

## Utilitarianism: A Contemporary Statement (Robin Barrow)

Romulo F. Magsino

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deficiencies of *Teacher Education in Ontario*, a report that is described as anti-educational, opposed to individual professionalism, and against collegiality and autonomy. In contrast to the report, Woodhouse recommends an individual professionalism that is rooted in disciplines, pedagogical knowledge, and critical thinking.

If the reader is looking for a collection of philosophical essays that introduces a number of educational issues to practitioners, this work may be suitable. For those who are looking for personal readings in contemporary analytic and normative philosophy of education on topics regarding religion, aesthetics, gender issues, censorship, student autonomy, and professionalism, the volume contains many worthwhile essays. The work should also be of interest to those who are interested in policy issues and ethical concerns. The volume may be slightly less serviceable for those who seek a collection of philosophical essays on educational topics that is designed for aspiring teachers who have little or no background in philosophy of education. Even in this regard, however, one might list some of the essays as required reading for students—for example, “Analytic Philosophy of Education: Development and Misconception,” “Gender and Moral Agency,” and “Teacher Empowerment: Unmasking Disciplinary Power.”

*Reviewed by Douglas J. Simpson, Texas Christian University*

**Robin Barrow, *Utilitarianism: A Contemporary Statement* (Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1991).**

Twenty years ago, Bernard Williams expected to hear no more of utilitarianism which, to him and other anti-utilitarians, certainly looked moribund. However, his expectation and perception proved illusory. The subsequent publication of numerous significant articles and books on utilitarianism and the appearance in 1989 of a notable journal, *Utilitas*, demonstrate its continuing vigour as an ethical theory.

In *Utilitarianism: A Contemporary Statement*, Barrow notes that the potential of this theory has been vitiated by its having been misrepresented and misunderstood. Thus, the volume aims at presenting a coherent, viable theory and defending it against persistent objections. The result is a forceful version to welcome or contend with, but not ignore.

To pave the way for his version, Barrow strategically establishes (in Chapter 2) a defensible view of an ethical theory which attempts “to explicate what in ideal circumstances would constitute right conduct,” rather than “provide unambiguously prescriptions for conduct in the imperfect world we inhabit” (p. 12). He underlines the consequentialist character of utilitarianism which insists that the rightness of an act depends on whether it maximizes intrinsic good. Nevertheless, he rightly claims that his rule-utilitarian version “would accept that certain actions ought to be performed regardless of the consequences of performing them on particular occasions” (p. 19). Thus, he undercuts the alleged tension and (to him, unhelpful) distinction between teleological and deontological ethical theories.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Barrow lucidly outlines his reformulation of utilitarianism and its central premise of happiness. Claiming that happiness is

the only thing that in itself has the supervenient quality of goodness, he asserts the central hedonistic utilitarian doctrine: “. . . happiness or pleasure is the only ultimate end and. . . the rightness of actions is to be determined by their propensity to produce or contribute to that end.” He adds, “. . . happiness is the sole thing that is morally good in and of itself” (p. 40). This is not to say, Barrow rightly cautions, that there are no other intrinsic goods, though there is only one *moral* intrinsic good; or that “happiness” means “good”; or that happiness is the supreme good, since utilitarians value other goods. Utilitarianism is committed, however, to the view that “what we ought to do, what acts are morally right, is determined by consideration of what overall set of acts would combine to produce complete happiness in ideal circumstances” (p. 45)—that is, in a world in which “everyone would be fully happy and, therefore, equally happy” (p. 47). The theory assumes that “all persons are equally deserving of respect in that they are persons: it is their personhood, for all that the salient characteristics of a person is said to be the capacity to experience happiness and misery, that makes them moral beings. . . .” (p. 53).

Central to utilitarianism, happiness is, for Barrow, a state of mind involving “a sense of being at one with the world, of thinking or reflectively feeling that things are as one would have them to be” (p. 68). Accompanied or not by a variety of sensations, it is not to be identified with any particular degree of emotional intensity or physical sensation. While it is logically incompatible with states of mind such as anxiety, envy, fear indicating that they are at odds with one’s world, no other psychological traits or material conditions are either necessary or sufficient for a person to be happy. Persons are completely happy “if and only if they have self-awareness and they are conscious of no disharmony, no lack of fit, between the way the world is and the way they would like it to be” (p. 76). A broad state of mind, happiness implies nothing about any specific types, its likely sources, or what are or are not acceptable means of attaining it. As such, though obviously normative, it begs very few value questions. Consequently, utilitarianism “allows of a degree of diversity in morally acceptable conduct. . . without descending to the incoherence of extreme relativism” (p. 92).

