

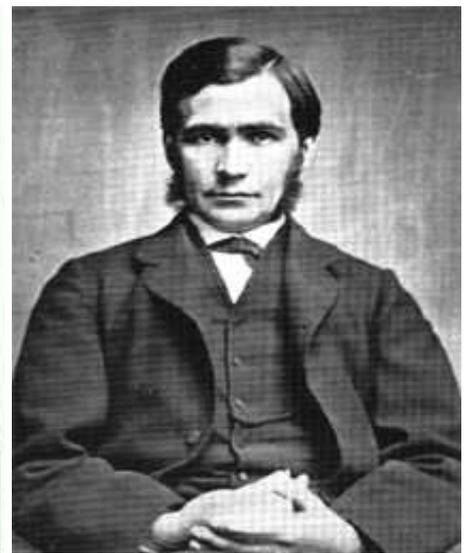
Bentham, Mill and Green on the nature of the good¹

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to compare three thinkers with respect to one moral issue. The three thinkers are Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hill Green.



Jeremy Bentham

John Stuart Mill

Thomas Hill Green

These are thinkers of three successive generations. The influence Bentham had on Mill, as well as the influence Bentham and Mill had on Green, is undisputed. Unlike Mill, however, Green did not see himself as a disciple of the utilitarian school, so one could question whether Green is a natural follower of the first two philosophers.. It will be demonstrated here that there is a notable progression of ideas from Bentham, through Mill, to Green: a progression that throws light on the nature of the good.

The issue this paper will address is how each thinker dealt with the potential conflict between the personal good and the common good. The ‘personal good’ is synonymous with ‘the good of the individual’ or with ‘personal happiness’, while the ‘common good’ is synonymous with ‘the good of society’ or ‘general happiness’. A common feature of the three philosophers is that each preferred to pre-empt the

¹ I would like to thank Richard Cookson, Irena Nicoll and Philip Schofield for their help with this paper. This paper was presented to the Bentham Seminar, UCL, 20 March 2003.

possibility of such a conflict. They would rather see these two goods—the individual and the social—as either in natural harmony with each other, or as essentially reconcilable. What happens though in cases where such a conflict exists and cannot be amicably resolved? It is a fact that cases where the personal good and the common good are antagonistic exist and the three philosophers had to face up to this fact. My task is to address each thinker in turn and see how his philosophy dealt with this problem.

The paper focuses on the cases of irreconcilable conflict between the common good and the personal good. It deals with two possible solutions to this conflict: when it is resolved in favour of the first, and when it is resolved in favour of the second. We shall see that the three thinkers tended to give priority to the common good over the personal good (though this is less true of Mill than of the other two). However, Bentham, Mill and Green were all genuinely concerned with the good of the individual and all gave serious theoretical backing to this concern. As giving priority to the personal good over the common good is a more difficult task than giving priority to common good over the personal good, I have paid special attention to how each of the three philosophers dealt with the former.

None of the three thinkers addressed directly the moral issue this paper raises. So my aim is to find answers that are not readily available. In the process of reviewing each thinker in turn, I will try to resolve the problems that are touched but not dealt with. The conclusions are that (1) all three philosophers play an important role in the process of emancipating the status of the personal good, (2) that addressing the cases of irreconcilable conflict between the personal and the common good is an essential part of any theory of the nature of the good, and finally that (3) T H Green's moral philosophy is best suited to give a satisfactory solution to such irreconcilable conflicts.

1. Jeremy Bentham

For Bentham the good is pleasure (synonyms of pleasure being benefit, advantage, happiness) and the opposite of pain (synonyms of pain being evil, mischief, unhappiness). Bentham believed that human nature is such that we tend to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The metaphor which he uses is that nature has placed

mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.² We could fight against their domination but ultimately our thoughts and actions are governed by them. With respect to the good, for Bentham, what the case 'is', is the same as what the case 'ought' to be.³ It is not only that by nature we try to increase pleasure and diminish pain, but also that we should aim to increase happiness, and diminish unhappiness. If anything, Bentham's emphasis on the normative character of his principle—at least in the first pages of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*—is stronger than on its descriptive character. Bentham's point is that if people did not pursue happiness, then what they did would be wrong. If people believe that happiness is bad and pain is good then they have succumbed to caprice instead of reason, they live in darkness instead of light.

