

Mill's *Utilitarianism*

G. J. Matthey

Winter, 2006 / Philosophy 1

Two Methods of Ethical Theorizing

- John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) claims that no progress has yet resulted from all the work in philosophy directed toward finding the nature of the good.
- 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.
- But it also seems desirable for morals to follow the practice of science, which begins with particular truths.
- Accordingly, there are two methods employed in ethics:
 - The *intuitive*, which searches for principles *a priori*,
 - The *inductive*, which generalizes principles from individual cases of right and wrong.
- The two methods have in common the thesis that the morality of individual actions is not perceived, but is derived from general principles.

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 find 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 Greatest 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 and wrong in proportion to their tendency to produce unhappiness.
- 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 swine):
 - 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.”
- People 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 hold that acting for the general happiness is a 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

- The central claim of utilitarianism is that happiness is the only desirable end.
- The only evidence that can be produced for this claim is that people actually do desire their own happiness.
- The general happiness is the aggregation of the happiness of all persons.
- If happiness were not desired as an end in theory and practice, nothing could persuade us that it is desirable.
- But happiness is not the only desired end—virtue is also desired, though not as widely.
- The utilitarian explains that while virtue is originally desired as a *means* to happiness, but 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.

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 sex.