**Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Notes 2)**  
PHIL 230, Fall 2014

**Chapter IV: Argument supporting the principle of utility, the “greatest happiness principle” (GHP)**

*Note: this is not going to be a full “proof,” but some arguments can be given in support (p. 16, also 3)*

Two overall parts to this argument:

(a) “happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end” (17)

(b) if so, then “happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct,” including judging if actions morally good/bad (19)

The arguments in Chapter IV are mostly for (a)

**An outline of the argument in chapter IV**

1. Each person’s happiness is desirable as an end goal of action for that person (and so a “good” to him/her) (17)

2. Happiness is the *only* thing desirable/good as an end goal of action for each person (17-20)

-- all other desirable/good things are so either as parts of happiness or as means to happiness

-- so happiness is the only thing intrinsically good

3. “Each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons” (17)

-- so the general happiness is intrinsically good

4. (from 2 & 3) Happiness is the only ultimate end goal of human action (19)

5. If (4), then what counts as morally right should be what produces that end goal (1, 7, 19)

Therefore, we have reason to say the GHP is valid: “actions are [morally] right as they tend to promote happiness” for all involved in the action (4)

**Premise 1:** each person’s happiness is desirable for him/her, a “good”

“The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. ” (17)

What argument is being given here for premise 1? What do you think of the argument?

(a). The only way to show that anything is desirable is that people actually desire it

(b). Each person desires his/her own happiness

Therefore: each person’s happiness is desirable for him/her, a “good” to him/her

**Premise 2:** happiness is the *only* thing desirable as an end goal for each person, the only intrinsic good

“human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness” (19)

Desiring things as a means to happiness: desiring them only because they result in something that contributes to happiness (e.g., surgery for health)

Desiring things as a “part of happiness”: desiring them because they bring happiness themselves; they are part of an individuals’ conception of happiness (e.g., money, fame, health, being morally good (virtue)).

**Premise 3:** the “general happiness” is desirable/good

a. the “general happiness”: the sum of individual instances of happiness

b. if individual happiness is intrinsically good, then the sum of all of the individual instances of happiness is intrinsically good as well

-- “each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons” (17)

Individuals’ own happiness—good to them

Aggregate/ “general happiness”

Good to the aggregate of persons

H2

H1

H3

Arrows = desire

P1

P2

P3

Aggregate of persons

Individual persons

What this does *not* show: each individual naturally and always desires the general happiness

-- we sometimes do, and the more we live and work together the more likely we are to do so (acc to Chapter III—optional reading).

What Mill could be arguing:

-- individual happiness is good to each individual (from argument above)

-- from an impartial perspective (the perspective we should take when thinking about morality), the aggregate happiness, all those instances of individual happiness, is a good

-- morality is about rules that all should follow, so we should be thinking about what’s good to produce from as impartial a perspective as possible

**Premise 4:** Happiness is the sole end goal of human action

Mill might be saying this follows from premises 2 and 3—if individual happiness is the only thing intrinsically good (good in itself, and the only end of our conduct, then the generally happiness shares these characteristics as well

**Premise 5:** we should judge the moral value of actions on the basis of the degree to which they produce what is the only end goal of human action: happiness.

This is mostly just assumed true by Mill in quotes on pp. 1, 7, 19

-- It expresses the consequentialist idea that we should judge actions morally on the basis of what they produce, their consequences

-- Also that the best consequences should be those that promote or are part of the only intrinsically good thing, and thus the only ultimate goal of human action

-- Mill doesn’t argue for why we should think of morality in this consequentialist way