The *principle of utility* recognises this subjection [to the governance of the two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*], and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law.⁴

The principle of utility asserts both that we do in fact pursue pleasure *and* that we should do so, because this is the reasonable thing to do. In explaining the nature of the good Bentham reviews 14 kinds of pleasure. He refers to a wide and subtle range of pleasures including pleasures of the intellect, social pleasures and so on. He demonstrates that some pleasures are more complex than others—indeed that some pleasures contain an element of pain, like the pleasure of relief which is possible only as a result of the cessation of pain.

Bentham is very helpful in explaining how his utility principle differs from other moral perspectives. He gives as examples two other principles which are adverse to the principle of utility. These are the principle of 'asceticism' and the principle of 'sympathy and antipathy'. The principle of asceticism is the opposite of the principle of utility. Those who adopt it believe that pleasure is bad and pain is good. It may seem incredible that someone could adopt such a principle, but Bentham points to two

² Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, edited by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, Oxford, 1996, (*The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*), p. 11. Hereafter *IPML (CW)*.

³ For a good discussion about whether this constitutes the so called 'naturalistic fallacy' see P. Schofield 'Jeremy Bentham, the principle of utility and legal positivism', inaugural lecture (London, 2002).

classes of men who had embraced this principle—'a set of moralists', that is, the philosophers, and 'a set of religionists'. The first have tried to condemn pleasure, the second have tried to 'make it a matter of merit and duty to court pain'.⁵ So the religionists have gone further than the philosophers. The philosophers have tried to make pain a matter of indifference, but they never proclaimed it to be something good. They have also denounced pleasure, but not all pleasure—only basic, physical pleasures. Philosophers have glorified refined pleasures but always under a different name 'the honourable', 'the glorious', 'the reputable', 'the becoming'.⁶ Although the philosophers are more subtle than the religious people, their views tend to lead to the same effect—to create an attitude of disapprobation of the principle of utility, branding anyone who adopts this principle with the term 'Epicurean'.

According to Bentham, the problem with the principle of asceticism is that it cannot help us run our public life. It could guide private conduct but it is thoroughly useless, indeed dangerous, when applied to the business of government. While the principle of utility can be consistently pursued, the principle of asceticism cannot. If only one tenth of humankind were to pursue it consistently, Bentham says, the world would turn into hell.⁷

The other principle averse to the principle of utility is the principle of sympathy and antipathy. The pitfall of this principle is its subjective character. According to this principle, one approves and rewards an action if one happens to like it, and disapproves or punishes an action if one happens to dislike it. According to Bentham, an element of objectivity is needed. There must be some empirical evidence about the nature of the action and Bentham believes that only the principle of utility provides the desired objective criterion.

To recapitulate: the good is the increase of pleasure and the diminution of pain. However, whose good is this? Is it the good of the individual or the good of the community? The answer is both. For Bentham, defining the good of the individual is the same as defining the good of the community. The community is made of many individuals. In the same way in which the community is an aggregate of individuals, the good of the community is an aggregate of the good of the individuals.

⁴ *IPML (CW)*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Does Bentham envisage a conflict between the good of the individual and the good of the community? When there is a conflict, how should it be resolved? Does the good of the community override the good of the individual? Does Bentham consider unconditional protection for certain areas of personal interest, in other words, does Bentham allow space for rights? Before addressing these questions directly, I will review in turn Bentham's concern with the good of the individual, and his concern with the good of society. We will then be in a better position to see what answers Bentham can provide to these questions.

