

# Mill's *Utilitarianism*

G. J. Matthey

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## *Kant on Happiness*

- Unlike the ancients, such as Aristotle, Kant had given happiness a secondary role in his ethics.
- He understood happiness in these terms:
  - “General well-being and contentment with one’s condition,”
  - “The entire satisfaction” of “one’s wants and inclinations” (*Metaphysic of Morals*, First Section).
- Happiness, for Kant, does not coincide with moral worth, as a morally bad person could be quite happy.
- A good will may not be conducive to happiness and is at most a condition for being worthy of happiness.

## *Utilitarianism*

- In opposition to Kant, nineteenth-century “utilitarian” moral theorists claimed that happiness is the sole criterion of moral worth.
- Among the early advocates of this view were Jeremy Bentham and James Mill.
- Their general view was that right action is action that is conducive to the production of happiness, both of individuals and of the community.
- Utility is the property of tending to promote happiness, so utility is the criterion of a right action.
- Bentham and James Mill identified happiness with pleasure and unhappiness with pain.
- In *Utilitarianism* (1861), James Mill’s son, John Stuart Mill, presented his own version of the theory that utility determines right action.

### *Utilitarianism*

- Mill begins *Utilitarianism* by claiming that no progress has yet resulted from all the work in philosophy directed toward finding the nature of the good.
- It seems desirable for the study of morals to follow the inductive method of science, which begins with particular truths.
- On the other hand, it appears that we need some general test of right and wrong in order to determine what is right and wrong.
  - This is because action is directed toward an end, and we should first know what the end is before pursuing it.
- If the method for studying morals is not scientific, it might be *intuitive*.
- The intuitive method searches for principles *a priori*.

### *Against A Priori Ethics*

- Ethical theories generated by the *a priori* method suffer from one of two deficiencies:
  - They give *a priori* authority to what are really only ordinary ethical precepts,
  - They supply a general principle that is less obvious than the precepts it is supposed to support.
- In either case, they have not been able to enunciate a suitable general principle of ethics.
- In fact, all ethical theory rests on the idea that what motivates people is the effects of actions on their happiness.
- Even Kant's deductions of duties from the categorical imperative are based on the fact that no one would accept the *consequences* of the universal adoption of "the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct."

### *On "Proof" in Ethical Theorizing*

- Mill will attempt to elucidate the "greatest happiness principle" put forward by Bentham.
- The theory does not admit of "proof" in the standard sense.
- Happiness is the ultimate end of human action, and what is good is understood to be so because of its relation to happiness.

- But it cannot be proved that happiness itself is good.
- The best we can do is to give rational grounds to accept a comprehensive formula which includes:
  - All things which are good in themselves,
  - An account of how all other goods are good as a means to what is good in itself.
- Before Mill gives these grounds, he tries to clear up some misconceptions about the “general happiness principle” that is adopted by “utilitarianism.”

#### *The General Happiness Principle*

- Mill’s utilitarian principle of morality applies only to *actions*, not to *persons*.
- Actions are right in proportion to their tendency to produce happiness (the good) and wrong in proportion to their tendency to produce unhappiness (the bad).
- Happiness itself is equated with pleasure and the absence of pain.
- Unhappiness is pain and the absence of pleasure.
- The “utility” of an action is thus its tendency to produce pleasure, and is not at all opposed to pleasure.
- The “pleasure” relevant to the rightness of human action is the kind of pleasure that is distinctively human.
- There are higher pleasures than those of mere sensation (which we share with non-human animals):
  - Of the intellect,
  - Of the feelings and imagination,
  - Of the moral sentiments.

#### *Ranking Pleasures*

- The greatest happiness principle operates along two dimensions of pleasure:
  - Quantity of pleasure,
  - Quality of pleasure.
- Quality of pleasure can be ranked just as can quantity of pleasure.
  - Pleasure A is preferred by all or almost all who have experienced it to pleasure B (discounting any feeling of moral obligation).

- Pleasures of the “higher faculties” are preferred over the pleasures of the lower faculties, even if they are accompanied by a good deal of discomfort.
  - “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (Chapter 2).
- People often do not pursue pleasures that are more desirable, because they are difficult to attain, and one is easily distracted from the goal of attaining them.

### *General Happiness*

- A principle that makes preferable only one’s own happiness would be egoistic.
- In fact, selfishness is the greatest impediment to happiness.
- The greatest happiness principle is not egoistic, in that it makes a right action one that promotes the happiness of all.
- Happiness—understood as a life of pleasures mixed with a few pains—is attainable by many for much of their lives.
- But it is not attainable by all, due to “the present wretched education and wretched social institutions.”
- Thus the utilitarian principle can only be satisfied by social reform.
  - The culture of the mind should be encouraged,
  - Poverty should be eliminated by government and charity,
  - Disease should be eradicated by education and sanitation.

### *Applying the Principle of Utility*

- The principle of utility is nothing more than a measure of the rightness of action.
- Utilitarianism does not endorse the Kantian claim that the rightness of an action depends on its being done from the motive of duty.
- Whether one acts on the basis of the principle of utility is not relevant to the rightness of the action, though it does reveal the moral worth of the agent.
- It may seem that a coldly calculating person who acts only on the basis of the principle of utility must be thought of as the best person.
- But there are other “beauties of character” that contribute to making a person “lovable or admirable.”
- If some utilitarians one-sidedly cultivate only the aspect of their character that promotes right action, this is a defect they share with those adopting any other moral theory.

### *Rule Utilitarianism*

- Even if we do adopt the principle of utility as a guide to action, it seems impractical in that we cannot calculate the effects of our actions on the general happiness of humanity.
- Instead, we act on general rules which we think will lead to the desired outcome.
  - History has shown us that theft and murder are not conducive to the general happiness.
- There is no incompatibility between there being a general principle of right action and subordinate rules about how to satisfy the general principle.
  - By analogy, when we tell a traveler where his ultimate destination is, we do not expect him not to use landmarks and road signs to find it.
- It is absurd for any system of morality to expect people to act as if there were no subordinate rules to guide them.

