

On 22 March 2020, Donald Trump tweeted (originally in block capitals): “We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself. At the end of the 15 day period, we will make a decision as to which way we want to go!” Trump appears to have come to this conclusion after watching *The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton* on Fox News.¹ On his show earlier that day, Hilton—the former director of strategy and close friend to British Prime Minister David Cameron,² before straining his relationship with the former prime minister by enthusiastically supporting Brexit—said, in his characteristically languid tone: “You know that famous phrase, ‘the cure is worse than the disease?’ That is exactly the territory we are hurtling towards.” Hilton then went on to quote an article from the *Guardian* that referred to a study that had calculated austerity measures were to blame for at least 130,000 deaths in the last decade (Helm 2019). Bearing in mind that Hilton had worked for the government that was largely responsible for these measures, it was a bizarre source to turn to. But perhaps that irony was lost on many U.S.-based viewers. This is also not to mention that modeling has predicted that the

¹ Steve Hilton (@NextRevFNC), “Don’t turn a public health crisis into America’s worst catastrophe,” Twitter, 22 March 2020, 10:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/NextRevFNC/status/1241914037476175872>.

² Michael Gove once remarked that “it is impossible to know where Steve ends and David begins” (Nelson 2015).

Counting the Cost: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Utilitarianism

Neil Vallelly

potential deaths from COVID-19 are exponentially higher than the figures attributed to austerity. Hilton finished: “The years of austerity for America to pay the costs of this shutdown will be worse.” Here, Hilton flaunts his lucrative lack of imagination. Of course there will be austerity in the wake of the pandemic, he implies. What else could there be?

Hilton’s circular and amnesiac argument interlinks two dominant political rationalities in the early twenty-first century, both of which have been ruthlessly exposed by the pandemic. The first is *neoliberalism*. The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually end. The economy will be in ruins. Unemployment will be at record highs across the Global North. The 2008 financial crisis will look like a minor blip in comparison. Neoliberalism will be dead (again). And Hilton does not even stop for a moment to think that there might be any

other postpandemic policy measures than austerity. He displays here the characteristic complacency of those who have been in or around power since 2008, a complacency embodied in a deep-seated unwillingness to think beyond neoliberalism as a means of ordering the economy and social life.

Post-2008, many governments managed to convince vast swathes of the general populace that

social spending and benefit cheats were to blame for the crisis. In doing so, they could market austerity as the only fair response. This wave of aggressive austerity heralded an age of “new neoliberalism” that, as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2019, xx) note in their book *Never-Ending Nightmare*, “openly adopted the paradigm of war against the population.”³ But who are these governments going to blame this time? Some have turned on China, or the World Health Organization, but such notions are hardly valid reasons for imposing austerity on national citizens. Moreover, the pandemic has revealed the decay of health and social institutions in the neoliberal decades, especially since 2008, so that blaming social spending is no longer a viable avenue (not that this will stop many governments trying). Even the right-wing think tanks that aggressively pushed the austerity agenda in the last decade in the UK, such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange, and the Centre for Policy Studies, have conceded that the age of austerity is over (Inman 2020). There are very few plotlines that could come together to rebuild the austerity narrative. This time, governments would have to force austerity on their citizens without any accompanying narrative other than *we know of nothing else*.

Neoliberalism is supplemented by the more subtle yet equally persuasive political rationality of *utilitarianism*. The founder of utilitarianism, the eighteenth-century philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, would have been very pleased with his moral theory’s lasting impact on public policy making. The conventional utilitarian logic approaches all events

from a consequentialist perspective, focusing on the action that will cause the least pain and maximize the most pleasure for the greatest number of people. For Bentham, this approach was not merely theoretical. Instead, it was an objective way of creating public policy by relying on evidence and rational prediction (or what is now known as “modeling”). In his book *The Happiness Industry*, the political economist William Davies (2015) charts the influence of utilitarianism on twenty-first-century obsessions with happiness and well-being, especially in public policy. Davies argues that utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham’s attempt to eliminate the metaphysical from political and legal policy in the late eighteenth century. In this respect, Bentham was “the inventor of what has since become known as ‘evidence-based policymaking,’ the idea that government interventions can be cleansed of any moral and ideological principles, and be guided purely by facts and figures” (17).