Bentham values the good of the individual. We can find evidence for this in at least four areas of his studies: in his psychological hedonism, in his concern with the security of the individual, in his criticism of the power of bureaucrats, and in his defence of liberty. To start with, the element of psychological hedonism which is a part of Bentham's utilitarian theory, can be given a positive spin. Traditionally it has been heavily criticised, on the assumption that psychological hedonism always implies egoism or selfishness. The logic of this criticism is that if the good is pleasure and pleasure exists as felt and experienced by the individual, then promoting the good is the same as promoting selfishness. Therefore some of Bentham's defenders have argued that psychological hedonism is not a part of Bentham's Utilitarianism.⁸ I think that defining the good as the pleasant does not carry morally negative implications. The fact that individuals pursue their own pleasure does not imply that they neglect and disrespect the pleasure of others. My claim is that the hedonistic aspect of Bentham's utilitarianism casts the definition of the good in the light of the personal good. Bentham wants to liberate the status of personal pleasure from the spell of moral disapproval. Defending individuals in their pursuit of pleasure is one of the revolutionary elements of Bentham's utilitarian philosophy. It is brave to argue that there is nothing wrong with the fact that individuals pursue their own pleasure. What Bentham says is that seeking and finding pleasure is good; seeking and finding more pleasure is even better. The philosophical claim that the pursuit of pleasure is good emancipates the status of the personal good.

Defending the good of the individual is at the heart of the utilitarian doctrine. However, later it will become clear that Bentham's utilitarianism is not fully loyal to this engagement with the personal good. Thus it is vital to constantly bear in mind,

⁸ See P. Kelly, *Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice*, Oxford, 1990, pp. 26-7.

regardless of the other aspects of Bentham's philosophy, that there is an essential link between defining the good as the pleasant and taking the good of the individual seriously.

Bentham cared for the good of the individual understood not only as pleasure but also as a long—term interest—a distinction which Bentham did not, but many other philosophers did, find significant. Bentham believed that one of the most important roles of the government is to provide security in which people could pursue their own individual goals and pleasure with the least possible interference, unease and frustration. Bentham was anxious to protect individuals against abuses of power on the part of bureaucrats. Finally, Bentham's views on liberty also took personal interest to heart. He believed that people should be allowed the liberty to do as they liked unless this caused harm to others.⁹ It could be argued that all these strands of Bentham's philosophy expressing concern with the good of the individual are put into jeopardy by Bentham's ardent critique of rights.¹⁰ The argument in defence of Bentham here is that his particular views on legislation and the function of the government express genuine concern for what we nowadays call rights.¹¹ In other words, Bentham has an implicit, though not explicit theory of rights.

On the other hand, Bentham's concern with the good of society rivals his concern with the good of the individual. We can find its source in two main areas: Bentham's 'second' definition of the utility principle and in his preoccupation with improving the system of legislation. Bentham defines the utility principle as increasing the pleasant and decreasing the painful, but also as 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. This second definition of the good, as the greatest happiness of the greatest number, means that the happiness of a single individual will always be trumped by the happiness of a group of people. This has always caused serious concern among liberal thinkers. But again, as was the case with psychological hedonism, it is possible to give a positive spin to this definition. It must be right that more happiness is better than less happiness; that more people being happy is better than fewer people, or than only one person being happy. Again this is a revolutionary

⁹ I am indebted to Irena Nicoll for her help in the discussion of these issues.

¹⁰ Bentham's reference to rights as 'nonsense upon stilts' is probably the most famous and often cited expression concerning the nature of rights and used as an example of a philosophical criticism of rights.

¹¹ See F. Rosen, 'Bentham and Mill on Liberty and Justice' in *Lives, Liberties and the Public Good*, ed. G. Feaver and F. Rosen, Houndmills, 1987, and P. Kelly, *Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice*.

element in Bentham's doctrine: the happiness of the majority is more important than the happiness of the selected few.

Bentham's commitment to the law also expresses his concern with the well-being of the community. For Bentham things like stability, lack of anarchy, existence of good legislation, good rules and norms are extremely important. Creating a society with stable patterns of interaction where expectations can be sustained is the business of any government. Bentham's aversion to anarchy and his admiration of, and commitment to, good laws demonstrates the importance for him of social well-being.

