

The Moral Philosophy of a Systemic Approach

As a break from bluff and bluster, I thought I might retreat in this soapbox to a bit of moral philosophy. Utilitarianism is pretty simple.

[T]he end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence ... might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind (Mill, 1861)

OK, maybe it doesn't sound that simple but, basically termed, it is the belief that what is right is to do the greatest good by the greatest number of people. *Good* has been understood and defined differently but, as we're not talking about measurement here, happiness will suffice, notwithstanding the poststructuralist critique that happiness cannot be in any way objective. The object of study here is the essentialised logic.

In developing countries, *the greatest number of people* are poor and M4P's emphasis on **scale** means that more of them will benefit from interventions. As for *the greatest good*, M4P's focus on **sustainability** means that, if implemented well with assumptions holding etc etc, the legacy of programmes will be the indefinite generation of impact so, in comparison to a great benefit for a short time, the cumulative 'good' is clearly greater.

So, from a utilitarian perspective, there is no alternative to a systemic approach to development. I wonder, then, what the moral philosophy of those that follow and espouse alternative approaches to development might be?

Perhaps cynraic hedonism? This moral philosophy can be summarised in the biblical conflation 'Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die'. Translating this to development means that we must maximise (some) people's happiness now regardless of what that means for the future. More money, spent more quickly, to have the greatest impact now – that's what the application of this philosophy means for development.

How about deontology? This is not the art of fixing teeth but an ethical position whereby the value of an action is perceived not in the results of that action but in the intention behind it. Perhaps it is this which characterises development best of all. No-one sets about development intervention with pernicious intent. Deontologists see that warm fuzzy feeling that we in development get from trying to do good as morally virtuous whereas a utilitarian, and therefore an M4P, perspective does not pay any mind to why something was done. While systemic approaches have a clear view on the

mechanisms most likely to deliver sustainable large scale change, *despite good intentions* or because of them, if the impact is delivered, the motivations of those involved are not seen as relevant.

What, then, of scale – M4P does not see the *greatest number of people* as an unqualified morass that excludes vulnerable groups. M4P is sometimes criticised for not catering to specific groups – the ultra-poor, women, minorities. The ‘P’ in M4P predefines that the focus of the system that is being targeted by intervention – and those that benefit from that intervention – will centre around the poor. To take the P out of M4P, so to speak, would be to focus on making a system which has already marginalised the poor more efficient in doing so. Similarly, to put a G for Gender or a U for Ultra into M4P would redefine the boundaries of the system targeted for intervention, such that it would no longer simply aim to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of poor people, but the greatest number of ‘ultra-poor’ people or poor women. Therefore, M4P is effectively bounded utilitarianism, seeking to achieve good for the greatest number of people within its target group. Other, perhaps hedonistic or deontological approaches to development target niches so specific – a village, a school, etc - that they exhibit a very different approach to scale. It is clear, then, that looking through the lenses of sustainability and scale, systemic and non-systemic approaches to development intervention have clearly divergent views of what is moral.