The best measurement for pleasure and pain, Bentham (2003, 117) concluded, was money. He wrote: “The Thermometer is the instrument for measuring the heat of the weather: the Barometer the instrument for measuring the pressure of the Air ... Money is the instrument for measuring the quantity of pain and pleasure.” In such a world, financial greed is not only justifiable at the level of ethics but actively encouraged at the level of governance and social relations. Also, if money is the best measurement of happiness, then the free market can act as the normative mechanism through which happiness can be judged and distributed. Consequently, the role of government becomes to safeguard the market. As Davies (2015, 27) writes, “By putting out there

³ And see “New Neoliberalism” by Davies (2016).

the idea that money might have some privileged relationship to our inner experience, beyond the capabilities of nearly any other measuring instrument, Bentham set the stage for the entangling of psychological research and capitalism that would shape the business practices of the twentieth century.” Furthermore, a new breed of psychologists and social scientists has emerged in the early twenty-first century, armed with contemporary behavioral science and psychology, neuroscience, and data analytics and claiming to have irrefutable empirical evidence of pleasure and pain in neural pathways and affective responses—evidence that contemporary governments rely on heavily to push forward “evidence-based” policies.

The philosophical legitimacy of utilitarianism has gradually waned over the centuries since Bentham’s original theories. Marx (1976, 758) was especially scathing of Bentham’s work, calling him, in the first volume of *Capital*, “the arch-philistine ... that soberly pedantic and heavy-footed oracle of the ‘common sense’ of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.” He continues his attack in a footnote, describing Bentham as a “purely English phenomenon” and claiming that “in no time and in no country has the most homespun manufacturer of commonplaces ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way.” He finishes: “I should call Mr. Jeremy a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity” (758–9n51). Utilitarianism’s emphasis

on the consequences of an action meant that it could never properly overcome its potential to justify the most heinous of human-rights abuses. Perhaps more crucially, utilitarianism could not sidestep the philosophical problems of how to define utility and happiness and, particularly, whom should be called upon to judge them. Invariably, the white European (perhaps even just white English) male became the normative judge of utility, which was particularly useful for imperial governments in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Utilitarianism could not sidestep the philosophical problems of how to define utility and happiness and, particularly, whom should be called upon to judge them. Invariably, the white European (perhaps even just white English) male became the normative judge of utility, which was particularly useful for imperial governments in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Utilitarianism has certainly not disappeared from the discipline of philosophy, with new variants such as two-level or preference utilitarianism emerging in the late twentieth century, the latter practiced by the high-profile ethicist Peter Singer. But it would be fair to say that the Benthamite utilitarian tradition has lost a significant amount of phil-

osophical validity. However, as the philosopher Jonathan Wolff (2006, 2) notes, “While philosophers have turned away from maximizing consequentialism, public policy decision making has embraced it.” In the neoliberal decades, utilitarian logic has become predominantly economic in character, in the sense that almost all policy making responds to one simple question: what is the least amount of funding (cost) required to keep a service or system functioning (benefit)? These calculations usually take the form of cost-benefit analysis, which draws on data and

modeling to ascertain whether a policy is worth the financial cost.

Wolff (2006, 2) observes that cost-benefit analysis is used across a vast range of policy areas: “From the building of a new airport to the permissibility of performing a particular animal experiment.” The advantage of cost-benefit analysis, we are told by its devotees, is that it removes prejudice or subjective reasoning from decision making, much like Bentham thought utilitarianism could do to moral philosophy. But Wolff implies that the real attraction to cost-benefit analysis is that it financializes all activities, even subjecting each human life to financial valuation. The problem, he identifies, is that cost-benefit analysis “in its purest form is a particularly crude form of consequentialism: consequentialism of money.” It is thus easy to see why philosophers might disregard cost-benefit analysis as a flawed morality, but policy makers view it as a magical formula for determining the distribution of public funds. A consequentialism of money is exactly what any treasury desires as it attempts to map the future.