So far so good. Bentham cares about the good of individuals as individuals; he also cares about the good of the community. The question is whether he envisages a potential conflict and whether he offers a solution consistent with his utilitarian theory. In the context of his critique of rights, Bentham makes the following statement:

'The greatest enemies of public peace are the selfish and the hostile passions: necessary as they are, the one to the very existence of each individual, the other to his security. ... Society is held together only by the sacrifice that men can be induced to make of the gratification's they demand: to obtain these sacrifices is the great difficulty, the great task of government.'¹²

This quotation demonstrates that Bentham sees very clearly the possibility of a conflict between the personal and the common good. Bentham also offers a solution to this conflict—in this case he commends sacrifice of personal passions in the name of public order. This may sound reasonable. However, this compromises the utility principle, according to which good is what increases overall pleasure. The good, that is, the pleasure, of those who seek gratification of their passions is being compromised. Does the utility principle allow for sacrifice of pleasure? Is there not a danger of slipping into the principle of asceticism? I do not believe Bentham could give an answer to these questions. Such questions, however, bring us back to what I briefly alluded to earlier—the double definition of the utility principle. One could see the utility principle as consisting of two separate parts that do not necessarily fit

¹² Bentham, *Nonsense upon Stilts in Rights, Representation and Reform: Nonsense upon Stilts and Other Writings on the French Revolution* ed. P. Schofield, C. Pease-Watkin and C. Blamires, Oxford, 2002, p. 321.

together (1) the good is what increases pleasure and diminishes pain: and this is so equally for individuals and for groups of people, and (2) the good is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

The problem of the second way of defining the principle of utility is that it does not allow space for defending the good of the individual in those cases where this good is in conflict with the good of all. However, this definition "takes sides"—it takes the side of the good of the community, in the event of conflict. While the first definition seems to be fair to both the personal and the common good, it does not take conflict into account, and accordingly, does not offer a solution to conflict.

In the case where a conflict between the personal good and the common good exists, there are two options: when the conflict should be resolved in favour of the first, and when the conflict should be resolved in favour of the second. How can a single philosophical principle cover both sets of cases: the cases where the common good should have priority over the personal good and the cases where the personal good should be protected at all costs, that is, be proclaimed as a human right? Part of the answer to this question is already implied in the question itself. To start with, it is enough to agree that a moral theory should provide a solution to both cases, and we could temporarily postpone the answer to 'how' this could be achieved. A theoretical solution must be posited to reconcile the two cases.. It seems that, because of its double definition of utility, the utilitarian doctrine is able to do this. Because of this double definition, the doctrine is ambivalent with respect to its commitment to individual welfare versus its commitment to social welfare. It is committed to both, but not in a manner that offers philosophical reconciliation. This ambiguity can be convenient, but because of the inconsistency inherent in it, it can lead to problems.

To conclude: Bentham's utility theory does not offer philosophically consistent solutions to the two possible outcomes of the conflict between the personal good and the common good. Bentham resolves these issues in practice but not on a theoretical level. On the one hand, in the case of security, freedom to pursue personal good is of paramount importance. On the other hand, in the case of a lawful and orderly society, the common good overrides personal interests. But how does this square with the utilitarian theory is a question that remains unanswered.

2. J. S. Mill

J. S. Mill's understanding of the good, by definition, is similar, if not identical to Bentham's:

According to the principle of utility or 'the Greatest Happiness Principle': actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.¹³

As with Bentham, this is both a description of how things are, and how they should be. In Mill's terms, this is both a 'theory of life' and a 'theory of morality'.¹⁴ But Mill goes on to do something which Bentham does not do. Mill introduces a distinction between lower and higher pleasures. This is a very specific binary distinction accompanied by strong assertions. Certain kinds of pleasure, Mill argues 'are more desirable and more valuable than others'.¹⁵ Higher pleasures are derived from the exercise of the higher faculties. Mill does not specify what lower pleasures are, but they are connected with what he calls 'a lower grade of existence'.¹⁶ The basis of this opposition is the opposition between physical and mental pleasures. Mill argues that all utilitarians have acknowledged priority of mental over physical pleasures. However, with Mill this distinction acquires a greater significance than with other utilitarians, as he develops a notably powerful and sustained polemic about why higher pleasures are more valuable than lower pleasures.