### *Why Act Morally?*

- The question arises for any general principle of morality:
  - What is the source of the obligation to conform to it?
- The question arises because we feel that customary morality is the only one that is obligatory in itself.
  - I feel that I am bound not to rob or murder, but why am I bound to promote general happiness as opposed to my own?
- The question will go away only when society has advanced to the point that people feel bound by the utilitarian principle.
- In the meantime, Mill notes that this is a question facing all systems of morality, and they all give the same answer:
  - The feelings of conscience that are shared by all mankind.
- Once an egalitarian social state is established, people will feel that they should promote the general happiness.

### *“Proof” of the Principle of Utility*

- In Chapter 1, Mill had argued that the principle of utility cannot be proved “in the ordinary and popular meaning of the term.”
- At best, we can get considerations “capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof.”
- Assent to the principle of utility requires an argument for two theses:
  - Happiness is the one and only good,
  - The general happiness is the good for the aggregate of persons.
- The problem of the first thesis is that although we can prove something to be good because it is a means to an end, we cannot prove that the ultimate end is good.
  - “The art of music is good, for the reason, among others, that it produces pleasure; but what proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good?” (Chapter 1).

### *Happiness as a Good*

- Mill begins by shifting his terminology to speak of what is desirable rather than what is good.
- What is good is an end, and “questions about ends are . . . questions about what things are desirable” (Chapter 4).
- If happiness is to be shown to be the one and only good, then it must be shown to be the one and only thing that is desirable.
- To set the stage, Mill compares desirability to visibility and audibility.
  - We can prove that an object can be seen only if people see it.
- Similarly, the only evidence we have of something’s being desirable is that people actually desire it.
- People do desire happiness, which is evidence that happiness is desirable.
- Since we can require no more evidence that happiness is desirable, we have all the reason we can have for that thesis.

### *The Normative Value of the Good*

- It has frequently been asked whether the conclusion Mill has drawn is strong enough for his overall thesis.
- Desirability as determined by desire does not seem to have normative force.
  - “Stinky tofu” (fermented tofu) is desired and therefore desirable to many people.
  - However, it does not follow that people who do not desire it should do so.
- On the other hand, happiness as a good is supposed to have the force of obligation.
  - “It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them” (Chapter 2).
- How, then, could happiness be the test of our duties merely on the basis of the fact that it is desired?

### *General Happiness as a Good*

- The second thesis is that “the general happiness . . . [is] a good to the aggregate of all persons.”
- The thesis is said to follow directly from the premise that each person’s happiness is a good to that person.
- In a letter, Mill claimed that the meaning of his conclusion is that:
  - “Since A’s happiness is a good, B’s a good, C’s a good, &c., the sum of all these goods is a good.” (June 13, 1868)
- The meaning is not that “every human being’s happiness is a good to every other human being.”
- We might presume that the sum of all goods is a good for a collective being, one that might be called “society.”
- Then it becomes a question why individuals should pursue what is good for society.

### *Happiness as the Only Good*

- To complete the “proof” of the principle of utility, it must be shown that happiness is the only good.
- If the good is the desirable and the desirable is the desired, then happiness must be the only thing that people desire.
- However, apparently happiness is not the only desired end—for example, virtue is also desired, though not as widely as happiness.
- The utilitarian explains that while virtue is originally desired as a *means* to happiness, it becomes an end in itself.
- It does so by becoming *part* of happiness.
  - Analogously, a desire for money begins by treating it as a means to happiness, but money becomes a component of happiness itself.
- But if virtue can become a part of happiness and is a “good in itself,” it is questionable whether happiness can be equated with pleasure, even of the “higher” sorts.

### *The Feeling of Justice*

- An objection to the principle of utility is that it conflicts with principles of justice.
  - What is useful may be unjust.
- Our principles of justice rest on a subjective feeling, which we take to indicate that justice has a more powerfully binding force than does utility.
- To investigate this feeling, we must ask the (Platonic) question: what are the common attributes of just acts?
- To find these attributes, we look at those acts that people think are just or unjust.
  - For example, it is unjust to deprive someone of his personal liberty.
- Mill concludes that we have a feeling that an injustice is an act for which a person ought to be punished.
- This would distinguish it from what is merely useful or not useful, which carries no such sanction.



### *Justice and Morality*

- The feature of justice that injustice merits punishment is also a feature of all other branches of morality.
- Mill claims that what distinguishes them is that justice is the domain of “perfect duty,” which involves people’s *rights*.
- The rest of morality involves no rights, and lies in the domain of “imperfect duty.”
- This explains the various aspects of justice Mill had listed earlier.
  - A person has a right to personal liberty, and what makes its deprivation unjust is the violation of the right.
- We feel very strongly that a person’s right is something which society ought to defend.
- The strength of this feeling of the need for security is the reason we think of justice as something over and above utility.
  - “The feelings concerned are so powerful . . . that *ought* and *should* grow into *must*.”

### *Justice and Utility*

- There is a real distinction between what is just and what is merely useful.
- But justice itself is ultimately based on “utility” in the sense of the promotion of the general happiness.
- General happiness is impossible unless people are kept safe from one another by having their rights respected.
- The principle of utility presupposes that the happiness of each person is equally important, and justice protects each person from having his happiness taken away.
- Thus, the practices of society that lead to inequality of treatment are, unless necessary, unjust.
- Society has progressed to the extent that it has recognized the unjustness of slavery and serfdom, and it is coming to recognize the injustices based on color, race and gender.