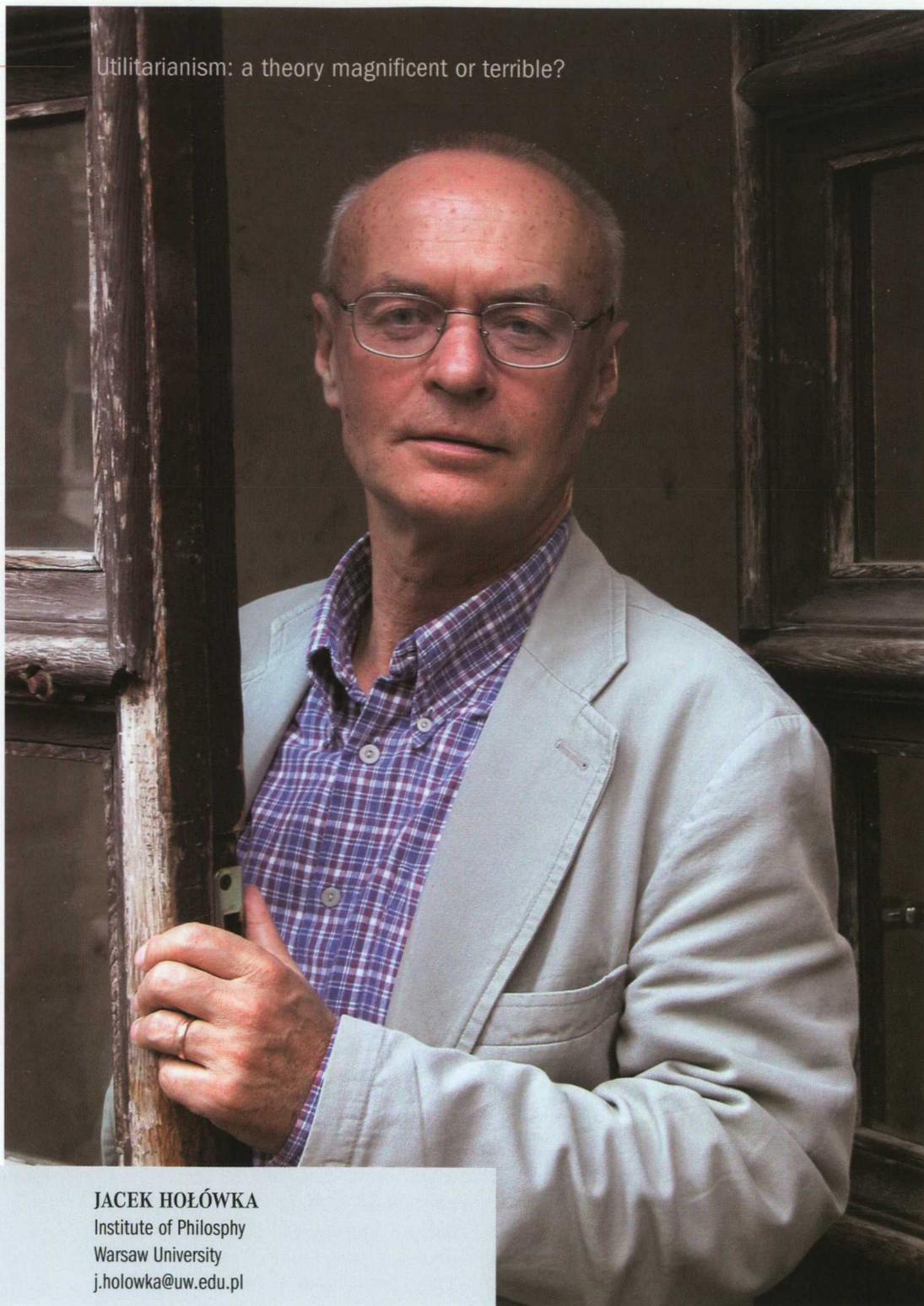


Utilitarianism: a theory magnificent or terrible?



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Throw the Rotten Oranges Out!

We talk to Prof. Jacek Hołowka from the Department of Analytical Philosophy about the pros and cons of utilitarianism, John Stewart Mill's take on politics, and forecasts for Poland's future

Academia: What is utility from the philosophical perspective? Is there a definition?