First, they are always preferred by those who have experienced both. What can be seen as a paradox from a utilitarian point of view is the fact that the exercise of higher pleasures often goes together with some degree of suffering. People possessing the higher faculty, argues Mill, require more, in order to become happy. They are capable of more acute suffering and are susceptible to it, yet given a choice between the two they would prefer higher pleasures. Secondly, lower pleasures are such that we feel 'unwillingness' to indulge them. This unwillingness can be explained by things like 'pride', 'love of liberty and personal independence', 'the love of power',

¹³ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On liberty, Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. Geraint Williams, London, 1999, p.7. Hereafter, *Utilitarianism*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

‘the love of excitement’, and ‘a sense of dignity’.¹⁷ The final justification for the preference of higher pleasures is that they are more likely to be beneficial to others. A person of noble character will take pleasure in doing things that are good for others. This accords well with the utilitarian principle, which, Mill states, aims not at the agent’s own greatest happiness, but at the greatest amount of happiness altogether.¹⁸ This final justification of the pursuit of higher pleasures has a direct bearing on our discussion of the possible conflict between a personal good and the good of all. It demonstrates that contributing to the welfare of the community does not come at the price of personal sacrifice of pleasure. If pleasures are understood as higher pleasures, then the pursuit of personal pleasure may go hand in hand with the care for the good of others. Therefore the concept of higher pleasures is a device for avoiding the conflict between what is good for the individual and what is good for society.

As with Bentham, I will review Mill’s concerns with the social good and with the individual good in turn—this time starting with Mill’s commitment to the social good. In his essay *Utilitarianism*, Mill places very strong emphasis on the good of everyone. Statements like the following one occur frequently in his essay:

I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.¹⁹

Mill’s purpose in *Utilitarianism* is to defend the doctrine against a set of strong criticisms. His dominant strategy is to portray utilitarianism as amenable to common sense, and he tries to achieve this by arguing that his doctrine promotes the overall well-being of society. He wants to dissociate utilitarianism from accusations of egoism. In this sense, Mill’s promotion of the general happiness is an important part of his defence of the principle of utility.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Mill portrays the desire for general happiness as part and parcel of the desire for personal happiness. This is an argument that is characteristic of philosophers who tend to defend the importance of common good and it is typically made by idealist philosophers like T. H. Green, for example, as we shall shortly see. Mill claims that it is possible to develop one's character in a direction which makes the union between the desire for general and for personal happiness habitual. Education should be used 'to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole'.²⁰ This leads towards asserting the importance of the general happiness because it implies that if we see our own interest as diverging from the social interest we are showing weakness of character, and hence, doing something wrong. Indeed, after putting across these ideas, the moralistic spirit of the utilitarian doctrine becomes so overwhelming that Mill feels the need to soften his tone. Until now Mill has been defending utilitarianism against those who claimed that it was demeaning to human nature and therefore not a proper moral doctrine. Eventually, he considers an accusation coming from the opposite direction: that, portrayed like this, utilitarianism is too moralistic and puts too much pressure on the individual to consider the good of all in every single action.

In the reply to this accusation, Mill's defence of the common good is considerably softer. His answer is that utilitarianism is concerned not with motives but with outcomes. It does not attempt to exercise power over people's thoughts, but rather to encourage some responsibility with respect to the outcome of one's actions. It aims to provide guidelines about what is commendable. He points out that, in practice, very few people—one in a thousand—are in a position to multiply the happiness of others. Only a public benefactor 'has it in his power to do this in an extended scale'.²¹ The rest of us must settle for private happiness—our own and the happiness of those closest to us. The utilitarian doctrine commends, but does not force us, to do good for others. The doctrine is imperative only about what should not be done; not about what should be done. The only obligation it imposes is that our actions do not bring unhappiness to others. This argument reveals considerable weakening of Mill rhetoric about how much utilitarianism is concerned with the public good and its priority over the personal good. This naturally leads me to the discussion of Mill's engagement with the personal good.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Mill's concern with the good of the individual has both utilitarian and non utilitarian origins. Like Bentham, he links the good with what is pleasant and renounces suffering for suffering's sake. In other words, he explains the good through what feels good to the individual. As I have already argued, while discussing Bentham, this utilitarian credo has important implications for the status of the individual, and therefore, of the individual's good. The non utilitarian origins of Mill's defence of personal good are to be found in his apology for personal freedom in *On Liberty*. Although the message there does not contradict his utilitarian beliefs, his criticism of 'social pressure', 'public opinion' and 'social stigma' does not fit naturally with the utilitarian commitment to 'the greatest happiness and of the greatest number'. Mill addresses a direct conflict between the social and the personal and takes the side of the individual. The spirit of his defence of freedom in *On Liberty* is exactly the opposite to the spirit of his claim that the individual should be encouraged to see his good as part of the good of all. In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that the individual should be left free to explore his own options, to pursue diverse, and if necessary, eccentric, paths. Only by being free can he be creative and find the truth. In the long run, society as a whole will benefit from this, but the emphasis in Mill's passionate rhetoric is not on the public good but on the importance of personal freedom. He defends freedom for the sake of creativity, for the sake of truth, for the sake of individuality, because only individuality can counterbalance mass mediocrity.