For his reading of the pandemic, Hilton undertook a simple cost-benefit analysis. He acknowledged that there might be a way of limiting the amount of infections and deaths as a result of COVID-19, but these all involve shutting down the vast majority of economic life. The benefit would be a much smaller loss of human life, but

the economic cost would be catastrophic. But if we do not shut down the economy, he suggested, then the loss of human life might be catastrophic, but the economy might survive. In hushed and solemn tones, Hilton dressed up this cutthroat utilitarian logic as a deep concern for the welfare of the everyday citizen.⁴ He said, “Our ruling class and their TV mouthpieces whipping up fear over this virus, they can afford an indefinite shutdown. Working Americans can’t.” Never mind that many workers are fearful of returning to work in the midst of a pandemic,

or that it is actually the contemporary ruling classes—large corporations and business owners—who have been pushing to restart the economy. None of these facts really concern Hilton, or Fox News for that matter. The ultimate point of Hilton’s diatribe is to remind viewers that the economy and

the financial system are much more important than the lives of everyday citizens, even if he disguises this belief as a concern for those same citizens. For those who have benefitted from this utilitarian outlook throughout the neoliberal decades, the kind of state intervention and social policies enacted to combat the pandemic are illogical. The financial valuation of human life is far too high, they conclude.

This cost-benefit imbalance has plagued many initial governmental responses to the virus. In the UK, Boris Johnson spoke in early March of “taking it on the chin” and letting the disease

⁴ Hilton, “Don’t turn a public health crisis into America’s worst catastrophe.”

It is thus easy to see why philosophers might disregard cost-benefit analysis as a flawed morality, but policy makers view it as a magical formula for determining the distribution of public funds. A consequentialism of money is exactly what any treasury desires as it attempts to map the future.

“move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures.” He spoke of “bizarre autarkic rhetoric” coming from the rest of the world, which might “trigger a panic and desire for market segregation.” His advisors spoke of “herd immunity” and “flattening the curve,” of mitigating rather than suppressing the virus. Herd immunity is Utilitarianism 101, approaching the COVID-19 virus from a purely consequentialist perspective. The herd-immunity strategy allows the virus to spread with the hope that when it has infected approximately 80 percent of the population, the antibodies developed to fight the virus by the infected part of the population protect the 20 percent who are uninfected. The illness will therefore kill a certain proportion of those infected in the initial stages but, in the long run, the virus will be held in check. Thus, according to the herd-immunity logic, the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term costs, and a certain number of deaths is deemed palatable.

Johnson’s amaurotic chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, reportedly pushed the herd-immunity strategy forcefully in the initial stages of the pandemic, with his approach summarized by Tory ministers, according to one newspaper report, as: “Herd immunity, protect the economy, and if some pensioners die, too bad” (Shipman and Wheeler 2020). By mid-March,

The pandemic seriously undermines the logic of utilitarian policy making. When thousands of citizens die daily from the same virus, cost-benefit analysis can no longer hide behind the surface of everyday life. Suddenly, policy makers must directly calculate deaths versus the economy. And no matter how ruthless and utilitarian a government might be, this is a very difficult sell to the general populace.

however, Johnson, Cummings, and other members of the cabinet were infected with the virus, and Cummings performed an abrupt U-turn on the herd-immunity theory after modeling predicted that the mitigation approach could lead to at least 250,000 deaths. An initial utilitarian approach had proved disastrous, and any kind of benefit had been eliminated from the cost-benefit ratio. There will be unprecedented deaths in the UK as a result of this initial approach, and the economy will still be in ruins. This is a cost-cost scenario.

The pervasiveness of utilitarian logic was not confined to the UK and United States in the early stages of the pandemic. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been rightly credited with a proactive and urgent response. But her decision to put New Zealand into lockdown at a very early stage did not

go down too well in parts of the business community. A prominent businessman and former leader of the Opportunities Party, Gareth Morgan, chastised Dr. Souxsie Wiles, a public-health academic, who argued that the lockdown needed to stay in place after many were calling for its abandonment after only two weeks. Morgan berated Wiles on Twitter (with barely disguised misogyny): “Do you have any appreciation of how important the economy is? ... The official value of a life in NZ is \$10k (ask Pharmac) ... cost so far = \$5bn! Wake up!”⁵ PHARMAC

⁵ Gareth Morgan (@garethmorgannz), “Do you have any appreciation of how important the economy is?,” Twitter, 13 April 2020, 2:35 a.m., <https://twitter.com/garethmorgannz/status/1249586995858264070>.

is the governmental agency that funds medicine and medical equipment in New Zealand. According to Morgan, this agency has managed to render redundant millennia of Western philosophical reflection on the value and meaning of life. Turns out, life is worth \$10,000 New Zealand dollars (NZD). If only Plato had known this, it might have saved us all a lot of hassle.

