**John Stuart Mill – *Utilitarianism* (1861, 1863)**

JS Mill: British, 1806-1873

-- Worked for British East India Company, 1823-1858

-- Member of House of Commons, 1863-1865

-- published works on, among other things, ethics, political theory, political economy, need for more gender equality

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**Question: please write on a piece of paper or email to:** [**c.hendricks@ubc.ca**](mailto:c.hendricks@ubc.ca)**:**

A very good friend is dying of a terminal disease, and has not had time to change her will to represent her current wishes. She gives you the combination to a safe that has $100,000 cash in it, and she wants you to give it to her estranged son whom she left out of her will. No one else knows about this money. You find out later that this son is already a multimillionaire from his stock investments, and $100,000 won’t make much difference to him. Would it be morally permissible to donate it to a charity such a children’s hospital or a charity that builds schools in poverty-stricken countries, instead of giving it to your friend’s son like you said you would? What would Mill say about this?

**I. Chapter 1 of *Utilitarianism***

There ought to be a single, fundamental principle of morality; or, if there are several, there should be a way to determine an order of preference among them (2).

Mill: many philosophers have accepted the same moral rules, and many tacitly accept a utilitarian principle grounding those rules, even if they don’t acknowledge it:

-- “whatever steadiness or consistency these moral beliefs have attained has been mainly due to the tacit influence of a standard not recognized” – a utilitarian one (2).

**II. Chapter 2: The Utilitarian view of morality**

A simplified overview: we can judge the moral value of actions by the degree of happiness they tend to produce for the sentient creatures involved

**The foundational principle of morality, the criterion of judging right or wrong actions:**

1. The principle of utility, or Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP):

*--* “actions are [morally] right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, [morally] wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (4)

-- “happiness” is defined in terms of pleasure and reduction or absence of pain (4)

2. Mill bases the GHP on the end goal of all action: “pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and…all desirable things…are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain” (4)

-- the “ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable . . . is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments” (6)

-- morality can be defined as “the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.” (7)

-- later in the text: “happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole” (19)

**B. Two kinds of pleasure**

1. pleasures differ in quality/kind: intellectual vs. sensual (also described as “higher” vs. “lower,” and those of the “higher faculties” vs. those of “mere sensation” or “the animal nature” (4-6)

a. How does Mill support the claim that the “higher” pleasures are better in *quality*, not just *quantity*? I.e., some pleasures are better *kinds* of pleasures than others.

*An argument*

1. The only way to judge the value of pleasures, whether in quantity or quality, is to ask which are preferred by those who have experienced the pleasures in question (2nd paragraph of 6).

2. If those who have experienced two kinds of pleasures prefer one, even if they could get *more* of the other, then this means that the former pleasure is better in kind, not just quantity (top paragraph of 5)

3. We do see evidence that those who have experienced “higher” pleasures as well as “lower” ones prefer the former, even if they could get more of the latter (5-6).

Therefore, higher pleasures are better in kind than lower pleasures.

Mill: the person who has a greater amount of the lower pleasures might have more “contentment” than the person who experiences higher pleasures but in a lesser amount.

-- he says there is a difference between “happiness” and “contentment” (5)—what might “contentment” mean in this context?

-- Even a greater *amount* of fulfilling desires for pleasure may get you just “contentment” rather than “happiness,” if the latter requires at least some higher pleasures.

2. Why might Mill have thought it important to make this distinction, rather than arguing that all pleasures are equally good?

3. Note that regardless of potential problems with this distinction for individuals, the “higher” pleasures may be more likely to promote greater happiness amongst *others* (p. 5)

**Questions from last time about consequences**

1. What sorts of consequences? Actual, intended, expectable, etc.?

a. Mill: what makes actions morally right and wrong is their “tendency” to produce pleasure or pain—actions are right “in proportion as they tend to promote happiness” (4)

-- sounds like the consequences to be considered are those that usually apply to a certain type of action

b. intention does matter (fn 2 of chapter 2, p. 12): “The morality of the action depends entirely upon the intention—that is, upon what the agent *wills to do*.”

-- indicating that if one *intended* to do an action that would produce happiness as a result, this could be morally right even if the result turned out differently than you intended.

2. Consequences for what/whom? And impartiality?

a. (as noted above) all “sentient creation” (7)

b. not everyone in the entire world, only those “concerned” with an action (9)

c. everyone’s happiness is to be treated impartially, counted equally (8)

3. Is Mill’s view “maximizing?” I.e., if one doesn’t do an act that tends to produce the best consequences of all available actions in the situation, has one acted immorally?

-- Mill says some things in Chapter 5 that address this question, so hold off on this one until then.

**Role of motive, character in Mill’s Utilitarianism**

1. motive doesn’t matter to the moral value of an action: “the motive has nothing to do with the moral value of the action, though much with the worth of the agent” (9)

-- only look at motive when want to evaluate the moral character of a person

-- “…the motive … when it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality: thought it makes a great difference in our moral estimation of the agent, especially if it indicates a good or bad habitual *disposition*—a bent of character form which useful, or from which hurtful actions are likely to arise” (12).

2. Still, it would be good to instill in people the habit of acting from the motive of utility

-- we should try to ensure that “a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being’s sentient existence” (8)

-- This would be a good thing due to utilitarian principles: it would be likely to promote greater happiness generally if many people had this habit

**The principle of utility and secondary rules**

1. Mill says that you don’t have to calculate the likely consequences of each action, every time, but can follow secondary rules that reflect the usual tendencies of actions to produce certain consequences (10-11)

-- “… mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better” (11).

-- “The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement;” “mankind still have much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness” (11).

2. But he also says there may be exceptions to these rules, and so considering likely consequences of a specific action may be needed (11-12)

-- “It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable” (11)

-- Use the principle of utility, then, to determine when there is an exception to a secondary rule

3. The principle of utility can be used to judge what to do in cases where secondary rules conflict (this will likely often be the case when considering possible exceptions to rules)

-- “If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligation, utility may be invoked to decide between [rights and duties] when their demands are incompatible” (12).

In *Utilitarianism* Chpt. 4, Mill attempts to justify the claim that pleasure and pain are the only things of intrinsic value that should be used to determine the moral value of actions.

• Use secondary rules to evaluate particular actions

• Use GHP to evaluate secondary rules, and judge conflicts btwn them

• Not clear if actions r/w depending on actual consequences or if they follow secondary rules

First, foundational principle of morality, “Greatest Happiness Principle” (GHP)—those acts are right that tend to promote the most happiness (defined in terms of pleasure & pain)

Moral judgment of actions in particular situations

Secondary, intermediate rules (10-12)