Barrow devotes the remaining six chapters to a sustained, rigorous, and compelling argument in defence of his version of utilitarianism. In Chapter 5, he argues against MacIntyre who charges that utilitarians necessarily reflect dominant attitudes and beliefs and, thus, justify an evil society. On the contrary, given the utilitarian commitment to the ideal of complete happiness for all, “a community in which some persons gain happiness at the expense and suffering of others. . . is obviously unacceptable” (p. 103). To dispel the criticism that utilitarianism countenances despicable acts against individuals, Barrow distinguishes (in Chapter 6) between act- and rule-utilitarianism and concedes the objectionable character of the former. Fortunately, his rule-utilitarian version assumes the principle that all persons are of equal significance. Thus, a morally acceptable society requires a social arrangement in which all people are equally and fully happy, mandates rule-following, and asks all to do what they sincerely believe to be most productive of happiness. In Chapter 7, Barrow takes issue with J.S. Mill’s position that happiness or pleasure admits of different qualities, unless quality involves more or less intensity and duration, effects on more or fewer people, certainty of consequences, potential for further happiness, and

long- or short-term impact of consequences. Otherwise, to accept qualitative differences is to accept some other criterion of worth besides happiness; this unacceptably dislodges happiness as the only intrinsic moral good. Against the charge that utilitarianism devalues other goods because of its commitment to happiness, Barrow points out (in Chapter 8) that his version is an ethical rather than a general value theory and, thus, does not address non-moral values. It does not deny, either, moral values other than happiness, although they are regarded as morally good only to the degree that they contribute to it. In Chapter 9, Barrow reiterates that utilitarianism assumes equal respect for persons, a principle preventing the sacrifice of individuals for social good and highlighting individual good. Nonetheless, he cautions against requiring the performance of supererogatory acts, which he thinks is likely to be counterproductive. Finally in Chapter 10, he tries to demonstrate that, rather than being perceived as too crass in promoting the primacy of happiness in morality, utilitarianism deserves serious exploration. His version, he insists, can give rise to a system of universally binding rules as well as rules binding within particular societies. For Barrow, such a system will no be unworthy of our deepest moral sense.

*Utilitarianism: A Contemporary Statement* exhibits Barrow's characteristic incisiveness, logical persuasiveness, and bold scholarship. It shows his willingness to stake out his definitive views which, predictably, are bound to provoke criticism from anti-utilitarians and non-hedonistic utilitarians alike. His holding a subjective conception of happiness rather than an objective one (see Kraut, 1979) makes individuals' subjective perceptions or judgements about their relationships with the world the basis for ascertaining their states of (un)happiness. Accordingly, critics are likely to condemn his version as at bottom relativistic, despite his attempt to demonstrate that he seeks appropriate balance between objectivity and subjectivity. His subjective conception may also be regarded as one which not only ultimately reduces morality to prudence in pursuit of individual happiness but also departs from the popular view of morality as relating to the quality of human relationships and their impact on human beings. Even utilitarians, especially those adhering to the objective conception of happiness, are likely to fault him not only for underestimating Mill's objective conception of happiness but also for depicting it as hopelessly confused. Indeed, recent Millian exegesis by Brink (1992), Donner (1991), and Hoag (1986; 1992), for example, seems to demonstrate that Mill's views on happiness, as well as his overall utilitarian position, are more coherent and stronger than critics suppose.

Nevertheless, Barrow is explicitly concerned with arguing his utilitarianism rather than demolishing Mill's or any other version. He also does not mind discarding common usage or conceptions in pursuit of a coherent, plausible version. Thus, he may legitimately brush some of the criticisms aside and dare his critics to challenge the coherence and plausibility of this views.

Barrow's version appears impregnable indeed. Still, critics may insist that this appearance of impregnability results from his tight delimitation of the notion of ethical theory. Allegedly an attempt at the full delineation of his utilitarian version, which applies universally and within specific societies, will show theoretical and practical difficulties in his position. Such a criticism, however, is for another work of Barrow's. Perhaps more pointed at this time is

the charge that the version's appearance of impregnability derives from his use of two principles—respect for/value of persons and equality of persons—which are not only at the heart of non-utilitarian theories but are also the subject of much debate. It may be claimed that his assuming and enlisting these two principles understandably strengthens Barrow's hedonistic utilitarian position. But, it may be asked, to what extent would Barrow's version be different from Mill's, once the notion of person is untangled to reveal its distinctive elements of human abilities and predispositions, the exercise of which is central to the Millian notion and value of happiness? To what degree is Barrow's version a utilitarian one, once the ramifications of the two assumed principles are unravelled? Doesn't the background assumption of the value of the person effectively act as the norm for determining which happiness (within an individual's experience, and/or among individual's experiences) are to be maximized within the full theory of hedonistic utilitarianism? If it does, doesn't the moral value of the person supersede the moral value of happiness?

Barrow's response to these questions (and those from other commentators) will surely be fascinating, and his full account of utilitarianism will be eagerly anticipated. For now, he is to be lauded for contributing a landmark in the development of utilitarianism as a theory of morality.

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*Reviewed by Romulo F. Magsino, The University of Manitoba*