

Mill's Utilitarianism

I. Introduction

Recall that there are four questions one might ask an ethical theory to answer:

- a) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts *ought* we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?
- b) What *makes* a particular action right or wrong? What is it about the action that determines its moral status?
- c) How do we *know* what is right and wrong?
- d) What, if anything, motivates us to do what is right?

Recall also that there seem to be three components of any action that may host the source of moral value:

- i. The person who performs the action (including their character)
- ii. The action itself (what makes it the action that it is)
- iii. Consequences that result from the action

Aristotle locates the source of moral value in (i). Kant suggests, however, that we should locate it in (ii). (Mill, we will see, will locate it in (iii).)

II. Consequentialism

Consequentialists hold that the rightness or wrongness, the permissibility or impermissibility, of an action depends wholly on its *consequences*. The most common sort of consequentialism is utilitarianism, so we will focus on that. Utilitarians add to the general idea that rightness and wrongness depend on consequences: first, that what matters is *utility*, e.g., pleasure, well-being/welfare, and second that the act we ought to perform is the one that *maximizes* utility. (Other consequentialists focus on things other than utility and offer alternatives to maximizing whatever it is that is good.)

Utilitarians begin by asking what, if anything, is *good in and of itself*, something that is not merely instrumentally good – as a means to some other good – but is good *per se*. We answer this question by looking at the structure of human desire, what it is that (well-informed) people ultimately aim for in action. (Does this sound like Aristotle?) The idea is that once we understand what this good is, the right act is the one that promotes the maximum amount of it. Given that on this utilitarian account what is good is determined by what humans ultimately aim for, we'll have an answer to (b) that points in the direction of an answer to (d), i.e., what motivates humans to do what is right.

III. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Mill was born in London. His father, James Mill, was a philosopher, historian, and economist, and imposed on John Stuart a very unusual and demanding upbringing. He was denied opportunities to play with peers and was required to spend his time studying, e.g., by age 3 he was instructed in (Classical Attic) Greek, and began studying Latin at age 8. He was exposed to vast amounts of history, literature, math, science, economics, and philosophy at an early age. One of James Mill's friends and philosophical influences was Jeremy Bentham. James hoped that John Stuart would carry on their work. Mill published *Utilitarianism* in 1861, initially as a series of magazine articles in *Fraser's Magazine*, and in book form in 1863. He is also well-known for his work *On Liberty* which argues that the state has only limited rights to restrict the liberty of individuals; notable especially is his argument for freedom of speech.

Bentham and both Mills are utilitarians: we morally ought to maximize utility, where "utility" functions as a placeholder for whatever is the greatest good. Bentham is a Hedonistic Utilitarian because he believes that pleasure is the greatest good. Mill is a Eudaimonistic Utilitarian because he believes that happiness is the greatest good. Utilitarianism remains alive and well today in different forms. Preference Utilitarians hold that preference satisfaction should be maximized. Welfare Utilitarians claim that we ought to maximize well-being.

IV. The "Greatest Happiness Principle."

So what is the ultimate good? We've already considered several options, as just noted. Let's suppose that happiness is good in itself. It would seem then that the more happiness the better--if it is good for me to be

happy, it's even better if I'm happy and others are too; and then it seems that if happiness is really what's important, then in order to promote the good we ought simply to aim to bring about the greatest amount of happiness. Our own happiness is a fine thing, but it's no more valuable than someone else's happiness--it's the total amount of happiness that matters. Thinking along these lines leads to Mill's "greatest-happiness" principle, which is his version of the principle of utility:

...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. (para 2/25, p. 210, hp 7)¹

It is useful to highlight some of the background assumptions in Mill's discussion.²

1. Practical rationality is a matter of making choices that enable one to meet one's chosen ends (or the ends it is best for you to pursue).
2. Moral rationality is a matter of making choices that enable one to meet *moral* ends.
3. The rational goal of human effort is happiness, so this is the moral goal.
4. The moral goal involves impartiality: no one counts for more than any other.

Note that this is supposed to be an extension of the idea of prudence. To be prudent you must consider each time in your life as having equal importance and maximize well-being over your entire life rather than placing too much weight on the present. So, for example, suppose you are having a great time partying the night before a big exam. In this situation the prudent person would weigh the amount of pleasure gained by the party against the amount of pain/unhappiness upon failing the exam and the consequences for their grade, etc. Mill thinks that moral rationality requires us to extend this time-impartiality to subject-impartiality. If what matters, ultimately, is happiness, it doesn't matter whose happiness it is. Your own happiness, from the rational point of view, counts the same as any other's.

5. The moral goal requires the aggregate happiness of all persons (or all sentient beings, i.e., all beings capable of happiness).
6. So moral rationality is a matter of maximizing happiness, i.e., the greatest happiness principle.

V. Questions

1. *What does Mill mean by 'happiness' and how does his view differ from a hedonistic utilitarianism?*

Mill says 'By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.' The hedonistic utilitarian takes all pain and pleasure to be on a par. Mill, however, allows that there are "higher" and "lower" pleasures, e.g.,

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone. (para 4/25, p. 210 hp. 7)

2. *How do we rank pleasures then? Doesn't a ranking suggest that there is something in addition to pleasure/pain as a source of value?*

Mill does not directly answer this question, but instead offers us a criterion for determining which pleasures are more valuable:

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures...except [one's] being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. (5/25, p. 211 hp. 8)

Based on his observations of the choices people make, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different

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¹ References are to the *Past Masters* resource, available through the MIT Libraries.