Does Mill acknowledge a conflict between the common good and the personal good? He does by admitting that higher pleasures imply suffering: for example, the suffering of renunciation of lower pleasures. Unlike Bentham though, he tries to reconcile this conflict with utilitarian theory. For Bentham the priority of the common good over the personal good is often unquestioned. He does not engage with justifying the fact that this comes at the cost of sacrificing personal pleasure. Mill's way of dealing with the conflict is to argue that the sacrifice or the suffering implied in the experience of higher pleasures does not diminish our pleasure. He acknowledges a cost, but he portrays it as insignificant. The fact that we *prefer* higher pleasures somehow disqualifies the suffering as an important ingredient of these pleasures. As a result he does not give due recognition to the very fact of suffering,

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

and that suffering is the opposite of pleasure. He acknowledges but simultaneously disguises a conflict.

Bentham's solution is more straightforward and more realistic in the sense that Bentham sees that certain people will remain displeased in their obedience to the law and he does not feel the need to explain this discomfort in some positive light. He does not make the extra effort which Mill does in order to reconcile personal discomfort with the public good. This weakens the integrity of his utilitarian theory. Mill, on the other hand, tries very hard to maintain this integrity but achieves this at the cost of downplaying the realistic cost of personal sacrifice.

In the context of his defence of utilitarianism, Mill seeks reconciliation between personal happiness and the happiness of the greatest number. He tries to achieve this reconciliation by minimising the losses of personal happiness. His recognition of a conflict is only implicit. However, in the context of his defence of freedom in *On Liberty* he addresses a conflict between the individual and society and explains why and where this conflict should be resolved in favour of the individual. If there is a conflict between the personal good and the social good, and the personal good does not pose any threat to society, the conflict should be resolved in favour of the personal good. The reason for that is that an individual can develop properly only if he makes independent choices. '[T]o conform to custom merely *as* custom does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being.'²² The idea is that personal development entails an element of defying social stereotypes. There is a necessary dimension to the conflict between society and the individual and winning this conflict is for the individual a test for personhood.

3. T. H. Green

Unlike his two utilitarian predecessors, Green introduced different concepts for the good and the moral good. For Green, the good is what satisfies desire.²³ The moral good is human perfection found in activities which contribute to the well-being of the community, and if possible, to the well-being of humankind. So for Green, how human nature actually works, and how it should work, are two distinguishable states of affairs. This can be explained by the fact that for Green, human beings are such that they are capable of progressing from one stage to a higher stage. Human nature is

²² J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, London, 1985, p. 122.

essentially perfectible. Because of this process of self—development, there is a difference between the ordinary good and the moral good.

The ordinary good (I call it ‘ordinary’ for convenience, to distinguish it from the moral good) is what satisfies desire. We may desire pleasure, but Green insists this is not always the case. Green thinks that utilitarians made a psychological mistake in claiming that we always want pleasure. Green wants to establish a distinction between the desired and the pleasant, and on the basis of this distinction, to demonstrate that his moral theory differs from the utilitarian one. He argues that we desire self—satisfaction, not pleasure. However, at this stage—the stage of defining ordinary good—Green is not talking about sophisticated desires. I believe that Green’s definition of ordinary good is much closer to the utilitarian definition of the good as pleasant than he is prepared to admit. There cannot be a very important difference between the pleasant and the desired, as well as between pleasure and self-satisfaction. Locating the origin of the good in personal desire is one aspect of utilitarian revolutionary thinking. A traditional moral theory would define the good as what is reasonable. Defining the good as that which is desired (as opposed to that which is reasonable), in essence, gives each individual access to moral authority, and this is a very democratic thing to do. This is one reason why, I believe, all of these three thinkers placed a high value on the good of the individual. The good is not divorced from ordinary human nature, or from ordinary human pursuits which tend to be personal.