Morgan's calculation of the value of life raises many questions, however. For one, his economic valuation is not only ethically indefensible but also empirically problematic. Morgan had a friend who was denied a medical treatment that cost \$10,000 NZD. The friend subsequently died. Morgan uses this example as evidence for the universal cost of a life, which he then puts into his version of the utilitarian calculator. As of 14 June 2020, New Zealand has twenty-one deaths from COVID-19, thus equaling \$210,000 NZD, according to Morgan's equation. If the economic cost was \$5 billion NZD in mid-April when Morgan tweeted Wiles, then we can assume it is much higher now, even though parts of the New Zealand economy opened up again in early May. Such a disparity between economic cost and social benefit is unthinkable under utilitarian political rationality. The cost-benefit ratio is far too unbalanced.

But the pandemic seriously undermines the logic of utilitarian policy making. Cost-benefit analy-

sis is all well and good in the abstract, especially if the human cost emerges over a long period of time. Austerity, for example, has undoubtedly contributed to many deaths in the UK and beyond, as Hilton even observes, but its effect is indirect. Austerity does not infect the body, clog the lungs, or stop the heart. It puts people in positions where they are more likely to experience such things, but it does not appear on any records as the cause of death. The effects of austerity can therefore be hidden by governments,

When the world stops turning, as it has in the early stage of this decade, and when we really need health care, welfare, education, and social care, none of these institutions or services are capable of effectively providing the aid that they are supposed to because they have all been focusing on doing something else: namely, maximizing benefits (financial profits) and minimizing costs.

even translated into a lack of sufficient personal care, work ethic, or responsibility on behalf of the deceased. But when thousands of citizens die daily from the same virus, cost-benefit analysis can no longer hide behind the surface of everyday life. Suddenly, policy makers must directly calculate

deaths versus the economy. And no matter how ruthless and utilitarian a government might be, this is a very difficult sell to the general populace. Most governments have buckled under this pressure, favoring some kind of state intervention that will irrevocably damage the economy but will limit the loss of life—even if in many cases, like in the United States and UK, these interventions have come far too late. There is also the danger that many countries, out of fear of complete economic meltdown, will reemerge far too early from lockdown procedures only to find themselves in the midst of a second wave

of infections and even worse economic devastation. There is no cost-benefit model that has the capacity to protect human life and the economy at the same time.

Over the last four decades, health care, welfare, education, social care, and the like have all been subjected to utilitarian scything. Hospitals, for instance, have been cut back to bare levels of staffing and equipment, with short-term profits, high patient turnover, and access to governmental funding prioritized over patient welfare and staff resources. Care work has been increasingly casualized, with many workers employed on zero-hour contracts that cut costs on wages but endanger the people whom these workers care for. Universities likewise maximize financial benefits by cutting costs on permanent academic staff, relying instead on a vast army of precarious and casual lecturers and tutors. But when the world stops turning, as it has in the early stage of this decade, and when we really need health care, welfare, education, and social care, none of these institutions or services are capable of effectively providing the aid that they are supposed to because they have all been focusing on doing something else: namely, maximizing benefits (financial profits) and minimizing costs.

It is clear, therefore, that among the series of crises this pandemic has engendered, we are witnessing a crisis of utilitarianism. But this is not

merely a philosophical or abstract crisis. Utilitarianism has been at the heart of governmental power and capitalist expansion since the early nineteenth century. After all, Bentham's aim was to reform social and legal policy and to rid philosophy of the metaphysical and replace it with rational and predictable calculations of human emotion. The philosophical limitations of such a project have been outweighed by its potential to justify the exertion of capitalist power over citizens under the ethical dictate that the consequences of such exertions of power are deemed to be for the benefit of the majority of people

Utilitarianism has therefore provided ethical justification for the expropriation of natural resources and public property and the exploitation of labor power under the myth that maximizing productive activity will eventually lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.

in the long run. In the mid-nineteenth century, utilitarianism was used to justify colonial expansion under the rubric of what the moral philosopher Bernard Williams (1985, 108–10) later called “Government House utilitarianism,” an elitist ethics that posited English legal and moral codes as vastly

more civilized to those existing in the continents outside Europe. In the late nineteenth century, utilitarianism overtly made its way into economic science, primarily through the works of the early neoclassical economist William Stanley Jevons. Davies (2015, 50) argues that “Jevons's landmark contribution was to plant [the utilitarian] vision of a calculating hedonist firmly in the marketplace. Bentham was seeking mainly to reform government policy and punitive institutions, which acted on the public in general. But Jevons converted utilitarianism into a theory of

rational consumer choice.” The ramifications of Jevons’s amalgamation of utilitarianism and rational consumer choice are felt most keenly in the hyperconsumerized and marketized society we live in today.

