

A problematization of the concept of utility: Bentham's chrestomathic project.

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Abstract

Bentham's work related to education and schooling catches our attention, particularly his Chrestomathia or project of chrestomathic education, for it comprises the opportunity to question the notion of utility. We consider Bentham's reflection on education as an initiative to evaluate individual judgment and behavior regarding utility, this notion being constantly discussed and criticized. Three dimensions of the problem will be developed in the presentation.

Firstly, we'll present Bentham's chrestomathic project. Bentham aims at proposing a *tree of knowledge* covering all the branches of art and science from the most general to the most precise, following a logical order. This implies an articulation of sciences and arts, which are considered to be tightly intermingled and non-separable, and a construction of an exhaustive nomenclature of ever finer branches. For educational purposes, Chrestomathia is about what should be taught and learned, and Bentham's work then involves a classification of these arts and sciences by stages of instruction.

Secondly, from this, we discuss the very principle governing the nomenclature of art and science. Reason is most evidently called upon, but it is neither unique nor prime. According to Bentham, it is happiness that ought to guide all thought and human action. Thus, *eudaemonia* becomes the *object* of all arts and the *subject* of all sciences; arts aim at happiness and sciences provide the required knowledge. Knowledge only is, in the end, the necessary means for reaching happiness. In applying utilitarian theory, Bentham points out that the arts should be put first, for in dignity as in worth, they directly aim at utility (the pursuit of happiness).

They are a finality in human action, whereas the sciences, even though unavoidable and indivisible, only are a means.

Thirdly, Bentham conceives of education as an essential way for people to gain respect, develop their judgmental skills, and above all, better deal with the trade-off between immediate satisfaction and higher pleasures. In this light, we should reconsider critics against Bentham, firstly by John Stuart Mill, who blamed him for not conceiving of qualitative differences between pleasures i.e. a hierarchy of pleasures. In fact, Bentham's educational perspective leads us to consider an individual to be driven not only by selfish interest or passions, but able of moral and esthetical consideration and of will for perfection.

All in all, with these three developments, we intend to present how the notion of utility is problematized and seen in a new light in Bentham's works on education.

Introduction

The work we are going to present is grounded in educational sciences and this field of research can be enriched by the works of utilitarian authors and their theories.

We are looking at the making of the school system in France, in the XIXth century. This period raises our attention for it is the moment when the French State takes in charge the construction of the school institution, formerly scattered, unequal and divided between diverse institutions – churches being among the most important in number.

The XIXth century will see the making of the institution “school”, with in the 1880s the famous laws on education rendering it compulsory, free and non-religious. Throughout this century, debates have taken place on the role and place school should embrace. On the occasion of these discussions, the notion of utility is widely used. For some, utility is the destiny school should aim at; for others, utility is but what should be sought for at school. But when looking more precisely, the notion of utility is not really problematized or profound. So we had the will to come back to the very notion, to look at what it means within the utilitarian theory and to come back to the texts.

What is useful learning? And its corollary is there un-useful learning?

What is utility on an educational point of view?

Where is utility? In the process of teaching and in the contents? In the expected effects of the process?

Is utility of an individual acceptance or should we consider a social and collective utility?

What Bentham proposes with Chrestomathia is a very complete project of instruction, inseparable of the notion of utility. He suggests some of the answers in a utilitarian point of view and it gives the occasion to look at the contents, the places and functions of utility.

1. Chrestomathia

“ A collection of papers explanatory of the design of an institution proposed to be set on foot under the name of the chrestomathic day school, or chrestomathic school, for the extension of the new system of instruction to the higher branches of learning, for the use of the middling and higher ranks in life”.

To approach the chrestomathic project, three fields of consideration will be underlined:

Firstly the general presentation that Bentham makes of the educational institution he wants to put into place.

Secondly, linked to the plan of instruction, Bentham creates a nomenclature of art and science, aiming at covering the whole field of human knowledge.

Thirdly, from this nomenclature, we are interested in the reflection on what should be taught and for which purposes.

2. The Chrestomathic project

Presentation of Bentham's chrestomathic school. Organization, advantages, principles.

Quotation to consider:

"The shopkeeper will not have then less need than at present to sell his wares; the artisan and the husbandman to obtain employment; the scourer to wash her room; the fisherman to catch his fish." Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, notes to the Chrestomathic Tables.