The moral good is different from the ordinary good. It is still related to human desire, however, not to just any desire, but specifically to the desire to do good for its own sake. Green describes a process of gradual transition from the pursuit of ordinary good, to the pursuit of moral good. His logic is as follows. The things we find desirable tend to change. Simple pleasure usually brings only a transient feeling of self-satisfaction, and often, its cessation is accompanied by pain. Therefore we start to seek satisfaction in objects that bring us a lasting feeling of welfare. We develop desires for things that are permanently good. What are these things? Green reviews two related categories of things: personal improvement and involvement in social activities. If we invest in developing a better character, we enjoy lasting benefits. If we do things that are good for others, as well as for ourselves, the goodness of our

²³ T.H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Oxford, 1890, p. 178, section 171.

action is magnified through the experience of others: the good does not finish when we cease to enjoy it—it continues in the enjoyment of other people.

The moral good, like the ordinary good, is linked to human desire. However, it is desired not so much for the personal benefits it brings to us, but because, through a process of development, we learn to desire the good for its own sake, or the good of others as much as our own good. There is a similarity between Green's moral good and Mill's higher pleasures. Mill tried to develop a more sophisticated concept of pleasure, and in a similar way to Green, he tried to unite personal perfection (high faculties) with care for others (nobility of character). This, however, could be tricky. If the notion of the pleasant is stretched too far, it loses what is essential to it, that is, the absence of pain. As we saw, higher pleasures imply some experience of pain. The same applies to Green's notion of the desired—stretched too far it loses what is essential to it, i.e., the achievement of one's own well-being.

However, because the concept of the moral good is central to Green's moral philosophy, it is more thoroughly developed and more useful than Mill's concept of higher pleasures: more useful for the purposes of moral theory. First, it is more enlightening with respect to our understanding of the nature of the moral good. It has a more direct social bearing. Whereas in Mill the element of personal perfection is stronger than the element of social awareness, this is reversed in Green. In a trade-off between becoming an excellent musician and doing something that would be more beneficial to society—accepting that these two could not be done together—Green would always recommend doing the good thing for society. Green's concept of personal perfection is more deeply embedded in social well-being than Mill's. Secondly, Green's concept of the moral good is more helpful than Mill's concept of higher pleasures because of Green's greater awareness that there could be a conflict between the pursuit of the ordinary good and the pursuit of the moral good. The pursuit of the moral good implies suspension of purely personal interest. Personal interest is legitimate in the pursuit of ordinary good but is not legitimate in the pursuit of moral good. This is a significant sacrifice and involves exercising one's power of will. This could involve suffering and pain, but for Green, suffering and pain are not necessarily bad. Bentham and Mill have, on occasions, deprived themselves of the option to legitimise pain and suffering.

Both Mill and Green acknowledge suffering in the trade-off between lower and higher pleasures or between ordinary and moral good, but Green gives due weight to

this fact. He offers a more truthful representation of what it takes to pursue the moral good and gives more credit to those who do get involved in the pursuit of the moral good. Being a good person is not easy. It cannot necessarily be described as pleasant, so it deserves appreciation when achieved. In this sense, Green is also more open about the possible conflict between the pursuit of personal good and the pursuit of the common good.

This leads us to the debate about how Green viewed the importance of the common good and the personal good respectively. Green's recommendation to everyone to embrace the good of the community as one's own good runs clearly through both his practical political theory and his moral philosophy. Green defined what the moral good is through the concept of the common good. In many contexts of his philosophy moral good and common good can be seen as synonyms. And, as it must have become clear from the discussion of the moral good, Green prioritises moral good over ordinary good. Practically this means prioritising the common good over the personal good.

