

Utilitarianism: justice, happiness and morality essay examples

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John Stuart Mill's basic theory of utilitarianism is simple enough to understand in that it holds that all normal individuals wish to maximize their pleasures and avoid pain and most desire that which brings them happiness. Obviously, many of these are simply matters of personal tastes and preferences that raise no real questions of justice or morality, such as happiness derived from certain foods or colors, meeting old friends, walking through the country or an infinite number of other possibilities. Mill would permit individuals the widest possible latitude in pursuing pleasure and happiness, even in activities that were not considered moral or legal at the time when he wrote Utilitarianism. His only limitation would be a legal sanction against doing harm to the lives and persons of others. He was well aware that standards of justice and morality varied widely across nations and cultures rather than being universal and absolute, although he agreed with Immanuel Kant that all individuals were also born with a capacity for moral sentiment and sympathy with other human beings. If they had not been then society would be impossible. Therefore, he argued that the true meaning of justice and morality was to allow everyone an equal chance to find pleasure and happiness, while injustice was denying them that basic right. By this standard of justice, all the age-old institutions of tyranny like slavery, serfdom, the oppression of women and racial discrimination would be abolished in favor of equality for all.

For the utilitarian, maximum happiness in the world is the aggregation of the greatest happiness and pleasure of all individuals. Mill could give no reason for this maxim "expect that each person, so far as he believes it to be obtainable, desires his own happiness", so naturally everyone should have

the same right (53). Virtue and morality might not be so universally desired as happiness, and he allowed that that might often be considered as good in themselves, without any future reward or benefit desired. Far from discouraging morality, Mill thought that it ought to be associated with happiness and pleasure. There are many forms of happiness that are not necessarily moral, such as the desire for money, fame and power, either as ends in themselves or the means of fulfilling other desires. People whose happiness depends on these often become “noxious to the other members of society”, which is not the case with those who derive pleasure from being virtuous and moral (57). Mill agreed that much of human behavior did not even derive from calculations of pleasure and pain at all, but only habits and unconscious desires, and insofar as possible, it was better for society if people learned to make being virtuous a habit.

Utilitarianism offers an extensive discussion of justice in the final two sections, and Mill’s attempt to define it and relate it to the fundamental principle of the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. He considers whether utilitarian philosophy can have a place for justice and higher morality, and answers in the affirmative. Justice has been defined in various ways over time and across various cultures as religions, such as the old Biblical injunction of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Mill rejects this as archaic and outdated, although it does seem to be related to the animal instinct of taking revenge for an injury or harm. All persons do have certain natural rights, and it is unjust to deprive an individual “of his personal liberty, his property, or any other thing which belongs to him by law” (65). Justice may not always be the same as legality, since certain laws

are bad and it would be unjust to obey them, just as some of the “ most illustrious benefactors of mankind” have done in history (65). Justice is also a question of giving people what they deserve (good or bad) and injustice is when a person receives “ a good, or made to undergo an evil, which he does not deserve” (66). In addition, justice is supposed to be blind, equal and impartial, with special favors and benefits for none. In modern times, justice can also concern economic matters, such as the rights of workers and the distribution of wealth and incomes. For instance, socialists and communists believe that wealth should be distributed equally or that it should go to those who work the hardest or have the greatest needs (67). Others believe that it requires a graduated income tax in which the wealthy pay more while the poor receive more benefits from the state (87).

Justice always implies a claim on the sympathy of the larger human community for some evil or harm that was done or some right that was violated. If some harm is done to a person, they have a right to self-defense and to expect help from others, since human beings have the intelligence to comprehend that there is a “ commonality of interest” among all members of the society (75). Mill does not oppose Kant’s Categorical Imperative but endorses it, and agrees that we “ ought to shape our conduct by a rule which all rational beings might adopt with benefit to their collective interest” (79). Justice means a sentiment or sympathy for others and a common set of rules designed for the good of all, with punishments for those who violate them. He finds no conflict between Kant’s universal moral law and the rule of general utility, since justice and morality require that no one be permitted to harm others. Acts of injustice should outrage everyone’s moral sensibilities

and lead them to feel sympathy for the victims, especially “ acts of wrongful aggression, or wrongful exercise of power over someone” (94). If Mill’s utilitarianism is simply regarded as philosophy justifying crude egotism, greed and self-interest, then that has nothing to do with what he actually wrote in the book. He did not regard his philosophy as all that different from Kant’s ideas of the natural moral sense and a universal duty to treat all human beings with equal respect and dignity. Utility meant that every person had an equal claim to happiness and the means to pursue happiness, with justice defined as equality of treatment for all. Mill did not deny that individuals also had natural rights to life, liberty and property that could not be violated without committing an injustice. By this standard, all human beings were equal, while unjust and oppressive institutions and practices like slavery, serfdom, and oppression of women and minorities should not be permitted. Utilitarian philosophy as Mill taught it, then, actually had a great deal of concern for social and economic justice rather than just the rights of individuals to do exactly as they pleased.

REFERENCES

Mill, John Stuart. Utilitarianism. London, 1870.