Simplest of all, any philosophy that prioritizes the maximization of utility naturally overlaps with capitalist discourses of productivity and accumulation, especially if economic growth, output, and wealth generation are politically constructed as the most useful courses of action for both individual and social happiness. Utilitarianism has therefore provided ethical justification for the expropriation of natural resources and public property and the exploitation of labor power under the myth that maximizing productive activity will eventually lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. But, instead, mass utility maximization has only further enriched the capitalist class, with the actual work of utility maximization performed by lower classes who receive few of the benefits of that utility maximization. The idea that utility maximization might actually lead to some kind of collective or social benefit is thus precluded in capitalist social relations. Utility maximization can only head in one direction, away from those who actually produce utility and toward those who either own the means through which utility is maximized or get to judge what utility looks like. This is abundantly clear in the age of globalization, in which the exploitation required to achieve utility maximization has taken on a new geographical formation, with the Global South maximizing utility for the Global North. Instead of leading to a prosperous future for the vast majority, utility maximization under capitalist

conditions can only entrench international class relations, trapping vast swathes of humanity in intergenerational forms of poverty, exploitation, and immiseration while ensuring the consolidation of wealth in the hands of an ever-decreasing few.

All of this is to say that a crisis of utilitarianism is simultaneously a crisis of capitalism and power. This is precisely why certain politicians, advisors, and media mouthpieces, like Hilton or Morgan, are ranting against the preventative approach to the pandemic. They know that neoliberal hegemony depends on utilitarian policy making, because when governments stop thinking purely in terms of the calculation of financial costs and benefits, as most have been forced to do during the pandemic, then suddenly the logic of neoliberalism makes very little sense. And if a crisis of utilitarianism is simultaneously a crisis of capitalism and power, then it also presents an opportunity to confront capitalist social and power relations. The pandemic has forced a reimagining of cost and benefit, one that aligns more closely with social-democratic and, more hopefully, left-socialist conceptions of these terms. We can expand costs far beyond the narrow realm of the financial to include social, ecological, emotional, and physical. Benefit can be judged not just by profits and productivity but also by collective experiences of the social and the environment. We can leave behind the “bourgeois stupidity” of Benthamite utilitarianism, once and for all.

Neil Vallelly is a political theorist and philosopher at the University of Otago. His work has appeared in journals such as *Angelaki*, *Poetics Today*, and *Social Anthropology*, as well as magazines including *New Internationalist* and *ROAR*. His book *Useless Values: Neoliberalism and the Rise of Futility* is forthcoming in 2021.

References

Bentham, J. 2003. “The Philosophy of Economic Science.” In vol. 1 of *Jeremy Bentham’s Economic Writings*, ed. W. Sterk, 19–120. London: Routledge.

Dardot, P., and C. Laval. 2019. *Never-Ending Nightmare: The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*. Trans. G. Elliot. London: Verso.

Davies, W. 2015. *The Happiness Industry: How Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*. London: Verso.

———. 2016. “New Neoliberalism.” *New Left Review*, new ser., no. 101: 121–34.

Helm, T. 2019. “Austerity to Blame for 130,000 ‘Preventable’ UK Deaths—Report.” *Guardian*, 1 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/01/perfect-storm-austerity-behind-130000-deaths-uk-ippr-report>.

Inman, P. 2020. “Rightwing Thinktanks Call Time on Age of Austerity.” *Guardian*, 16 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/16/thatcherite-thinktanks-back-increase-public-spending-in-lockdown>.

Marx, K. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Trans. B. Fowkes. London: Penguin.

Nelson, F. 2015. “‘We need 10,000 Mayors’: An inter-

view with Steve Hilton, Cameron’s Former Chief Strategist.” *Spectator*, 23 May. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/-we-need-10-000-mayors->.

Shipman, T., and C. Wheeler. 2020. “Coronavirus: Ten Days that Shook Britain—and Changed the Nation for Ever.” *Sunday Times*, 22 March. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-ten-days-that-shook-britain-and-changed-the-nation-for-ever-spz6sc9vb>.

Williams, B. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana Press.

Wolff, J. 2006. “Making the World Safe for Utilitarianism.” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 58 (May): 1–22.