Despite this wholehearted engagement with the good of the community, which extends to the good of humankind, most of his critics nowadays accept that Green was a liberal. Green was genuinely concerned with the good of the individual as well as with the common good. First, he expressed this concern directly: "To speak of any progress or improvement or development of a nation or society or mankind, except as relative to some greater worth of persons, is to use words without a meaning."²⁴ Secondly, he developed a theory of rights. According to Green, rights are powers recognised as belonging to the individual by the society, on the proviso that these powers will be used to contribute to the common good.²⁵ Unlike Bentham who was implicitly, but not explicitly concerned with rights, Green believed and argued that there are certain "powers" to which the individual is entitled and the society should provide those to him. And thirdly, defining the good via what is desired—a feature he shared with Mill and Bentham—represents, as I have argued earlier, an emancipation of the personal good.

What kind of solution does Green offer to the conflict between the personal good and the good of all? Like Mill, Green wishes to pre-empt the conflict between

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193, section 184.

²⁵ T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, ed. P. Harris and J. Morrow, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 26-7, section 26.

personal happiness and general happiness. Mill's higher pleasures and Green's moral good are reconciliatory concepts. They try to fulfill the ambitious project of making the pursuit of general happiness personally pleasant, of marrying the personal good to the common good. However, Green addresses the potential conflict between these two goods more successfully than does Mill. He is explicit about it: he reveals the costs of its solution, and he offers an answer to it. As stated earlier, the conflict between the personal good and the common good, when a conciliatory outcome is impossible, has two possible solutions—either in favour of the common good, or in favour of the personal good. Green provides a rationale for both cases. The solution he offers is the following. Personal good can be sacrificed in the name of the common good when this good is not crucial for personal flourishing and for the developing of one's moral personality. Personal good can be sacrificed when it has a limited, self-centred nature. A justification for such a sacrifice is that these self-centred personal goods are not the only personal goods we have at our disposal. We are capable of pursuing personal goods that either have the potential to, or already do, embrace the common good. The sacrifice and its cost—a degree of suffering—should be acknowledged.

Personal good should be of primary concern to society, the government and to the legislators when this good is a necessary condition for the development of one's moral character. That means it is essential for one's flourishing as well as for one's development into a moral agent. This is Green's justification of rights. The cost is the same—some degree of discomfort for those who have to abstain from preventing the exercise of these rights. In both cases somebody's interest has to give way. And both cases boil down to the sacrifices made by individuals. Both cases are explained by the process in which moral good overrides ordinary good. What makes Green more coherent than Mill or Bentham in his treatment of the dichotomy between the good of the individual and the good of the community is his dual definition of the good. His own dichotomy between ordinary and moral good is helpful. In the cases of conflict between the personal and common good—which are essentially the morally difficult cases—resolution can be achieved through the process of moving from ordinary to moral good. Another of Green's advantages is his acceptance of some degree of suffering. The failure to acknowledge a legitimate use of suffering deprives Bentham and Mill of one of the philosophical tools to explain moral behaviour.

Conclusion

When a conflict between the common good and the personal good is at stake, traditionally, political theorists have given priority to the common good. The idea is that, if society as a whole does well, eventually people as individuals will also benefit, even if in the short term it will cost them some liberties and pleasures. For this reason, terms like 'individual good' or 'personal good' frequently carry a degree of negative connotation. The personal good has become a victim of the relationship between the two kinds of good. Bentham, Mill and Green have done a lot for the emancipation of this concept. The main source of the three thinkers' defence of the individuals' good is their definition of the good as what is pleasant or desired. This gives serious weight to personal freedom. And although there is more to the good than 'what is pleasant' or 'what I happen to desire now', the basic link between the good and the pleasant/desired is purposefully maintained by all three thinkers even when they discuss more complex forms of the good.

Bentham lacks the theoretical consistency of Mill and Green, but it could be argued that he does not consider it to be of ultimate importance. His theory can offer us specific solutions that can be satisfactory for all practical intents and purposes. Mill explores—more than Bentham does—the potential of the utilitarian theory to defend the status of personal good. Green's philosophy turns out to be best suited for dealing with the irreconcilable conflict between the personal and the common good, because Green's moral theory is sensitive to the process of development and change in the nature of the good. It can allow for, explain, and resolve, a conflict between different goods.