

Analysing utilitarianism by john stuart mill philosophy essay



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John Stuart Mill opens his essay, *Utilitarianism*, by mentioning that there's little progress being made toward a standard system that judges people's actions as morally right or wrong. For over 2000 years, philosophers have tried to lay the foundation of morality, but have yet to come closer to an agreement of what the notions of 'right' or 'wrong' are based on. Mill argues that unlike science where "particular truth precedes general theory", ethics needs 'general laws' in order for morality to have legitimacy or significance. (944) In ethics and law, all actions exist to promote a particular end; thus an action can be deemed right or wrong depending on what ends are being pursued. If the ends are good, the action is therefore a good one; if the ends are bad, the action is therefore a bad one. Therefore, it is necessary to know by what standard human actions should be judged. It is important to note that Mill defines morality's purpose as that of bringing about a particular state of the world. Mill continues and states that utilitarianism, or the greatest happiness principle as Bentham called it, is the cause in forming moral doctrines and keeping them stable and solid over the years. He explains that his essay will be an attempt to prove utilitarianism in ethics and demonstrate why this moral foundation is so central to our existence as human beings.

In Chapter 2, Mill tries to present and respond to criticisms against utilitarianism. He notes that many people misunderstand the true definition of the principle. They define it in a "restricted and colloquial sense in which utility is the opposition to pleasure". (946) When in reality, it has everything to do with pleasure and absence of pain. Utility or greatest happiness principle "hold that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote

happiness, wrong as they produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure". (946) He continues and says that pleasure of freedom of pain are the only things desirable as ends. Thus, things are desirable only if they bring about pleasure and prevention of pain; actions are good when they lead to general happiness and bad when they fail to do so.

Mill targets the critics that claim that he and other Epicureans reduce and degrade the meaning of life to pleasures like those of swine, and replies that human pleasures are superior to those of beasts. " Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetite." (947) Once we are aware of these higher faculties, we will never be happy until these faculties are gratified. When making moral judgment, utilitarianism takes account not just the quantity but also the quality of the pleasures resulting from it. Mill differentiates between high and lower pleasures. A pleasure is of higher quality if one chooses it above any other pleasure, even if it's accompanied with discomfort. It is also something that won't be traded for any quantity of the other pleasures. Furthermore, according to Mill it's an ' unquestionable fact' that when given many pleasures one would choose that in which appeals to their higher faculties. Even if it means he'll suffer more in life, he would never choose a lower existence, preferring instead to maintain his dignity. " Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasure; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus..." (947)

Mill continues and responds to those who say that happiness, in any form, can't be a rational purpose of human life and action because it's unattainable. In addition, critics claim that people can exist without happiness; that all noble men have become virtuous by renouncing happiness. First, Mill replies it's an exaggeration to state that people cannot be happy. If happiness is defined by a perpetual feeling of pleasure, then Mill admits that it's impossible to obtain it. The state of pleasure is not long lasting; it's temporary and intermittent. He contends that happiness are moments of rapture occurring in a life troubled by few pains and when defined as such is indeed possible to attain. It would be possible to all people, if level of education and social arrangement would allow it.

Moreover, those who can't find happiness generally care for nobody but themselves and have failed to open their minds and exercise it's faculties; they are selfish and have a lack of mental cultivation. Thus, if people are educated to learn and develop appropriate values, they have the capabilities to be happy. Next, Mill addresses the argument that state that people can do without happiness. He admits that it's true that people have existed without happiness, but they were martyrs, doing so voluntarily. This is usually done to achieve an end greater than happiness, which is virtue. The sacrifice of giving up their happiness is done so, so others don't have to make a similar sacrifice. They increase the amount of happiness in the world. They would not commit such an action if it " would produce no fruit for any of [their] fellow creatures". (951) However, Mill does say that these martyrs are proof of what men can do, but not an example of what they should do.

Nevertheless, the willingness to sacrifice your happiness for that of others is the highest of virtue. Mill specifies that utilitarians only see sacrifices as good

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insofar it promotes and increases the state of happiness. If it fails to do so, it's considered a waste. He emphasizes that utilitarians judge an act as right if it affects the happiness of all people and not of the individual. The morality of an action depends on the goodness of its results only, and not the motives behind the actions. It is all about consequences. Mill, however, states that since many don't affect large numbers of people on a daily basis, they only need to consider his or her own actions in relation to every individual involved in the action. It's only those who have an impact on the public that should think about public utility on a regular basis.

Another criticism against utilitarianism is that it underestimates human nature to find exception to rules. For example, someone will justify breaking the rules by simply stating that a given action increases utility. Mill argues that this is not only the case with utilitarianism; this happens in every moral system. "There is no ethical creed which doesn't temper the rigidity of its laws." (956) He further says that having the application of the standard of utility is better than having none at all.

