

Essay on the greatest happiness principle an examination

Psychology, Success



The philosopher John Stuart Mill developed the Greatest Happiness Principle as a way to explain his own view of utilitarianism. According to this Principle, it is the goal of every human being to act in the best interests of everyone involved, to help create the largest possible net level of happiness in the people around you. Mill attempts to support this principle by __. In this paper, the success of his justification for the Greatest Happiness Principle will be explored, as well as whether or not it truly offers 'the foundation of morals,' as many utilitarians believed it did.

The Greatest Happiness Principle states that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure" (Mill, 1998).

According to Mill, there are varying degrees of happiness, and different forms of pleasure are more righteous than others. Mill thinks that intellectualism and moralism are admirable, whereas physical pleasure takes a backseat to these nobler pursuits. He also thought that there should be a difference between being contented and being happy - blind happiness is no happiness at all, but mere ignorance; happiness must come from knowledge of one's world and acceptance of it. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrated dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question" (Mill, 1998).

Mill supports the principle in a number of ways, to varying degrees of success. Mill states that some dislike his principle, as they think that there is

more to life than mere pleasure. He refutes this by stating that human pleasure should not be likened to the raw pleasure of an animal; instead of basic instincts, our happiness comes from exercising our sentient nature. We beg to figure things out about the world using our human intellect; as we do this, we are learning more about ourselves and the world, but it also makes us happy (Mill, 1998).

He also states that the standards of happiness and utility are not decided by just what feels good; instead, he says there are different kinds of pleasure out there, and some can be more qualified to determine these pleasures than others (i. e. those with education). However, this is a somewhat flawed argument, as it calls for a personally decided and delineated system of measurement for the intrinsic worth of an action, arbitrarily deciding what does and does not constitute happiness. Mills even seems to refute the importance of happiness by implying it is more important to have “ noble character” to be happy, since there would still be a benefit provided to society (Mill, 1998).

Many believe that Mill’s description and support for utilitarianism leaves a lot to be desired. For one, Jeremy Bentham had a somewhat opposing view of Mill’s interpretation of utilitarianism, stating that “ quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.” This means that the subjective nature of happiness can make the overall goal of humanity shape itself towards the most fickle of pursuits, provided that makes one happier than bettering oneself (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). What’s more, there is the objection that it is impossible to just pursue happiness at the expense of other things; people

believe that it is ideologically unsound, as individuals may not develop themselves mentally, or that they may pursue happiness at the expense of the happiness of another. This presents a conflict wherein someone may want someone else's wife, and by Mill's standard of utilitarianism could not be satisfied without them, leading them to take dramatic steps to fulfill their purpose. While this is an extreme example, there are those who take these steps to heart.

However, there are many supporters of the principle, as well: life satisfaction has been found to be happiness-based, and often it does not have to be in conflict with other values the individual has. Even in this day and age, it is possible to have a significant level of happiness while still generating more of it on a consistent basis. There is no conflict found between happiness and other values, and in fact is necessary in order to be civil and healthy individuals (Veenhoven, 2009).

Support for this principle included Jeremy Bentham, Mill's contemporary and one of the founding fathers of utilitarianism – he posited that the greatest happiness needed to come to the greatest number of people. This was the way to solve the problem of inequality in people's goals for happiness; people needed to work together to make as many people happy as possible. This does not mean everyone could be happy, but the majority could be happy, though at the expense of the minority (Burns, 2005).

In light of the investigation into the Greatest Happiness Principle, I do not agree that it provides 'the foundation of morals,' for many reasons. For one,

it is not enough to make sure that as many people as possible find happiness; while this is a very democratic view of life and purpose, it is an exclusionary one, and one that can easily leave people out of the loop. At the same time, it is difficult to refute; the principle itself argues that, basically, one must do the best it can to further themselves and those around them. On the surface, this feels like an admirable goal; however, it essentially amounts to philosophical triage, where some people just do not make the cut.

In a perfect system, the foundation of morals would amount to more than just happiness for happiness' sake, no matter how dressed up it may be in intellectualism and altruism. What's more, Mill tends to downplay and vilify the baser, more physical pleasures, which are just as much a component of happiness as anything else. Ignoring our baser instincts can provide us with a significantly decreased level of happiness, ignoring Mill's claim that those who prefer those baser pleasures cannot properly judge what is just and good for mankind. According to Mills, academics and intellectualism were what led people to happiness, as he valued the educated moreso than the rest. While this may seem sound from a practical point of view, it is far from compassionate; however, it is indeed one of the tenets of utilitarianism. In that principle, the overall goal is to further mankind as much as possible, meaning that some people can get lost in the shuffle.

References

Anderson, K. (2004). Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number. Probe Ministries. Retrieved August 8, 2011, from <http://www.probe.org>

<https://assignbuster.com/essay-on-the-greatest-happiness-principle-an-examination/>

org/site/c. fdKEIMNsEoG/b. 4224805/k.

B792/Utilitarianism_The_Greatest_Good_for_the_Greatest_Number. htm

Bronfenbrenner, M. (1977). Poetry, Pushpin, and Utility. *Economic Inquiry*, 15(1), 95-110.

Burns, J. (2005). Happiness and Utility: Jeremy Bentham's Equation. *Utilitas*, 17(1), 46-61.

Mill, J. S. (1998). *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Veenhoven, R. (2009). GREATER HAPPINESS FOR A GREATER NUMBER Is that possible and desirable?. *JOHS*, Sept, 1-8.