JUSTICE

Lecture 8 – The Utility of Democracy

1. So far:
   a. We have considered the Principle of Utility as the ultimate principle of justice
   b. We have explored some of its implications for the content of laws and social practices
   c. But the Principle of Utility also has implications for the form of government

2. Utilitarianism as a theory of democracy
   a. Everyone should have rights of political participation, including the right to vote
   b. Not because there is an “inalienable” right to participate in collective decision-making
   c. But because popular government has “the greatest amount of beneficial consequences”

3. Why does representative government have better results than non-representative government?
   a. Influence on the content of laws: participation provides better protection against oppression
   b. Influence on the character of the governed: participation has important educative effects

4. Mill on the beneficial educative effects of participation
   a. Having the vote gives people the sense that the laws to which they are subject are changeable by them, not merely “visitations of Nature” or unchangeable obstacles
   b. Political discussion expands people’s thoughts beyond their daily tasks and wants; they are led to form opinions on larger matters of common concern
   c. Participation in the exercise of public functions (voting, serving on a jury, holding a public office) develops the ability and desire to act impartially and to pursue the common good

5. Government should be organized so as to enhance these beneficial educative effects, through e.g.:
   a. Opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in the exercise of public functions
   b. Norms of open, public discussion by government officials and elected representatives
   c. The Single Transferable Vote
6. But mass participation can also have bad consequences, since at present the majority has
   a. Low “technical competence”
   b. Low “moral competence”

7. These “dangers of incompetence” must somehow be addressed if popular government is to be justified by appealing to its results

8. Mill’s proposal
   a. No group should be permanently excluded from political participation: this would forgo the beneficial educative consequences of participation
   b. But, a basic literacy and numeracy test should be required of all persons who wish to vote
   c. And, multiple votes should be given to persons of greater mental competence

9. A potential objection to the utilitarian justification of democracy
   a. It be wrong to give educated persons more votes even if doing so would have the best results
   b. Therefore, the utilitarian justification of democracy is defective
   c. And, the Principle of Utility itself must be mistaken