Jacek Hołowka: *In philosophy the notion of utility, or usefulness, has been pondered by everyone holding that idealism is the best solution to moral problems. They have included Jeremy*

Bentham and John Stuart Mill; the latter in my view represents the most credible version of utilitarianism. Put most simply, utilitarianism is an ethical theory which holds that utility is the sole value, and something is useful if it contributes to the happiness of the greatest number of people. That means if I have several courses of action available to me, I should consider who will feel the effects, ponder all the consequences, and compare the various options. As a utilitarian, I should recognize the route that promises to lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people as the proper course of action. In other words, maximizing happiness is the conclusive criterion of value. My personal convictions are as follows: utilitarianism is an excellent political theory, but a horrible theory in the domain of philosophy and morality.

Why is it a good political theory?

Because it cleanses a community's activity of ideology. It is a theory that does not succumb to naïve concepts of a bright future. It does not consent to the selection of any single distinctive goal, such as industrialization, meant to be achieved over 15 or 20 years. It does not maintain that there is any particular class or political party that knows the right way to shape the future. What it says is this: we should stay in touch with all people and try to understand what is best for them. Mill stated that very pointedly and stressed that democracy is the basis for a well-functioning society. But at the same time he qualified it and did not advocate direct democracy, only a kind of enlightened democracy. He rejected the principle that elections should be universal, equal, direct. For example, he thought an extra vote should be granted to everyone who earned a university degree, another to everyone who employed more than 10 people, another to recognized public figures. And anyone voters wanted to grant an extra vote to, would have one.

That would strengthen some and exclude others.

Well, there are people who deserve zero votes. Mill's principle also applies to voters. He was not a formalist, but he said: anyone who does not know how to read and write does not deserve to vote; whoever does not know how to do math does not deserve to vote; whoever does not pay taxes does not; and whoever who has gone bankrupt does not. And so yes, those people would be excluded. If someone goes bankrupt,

they demonstrate that they are not serious about what they do. It is therefore terrible to entitle them to decide things for other people. If someone does not know how to read or do math, are unable to process information for themselves and have to rely on hearsay, then their views will be a reflection of what others say. And so they should not be given the right to vote. Someone who does not pay taxes does not contribute to helping the society in which they live function better, and so there is no reason for them to decide how it operates. The basic attributes of the current system of voting are, I feel, quite propagandistic and above all invoke the support of those who are the least competent to influence the course of history. They would feel wronged if Mill's proposal were to be put into effect, but we should not be particularly concerned about that. As things now stand, after all, society is greatly susceptible to various forces of manipulation. The unpredictability of election outcomes seems to be exciting. But in that case, we could just as well roll a die to determine who should govern us. If, for instance, we do not demand that the media should inform us in detail about what the party agendas envision, as a consequence there are no party agendas. I consider it scandalous that no Polish political party at present is pledging to bring down unemployment, even though we have one of the highest rates in Europe. More than a million Poles have moved abroad. If they were to come back suddenly, unemployment would exceed 20%!

We do not have much influence on what politicians do. For example, parliamentary deputies can switch their party affiliation as they like during the course of a term.

Mill here coined the phrase "rotten oranges." If members of parliament retain the right to change their political affiliation, artificial majorities may emerge: conspiracies, informal parties that are unregistered and unknown, which focus on their own interests. These are the "rotten oranges." Mill warned against thinking we can protect against an invasion of such people by invoking a referendum or through direct rule. That is naïve. Our goal should be to construct parties based on a common campaign agenda and common interests, entitled to gather supporters throughout the country, not just within defined constituencies. Moreover, voters should have the right to recall their chosen representatives. Mill also argued that the people who back a specific

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member of parliament should themselves pay his or her salary. If their representative does not want to earn that salary, he or she should resign and make way for someone else. When someone goes into politics seeking big money, in Mill's view they are swelling the ranks of "rotten oranges."

I can see that you find that concept very much to your liking. It is tempting, but is it realistic?

It is not tempting, it is magnificent! There is only one objection to it: it would be very hard to secure such conditions in practice.

So we have described the advantages of utilitarianism in politics. Why, in your view, is it a terrible theory in moral philosophy?