² This is captured well in the Arneson notes I've added to recommended readings, and I draw on those here.

opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.” Note that here Aristotle and Mill’s approach to the epistemology of value come apart. On Aristotle’s view, we can, through inquiry, discover what is the “proper function” of humans, i.e., what is their distinctive capability whose exercise beings flourishing. It is the exercise of the rational faculty. This is something we can be confused about and the expert can correct us. Mill thinks, however, that to determine what is good for humans we have to go by what humans actually choose. This is a much more “democratic” or “populist” epistemology of value.

3. *How do we know in a particular case what is going to bring about the most happiness?*

In many cases we might not know for sure. According to Mill, our ordinary moral rules serve as a rough guide, e.g., in general, keeping promises, not telling lies, doing your duty, are likely to produce the greatest happiness. Of course there's no guarantee, and if we determine in advance of acting that normally good results wouldn't occur, then we shouldn't follow the moral rule.

4. *Suppose you can quantify the happiness of individuals; how should we calculate general welfare?*

Simply *adding* amounts of happiness doesn't seem right, because then there would be a moral imperative to produce more people to get more total happiness. (Or to eliminate people to reduce the total unhappiness.) Plausibly we should aim to maximize average happiness. But then wouldn't wiping out the chronically unhappy people raise the overall average? What's wrong, then, from the Utilitarian point of view, in doing so?

Appendix: Objections and Replies

These questions are really just the tip of the iceberg, for Utilitarianism seems to pose quite systematic conflicts with our ordinary moral judgments. How can Utilitarians respond?

Utilitarianism contradicts ordinary moral principles. Within limits we think that promise-keeping is obligatory, even when breaking the promise would lead to better consequences. Suppose I borrow \$10. from you and promise to pay it back. In the meantime your parents give you a ton of money and the \$10 means nothing to you. Ought I to pay it back? It seems that a Utilitarian would say no: I would be happier/better off if I could keep the money, and it won't make a substantial difference to you; so I maximize happiness by breaking my promise.

- Possible response: there are more effects to be taken into account. There are *subtle direct* effects like disappointing your expectations, and making myself untrustworthy in people's eyes, and also *indirect* effects like weakening the institution of promise-keeping. When the indirect effects are considered the calculation favors returning the money.
- Further possible response: one might argue that the Utilitarian answer is the correct one. For example, it would be fine to disregard a deathbed promise to give your uncle's fortune to the Society for Grass Counting and use the money for famine relief.
 - Note: even if we accept that utilitarianism gives us the correct answer about what is *right* to do, it does not necessarily give us the correct answer about *moral appraisal*. Our practices of praise and blame should themselves be subjects of utilitarian evaluation: possibly it's better overall if we always praise people for promise-keeping and blame them for promise-breaking, even if they did the right thing when breaking a promise. E.g., one might argue that the consequences of breaking a promise are almost always worse; the exceptions are very hard to recognize beforehand; and if you write exceptions into the rule people won't take it as seriously. Notice that the Utilitarian has two sorts of moral evaluation to work with:
 - Action X is *right/permissible* iff it maximizes happiness/utility.
 - Action X is *praiseworthy* iff the practice of praising actions like X maximizes happiness/utility.So a Utilitarian could say that breaking the deathbed promise is *right* but *not praiseworthy*.
 - But: is it coherent to praise someone for doing the wrong thing and blame them for doing the right thing?

Utilitarianism disregards ordinary moral distinctions. Ordinarily we think there is an important moral distinction between harming and failing to help. E.g., should a doctor cut up one person to save five? Should

one be willing to shoot one innocent person in a deal that would let twenty go free? No! But Utilitarianism says "yes". Can we accept this?

- Possible response: As mentioned above, even if a utilitarian is committed to saying that the seemingly wrong actions are required, the actions may not be praiseworthy. In general, causing harm should be regarded as worse than failing to help because the badness of harm is predictable; the goodness of help is much less predictable. So, for a Utilitarian it makes sense to train people to place greater weight on avoiding harm than on promoting good.

Utilitarianism asks too much. If our actions must maximize happiness in order to be right, then we never do anything right (or at least most of us don't) because there are always things that would increase general welfare more than what we're actually doing. A moral view that says we never do anything right can't be the correct view. [How do you think a utilitarian could respond?]

Utilitarianism asks too little. The Utilitarian evaluates actions on the basis of their actual *consequences*. But intuition says that factors coming *before* the action are equally important: especially, the agent's *motivation* for acting in that way, the spirit in which the act is conducted. Some moral theorists even suggest that the inner decision is *all* that's important, the rest being just a matter of good or bad luck. [How do you think a utilitarian could respond?]

Questions:

- Hedonistic and Eudaimonistic Utilitarianism aren't the only forms of utilitarianism or of consequentialism. Consider: *Rule Utilitarianism*, *Preference Utilitarianism*, etc. And some consequentialists don't argue that we ought to *maximize* utility (as utilitarians do) but that we ought to be satisficers (we ought to produce "good enough" consequences). Do these versions fare better with respect to the objections we've considered?
- What else matters about the rightness of action besides consequences?

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