

21 June 2013

"Justice": from Warburton: Bentham, Mill, Arendt, Dilemmas, Rawls, Singer

The chapter on Bentham revisits Utilitarianism, but he is also noted for his famous quotation that "natural rights is simply nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts". Simon Blackburn "the Big Questions" page 178 is one reference. Mill had a lot to say about freedom as an aspect of justice. Hannah Arendt found that evil deeds often come not from deliberate malice, but from failure to think – the banality of evil. We have looked at "Dilemmas" before – should you kill two people to save seven? Rawls is one of my favourites – you can't look at his theory of how a just society should work too often! The chapter on Singer is a neat attempt at rounding off of the book by linking him right back to Socrates – a philosopher who asks annoying and uncomfortable questions!

Today's discussion from the start was filled with examples to compare with some of the ideas we had read: were the examples different in nature or just in degree? We started off comparing Peter Singer's challenge that we ignore the starving in Africa with Arendt's condemnation of Eichmann for not thinking about what he was doing. Just maybe that is stretching a point comparing uncaring inaction with efficiently mechanising ethnic cleansing, but we await with interest the explanation of how those responsible for upholding standards in hospitals were "just doing their job" when they destroyed unfavourable reports. We discussed the mind game of diverting the train to prevent five workers being killed – but unavoidably killing some other worker, and was it really different to push a fat man onto the track to bring about the same consequence. A good argument was advanced that the workers would be aware of the risks when they signed up – so maybe we should consider what they would think of such action. This led on to thinking about acts of self sacrifice and heroism, and whether there could be any "duty" to behave beyond reason in such a way.

We attacked & defended Bentham: Ok his measures and definitions of "pleasure" can be challenged, and do lead to such dilemmas as discussed, but he was an early egalitarian and the first champion of animal rights, driven by his principle of minimizing pain. And he did try to quantify the consequences of a course of action. We moved on to John Rawls' idea of looking at the worst off rather than the average effect. This led inevitably to bankers' bonuses (ok only if they incentivise and deliver better job opportunities and benefits to the poor) and then to a justification of unionisation to fight the exploitation of labour in times of unemployment: but wait – in today's global economy, don't the even worse off of the developing world have a right to these jobs?

We covered most of the ground if thinly – Mill's idea of maximising freedom on the "no harm" principle, but it is still worth reading Simon Blackburn on rights.