It assumes that we all see ourselves as equal to strangers, that we have precisely the same kind of duty towards them. Even when I have children, I should consider whether somewhere else in the neighborhood might have children that are more poorly nourished and less well dressed than mine. If I give them money rather than spend it on my own kids, the sum of happiness in the world will minimally increase, and so I have a duty to do so. That is not convincing, and it leads to completely absurd consequences. Herbert Spencer proposed a certain syllogism. If we assume that the basic moral duty is to maximize the happiness in the world, that could be achieved in two ways: either by intensifying the happiness of individuals, or by increasing the population while maintaining the average. Because improving the happiness of individuals is hard but increasing the population is easy, utilitarianism tells us to overpopulate the world to the point when the sum of happiness is greatest. And only once the extra people begin to cause the average to decrease should we start to rein in natural population growth. That shows that utilitarianism is a senseless theory. This was also described by George Orwell in "1984" and Aldous Huxley in "Brave New World." They depicted characters who enforced certain strange ideals, calling for the maximization of a certain parameter, only no one actually wanted what that parameter represented. I am not at all interested in ensuring that the whole world will be happier and I cannot accept the staunch utilitarian's argument that I am environmentally egotistic. I simply believe that our capacity for global influence is significantly limited. There exist certain problems that should be resolved on a global scale: global warming,

air pollution, the consumption of natural resources, etc. But problem-solving by individual people is a task that only works in a narrow community.

And so I think that utilitarianism has got the priorities backwards. It rightfully encourages us to do things that are useful to the greatest possible number of individuals, but unnecessarily posits this as our first and most important duty. The next thing that seems very unconvincing in utilitarianism is its inability to answer the question of what different people will treat as utility. And here we are coming to the question that you first asked me, namely what the definition of utility is. None can be given. Anyone who wants a single definition will make a fool of themselves and distort utilitarianism. Because the sense of utilitarianism lies in the idea that the people concerned will decide for themselves what is useful to them.

Utilitarianism is therefore linked to liberalism.

That is best expressed by the principle that everyone is the best judge of their own case. But we can see, however, that people who are incompetent, who lack experience, who are beguiled by various religious principles or political programs, bring misfortune on themselves. We have to remember that in 1933 the Germans elected the Nazi Party in general elections. A government that brought misfortune, war, and vast destruction. Many other societies make similar mistakes. What can we say to that? We can only urge people to adopt an election system of the kind described by John Stewart Mill, not to turn a blind eye to the greatest difficulties, the greatest problems we face. In Poland, 30% of young voters recently backed Janusz Korwin-Mikke, the leader of the New Right Congress.

What should those people be told?

They need to be made to realize, discretely and delicately, that they have not really thought the issue through. There is not a single text that presents what Korwin-Mikke is proposing in a complete, clear way that is suitable to be discussed. Is he an extreme hardline conservative, or is he an extreme libertarian who will allow everyone to do as they wish and feels that no binding rules exist? He skips from one radical position to another, depending on the context. His young supporters do not realize the consequences of his proposals. Perhaps things would end in the emergence of a handful of very self-



Jacek Ostrowski/QUIP

-certain, aggressive, expansionistic capitalists who would fight among themselves or not, with everyone else being relegated to the function of a proletariat working hard to survive. And here there would be no unemployment benefits, whereas jobs would be almost impossible to find. This is essentially a recipe for civil war. The fact that we are losing 30% of votes among young people on an agenda that is in practice unfeasible is in my opinion a political tragedy. These people are relegating themselves to the sidelines, dooming themselves to having no influence on political life.

Most of them are well-educated. In that case, does the fact that more and more people in Poland are obtaining a university degree truly guarantee that we will have an increasingly enlightened society?

I'll answer that question, but you have to allow me to say some not very responsible things, because I have no ability to augur the future. In my opinion, there exists an unconscious conspiracy against young people. People of my age who have not yet left their jobs are reluctant to allow the new generations to take their place. Middle-aged people are frequently pleased with what they have and do not care that their place should be taken by successors. That causes a certain kind of inter-generational tension, leading the young generation to underscore how it differs from the previous one; in my opinion this is precisely the source of the Korwin-Mikke

phenomenon. But there is a certain unknown critical mass. Once it is exceeded, people who are well-educated, who know how to ensure their own interests, who have big ambitions and considerable talent, and who are interested in pursuing higher values, will once again be buying books and going to the theatre and opera. The caliber of the discussion on TV and in the press will improve, and our political system will improve at the same time. Certain elements of Mill's theory will be put into effect. We will be more critical, more demanding with respect to our political representatives, we will be demanding more boldly that incompetent ones should get the sack.

But won't we have more enlightened individuals mainly affiliated with the national-catholic right? What is happening now does make one optimistic.

Everything depends on whether we are able to build a well-functioning democratic system, supported by a majority. That is the strongest weapon against the right wing. Combined with an improvement in the quality of education, it offers the best counterweight to narrow nationalist and right-wing programs that would like to impose, by authoritarian means, measures of a certain type upon society. We need to work against that, defend ourselves, but there is never any guarantee. ■

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Pictured here: parliament building in Warsaw, July 2014

Interview by Anna Zawadzka