3. Tree of knowledge

To be able to make a plan of instruction, for Bentham, there is a necessity to take a survey of the whole field of learning to make a selection of what should be taught, and from that, draw a scheme of instruction. He thus organizes knowledge in the shape of an *Encyclopedical Tree*.

Principle of totality of the Tree; notion of time.

4. Art and science. Eudæmonics and Ontology

The status of art and science in Chrestomathia.

Quotations to consider:

"Correspondent therefore to every art, there is at least one branch of science: correspondent to every branch of science, there is at least one branch of art. No determinate line of distinction between art on the one hand, and science on the other: no determinate line of distinction between art and science on the one hand, and unartificial practice and unscientific knowledge on the other." Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, Notes to the Chrestomathic Tables.

"Directly or indirectly, well-being, in some shape or other, or in several shapes, or all shapes taken together, is the subject of every thought, and object of every action, on the part of every known Being, who is, at the same time a sensitive and thinking Being. Constantly and

unpreventably it actually is so; nor can any intelligible reason be given for desiring that it should be otherwise.

This being admitted, Eudæmonics, in some one or other of the divisions of which it is susceptible, or in all of them taken together, may be said to be the object of every branch of art, and the subject of every branch of science. Eudæmonics, the art, which has for the object of its endeavours, to contribute in some way or other to the attainment of well-being, and the science in virtue of which, in so far as it is possessed by him, a man knows in what manner he is to conduct himself in order to exercise that art with effect.” Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, Appendix IV, VIII.

“Concomitant and correspondent to Eudæmonics considered as an art, runs Ontology, considered as a science”. Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, Appendix IX, VIII.

5. What should be taught and learned

A great part of *Chrestomathia* is about the explanation and the justification of what should be taught and learned.

Quotations to consider:

“On the occasion of propounding any extensive plan of useful instruction—in this, as in every other walk of useful art and science, the lover of mankind will propose to himself two main objects: the one to maximize the quantity of use capable of being derived from it, the other to maximize the facility, and thence the promptitude with which each given portion or degree of it may be rendered obtainable. Usefulness and facility, by these two words, may be expressed the main objects of his regard. Long after these, the advancement, in as far as that is distinct from usefulness; long after these, though still not as an object to be neglected, will the mere extension of science, that science being but a speculative one, rank in his estimation and endeavours.” Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, Appendix VIII, VI.

“To the proposed plan of instruction, the quality of usefulness possessed by it, in a pre-eminent and incontrovertible degree, is without hesitation attributed, inasmuch as, of all the several branches comprehended in it, there is not one that may not be found to be continually

applicable to all the several purposes of common life; and that not only of the more or less elevated, but of the very humblest spheres. True it is, that when these several branches come to be mentioned by their names, these names being, in most instances, the designation of branches of instruction hitherto but little cultivated, the names, and consequently the things themselves will, to the generality of readers, be apt to be regarded as remote from common use. But when by an example or two, the practically useful application of these seemingly abstruse and hitherto formidable sciences is brought to view, and when the cause why the number of persons acquainted with them is as yet so small, is seen to be not in any deficiency in the article of practical usefulness, but in the recency of the discoveries by which they have been brought to their present state of comparative perfection, and in the accidental circumstances which occasioned a preference to be given to other less useful studies, the conception of their inutility will scarcely be long in giving way to the clearest and firmest persuasion of their pre-eminent and universal use.” Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, notes to the Chrestomathic Tables.

6. Further development of the chrestomathic project

“From any such increase in the quantity of useful knowledge possessed by the middle classes, the only manifestly natural and probable results are, improvement in respect of health, domestic economy and personal comfort; a more extensive disposition than at present to look for amusement and recreation in art, science, or literature, in preference to sensuality and indolence. In all these ways will the condition of the middle classes be made better; and it appears not how, in any of them, the condition of their superiors should be made worse.” Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, Notes to the Chrestomathic Tables.

7. Conclusion

There is a huge difference between the conceptions born in the thinking of a philosopher and its realizations in society. Industrials have taken from Bentham’s principles only what was likely to serve their own interests without truly understanding what the general frame of the chrestomathic project was. After all, those people were only looking for workers for the

industry, and didn't care about the development of the individuals, or about well-being and happiness which were far away from their preoccupation of profit. But this project was more than what was made of it.

Firstly, concerning the notion of utility.

Secondly, deriving from utility, for the values it spreads.

Thirdly for the critique it makes of the English school system of the time.

Finally because it gives the occasion to carry a reflection on the school system and what we expect from it, in the light of a utilitarian theory on education.

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