring larger to smaller universes or vice versa. In the first place, within suitable limits, a larger population has a better chance for securing happiness to all than a smaller one owing to the necessities of industrialization and economic organization, and other such things. And in the second place, there is no reason on earth why people cannot *like* larger universes better than smaller ones. I am only pointing out that we must not confuse matters of taste with matters of morality. Those who argue that if they like larger populations better than small ones and therefore have a moral duty to make the population as large as possible, are in fact saying that they have a duty to make *themselves* happier: for the reason they must give for their actions is that the effect of them is to get something that they like. And this, as argued earlier, is wrong. There can be no question, on utilitarian principles, of a "duty" to do what one likes.

V

On the other hand, however, I now wish to argue that it does follow from utilitarian principles that, if we could predict that a child would be miserable if born, then it is our duty *not* to have it. This result, I admit, will look rather peculiar in view of my preceding argument; but the peculiarity can be overcome if we consider certain logical points about duty-fulfilling and duty-transgressing.

As is generally accepted today, every statement describing a particular duty on a particular occasion must be backed up by a general principle of some kind, from which the particular one follows by application. Such is certainly the case with utilitarianism, at any rate. Now let us suppose, as is plausible, that two of our utilitarian duties are to avoid inflicting misery on people, and to reduce misery where it exists. The first of these is a general principle which might be put into logically precise form in some such manner as this: "each person *x* is such that for each person *y*, *x* should not inflict suffering on *y*", while the second would be, "each person *x* is such that for each person *y*, if *y* is suffering, then *x* should reduce *y*'s suffering". Now, as we

know, all general statements of a hypothetical form " $(x) Fx \supset Gx$ ", are equivalent to universal disjunctions, " $(x) (- Fx \vee Gx)$ ". And this means that there are two ways of acting in accordance with either of these duties: either there is no person x upon whom to inflict suffering, or if there is, then to avoid inflicting it on him, in the first case; and in the second, either x is not suffering, or we reduce his suffering. I am, of course, neglecting complications such as supervening duties; also I am assuming that a duty to reduce suffering is a duty to *try* to reduce it.

On the other hand, there is only one way in which such a principle may be infringed, and that is by the occurrence of a state of affairs described by a true existentially quantified statement. Thus, I can infringe the first duty if the following statement is true: "there is someone on whom I have inflicted misery", and in the other case, "someone _{x} is suffering and someone _{y} has failed to reduce x 's suffering".

From this analysis, it will again be evident that we cannot have a duty to produce children just because the latter would be happy. For even if it were our duty to make everyone as happy as possible, we would be guilty of no transgression of it if we were not to add to the population, though we would transgress it by making somebody less happy than he otherwise might have been. In other words, the duty being "each y is such that for each x , y should make x as happy as possible"; and if, say, "the son of Jones" does not exist, then it is not the case that Jones is failing to make his son as happy as possible. Or, to sum it up: true affirmative existential statements are not necessary to fulfil duties, but *are* necessary to *infringe* them.

Now let us suppose that we are contemplating having a child, who would, we know, be miserable. For example, suppose that, we know he would have a hereditarily-acquired painful disease all his life; or that we are poverty-stricken unemployables living in a slum. In both these cases, we can reasonably predict that any child of ours would be miserable. Now, these miseries will be unavoidable if we produce the child; and consequently, a counter-instance to a duty statement will be true, namely: "a child of Smith's is miserable and the Smiths could have prevented this." This would violate the second duty. But quite likely it would violate the first too, for although one does not inflict pain on someone by giving birth to him even though he is in pain ever after, since if you cannot make someone happy by bearing him, you also cannot make him miserable by doing so, nevertheless in many such cases, *e.g.* the slum-dwelling case, you will actually

have inflicted misery on the child, by underfeeding him, exposing him to disease, filth, and ugliness, making him associate with equally wretched persons, and so forth, and thus you will also have transgressed the first duty. And in both cases, you could have avoided these evils by not having the child in question.

If, therefore, it is our duty to prevent suffering and relieve it, it is also our duty not to bring children into the world if we know that they would suffer or that we would inflict suffering upon them. And incidentally, I think this also is a strong argument against those who think that it is our *duty* to make everyone as happy as possible. For this is a duty we could infringe by having a child who we know would not be as happy as possible. And of how many people can't *this* be foreseen? Frankly, I do not think there is any such duty on utilitarian principles, but it is something to think about for those who do.

VI

Finally, we may briefly consider the moral relevance of indirect effects on the "general happiness". Clearly, it will often be the case that we can foresee good or bad effects on the existing population by the production of new people. If we assume, as seems reasonable enough to me, that an advanced civilization is likely to be happier than a primitive one, and that industrialization is necessary to advanced civilization, then it is obvious that a fairly substantial population will be necessary to achieve these desirable ends. On the other hand, as we also know, too large a population tends to have adverse effects from the agricultural point of view. With too much pressure on food supply, inferior lands have to be put into cultivation, and yield per man-hour tends to go down; withal, if the pressure is too severe, as it is in some parts of the world today, one of two evils will set in: either some people will starve or be severely shorted in their diets while others have enough, so that the various evils resulting from inequality will set in, or everyone will have less than enough. In all likelihood, there is an optimum population for any particular piece of land at a given state of advancement in agricultural technology, as the economists tell us. A further consideration is the aesthetic effects of over- or under-population. If population is very dense, people will be crowded together, and will have little solitude. Further, little land will be available for parks and natural scenery. If it is too thin, on the other hand, human intercourse is much reduced, and the interesting by-products of cities, such as the ability to maintain art galleries and concert halls, and the support of architecturally interesting buildings, will be missed.

Now it seems to me clear that all of these considerations are of the sort which will provide what, in the narrowest sense, may be called "utilitarian" reasons for changing the sizes of populations. The only question of interest is which of these would give rise to genuine duties, and which merely to something less. My final suggestions, which the reader may take or leave, follows here.

Many critics of utilitarianism will object that according to this latest turn, we have a right to increase slave populations in order to benefit the rest. This is false, I believe, but the discussion of it would occupy too much space to be included here. Other objections of the same kind also seem to me misguided.

It is obvious that there can be good reasons for producing children, and also that there can be good ones for not producing them. But when are these sufficiently stringent to give rise to a duty rather than merely to a moral inducement? My own answer, which I cannot defend here, would be that whenever the production of new children would either result in misery for them, or would result in substantial decreases in the happiness of other people, it is one's duty not to have them. If, for example, one's child would be a burden upon the public, then it seems to me one has no right to produce him. It therefore seems to me that the public has the right to prohibit the having of children in such cases.

Is it *ever* one's duty to have children? I can think of only one case where it might. If it can be shown that the populace will suffer if its size is not increased, then it seems to me that one could perhaps require efforts in that direction, and punish those who could comply but do not. But I am inclined to think that such a situation is exceedingly rare.

There is one final question which might bring the whole issue into a sort of focus. This is: is there any *moral* point in the existence of a human race, as such? That is to say, would a universe containing people be morally better off than one containing no people? It seems to me that it would not be, as such, at any rate on utilitarian grounds. We might *prefer*, like Smart, a universe containing people to one that does not contain them, particularly since we presumably would not be able to occupy the second one ourselves; but is this, then, a moral preference? It seems to me, again, that it is not, and that the effort to make it one is a mistake. Given people to have them toward, there will be duties; but if we are not given them, questions of duty will not arise. And it is not a question of duty whether we should create new duties. Our duty is to fulfil them, once they are raised.

University of New Hampshire