

# Ultimate norm of morality

Experience, Human Nature



Many examples of theoretical arguments for God's existence start from the fact of ethical normativity. Human beings are aware of actions as being right and wrong, obligatory and forbidden. Such awareness carries with it the thought that they are bound to do some things and bound to avoid doing others. Moral qualities have a binding attached to them shown in the force of the moral "ought" and the moral "must". If I make a promise, the promise creates an obligation to deliver what is promised. The normative fact is, first, not dependent on my own goals and ends and, second, possessed of a universal force.

The fact that I am bound by the normative truth "do what you promised" does not hold because I have ends which I cannot achieve unless I fulfill the promise. The obligation created by the promise holds independent of my particular goals because it reflects a universal rule, holding at all times and places and applying to any human being as such. Utilitarianism, in its most general form, claims that one should assess persons, actions, and institutions by how well they promote human (or perhaps sentient) happiness. This claim Mill shares with his forbears.

But he modified their assumptions about human motivation, the nature of happiness, the relationship between happiness and duty, and the justification of utilitarianism. Some of Mill's most significant innovations to the utilitarian tradition concern his claims about the nature of happiness and the role of happiness in human motivation. Bentham and James Mill understand happiness hedonistically, as consisting in pleasure, and they believe that the ultimate aim of each person is predominantly, if not exclusively, the promotion of the agent's own happiness.

Mill rejects their psychological egoism and significantly modifies their assumptions about happiness when he introduces his doctrine of higher pleasures. To appreciate Mill's innovations here, we need to understand some aspects of the Radical legacy he inherits. Mill's proof is widely regarded as flawed in multiple ways. To appreciate the objections we need to reconstruct the steps in this argument more carefully. One traditional reconstruction might look something like this.

1. Utilitarianism is true iff happiness is the one and only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
2. The only proof of desirability is desire.
3. Each person desires his own happiness for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
4. Hence, happiness, as such, is desired for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else) from the point of view of humanity (= the aggregate of persons).
5. Hence, happiness, as such, is desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
6. Happiness is the only thing desired for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else). Other things — such as virtue, health, music, money, and power — can come to be desired for their own sakes, but then they are desired as parts of happiness.
7. Hence, happiness is the only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
8. Hence, utilitarianism is true.

The “ proof” has, at least in some quarters, threatened Mill's reputation as a careful philosopher.

It is commonly thought to be riddled with major mistakes — mistakes of inference and implausible assumptions. Here is a partial list of concerns about Mill's argument, as traditionally conceived. In an early and famous

passage Mill offers one formulation of his basic principles concerning liberties. The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion.

That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise or even right.

These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else. The only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns him, his independence, is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.