A philosophy cannot be binding if it does not contain inherent consequences for those who break the rules. In chapter 3, Mill discusses what motivates us to act in ways approved of by the principle of utility. He explores all the possible sanctions utilitarianism might impose, upon those who do not abide by it. He writes that there's no reason utilitarianism can't have or won't impose all the sanctions that belong to other moral systems. These sanctions can be either external or internal. External sanctions include outer impacts on an individual, such as peer pressure or the fear of god's wrath. Internal sanctions come from within, from one's conscious. It is a "feeling in our
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mind...attendant on violation of duty". (957) Internal sanctions are more powerful than any external sanction, given that internal sanctions have more potential to influence one's actions. Thus, if internal sanctions provide the strongest influence over people's actions, utilitarianism must appeal to people's inner feelings in order to have a binding force on them. Mill believes that moral feelings are acquired and notes that they are no less natural because of it. Moral feelings may not be part of human nature, but they are a natural outgrowth from it. They are capable to spring up spontaneously, but at the same time, they can be cultivated and educated. However, bad moral principles can also be likely to come about due to external sanctions.

Because these moral feelings are imposed and not naturally developed, they're called 'artificial' moral feelings. Mill notes that it is very easy to distinguish between the two. Artificial moral feelings eventually fade and crumble under scrutiny analysis, while naturally developed feelings do not. Since the principle of utility doesn't break down under analysis, we can assess there's "a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality". (959)

In chapter 4, Mill discusses what is required of utilitarianism for it to be believed as valid, even if it's impossible to prove the first principle by logic. If a person can actually see an object that means, that said object is visible. If a person hears something, that means there is sound. With that in mind, Mill's argues that the proof of something being desirable is that people desire it. Hence, happiness is desirable since each person desires his own happiness. We can also say that each person's happiness is a good to that person and general happiness a good to all people. If something desirable is an end to an action and happiness is desirable, then it's clear that happiness

is one of the ends and one criterion of morality. However, in order to show that happiness is the only criterion for morality, it's essential to show that people never desire anything but happiness. Mill claims that you could say that people desire things like virtue or the absence of vice which is generally separate from happiness. Then again, he argues that happiness is a whole idea with component parts. People desire virtue because it's part of happiness and promotes the general happiness. Mill notes that there's a difference in desiring something as a means to happiness and desiring something because it's part of happiness. Whether or not it's true, can only be answered through self-reaction and observation of others.

Mill says that throughout history one of the biggest obstacles to the acceptance of the principle of utility has been that fact that it doesn't allow for a theory of justice. In chapter 5, Mill defines justice and makes the connection between justice and utility. Mill takes on the meaning of justice. He lists things that are commonly associated with being just and unjust. First, it is considered unjust to "deprive any one of his personal liberty, his property, or any other thing which belongs to him by law". (965) However, this concept has exceptions. For example, a person may have legal rights he should not have due to a bad law. While people vary whether bad laws can be justly disobeyed, all people agree that laws can be unjust. Therefore, law cannot be the ultimate standard of justice. Second, it is considered to be unjust when someone withholds from any person something he has a moral right to possess. Third, it is considered just when a person receives what he deserves (whether good or evil) and unjust when he receives a good or undergoes an evil in which he doesn't deserve. Mill explains that this, is the "

clearest and most emphatic form in which the idea of justice is conceived by the general mind". (966) People are thought to deserve good things if they have done right and evil things if they have done wrong. Fifth, it's considered unjust to show favoritism and preference to one person over another, in inappropriate circumstances. This can be the case in a courtroom, when a judge sways the verdict based on his own fondness and not based on facts. But, when regarding the issue of friends and family one doesn't have to be impartial. Lastly, the idea of equality is seen by many to be part of justice. Mill further investigates the meaning of justice by looking at its etymology. In most languages, the word's origin comes from either positive law or authoritative custom. Therefore, the most primitive element of justice is the idea of conformity to the law. Ultimately, Mill argues that the ideas of justice are united by the concepts of rights. In cases of justice, the person who has been wronged has had his or her moral right imposed upon and has the moral right to seek repayment.

Mill then turns to argue that the sentiment of justice can be linked to the principle of utility. He says that there are two components to justice. The first is the desire to punish. The second is the knowledge that there is an individual who's a victim of wrongdoing. The desire to punish comes from the impulse of self-defense and the feeling of sympathy. Like all animals, humans have instincts of self-defense. Unlike animals, humans are capable of sympathizing not only with loved ones, but also with strangers, people they have no connection with at all. Justice then, reflects the natural feeling of retaliation and vengeance, expanded by the feelings of sympathy and intellect to apply to things that harm society. These feelings are not moral

feelings but we can see the justice's moral component can be seen in the way people are outraged by the injustices they see, not just on themselves, but also on everyone else. This demonstrated a moral concern.

Mill also claims that the idea of a right is not a concept separate from justice. When we call anything a person's right we mean, " he has the valid claim on society to protect him in the possession of it, either by the force of law, or by that of education and opinion." (970) The reason for this is utility. Mill's then argues that if justice is indeed independent from utility than why is questions related to justice are often debatable. " We are continually informed that Utility is an uncertain standard, which every different person interprets differently." (971) Hence, justice is grounded on utility and is the most important part of all morality; it concerns many of the most basic essentials of a human's well-being. Furthermore, the preservation of justice keeps the peace among the people. Therefore, there is a strong utility interest in preserving and enforcing what justice commands. Most of the applications of justice discussed earlier are ways to maintain the notion of moral rights. The Greatest happiness principle doesn't have meaning unless each person's happiness is valued exactly the same as somebody else's, which is basically the idea of impartiality and equality. In addition, people are seen to have an equal entitlement to happiness, and an equal entitlement to the means of happiness.