

24.231 Ethics – Handout 10 My Notes on Mill’s *Utilitarianism*

(1) General concerns:

- Are interpersonal comparisons of utility even possible?
- What are we talking about – maximizing total utility or average utility?
- Both seem to ignore issues of distributive justice (except instrumentally – diminishing marginal utility of resources)
- Average utility has some implausible implications (especially when considering harms, rather than benefits – is it really not worse for a total population of 100 people to be suffering torture than for a total population of 10 people to be suffering it?), and seems not to sit comfortably with utilitarian intuitions. Total utility invites the repugnant conclusion (but it’s important to remember that this isn’t just a problem for utilitarianism).

(2) On higher and lower pleasures:

- Should a utilitarian make any distinction between these? Is “pushpin as good as poetry,” if the quantity of pleasure they produce is the same?
- How are we to determine which of two pleasures is higher? Is Mill’s appeal to “competent judges who have experienced both pleasures” plausible? And if competent judges prefer the higher pleasures, should we think they do so because activities leading them are more pleasurable, or have a higher quality of pleasure? Isn’t it perhaps more plausible to think they value them more for some other reason, having nothing to do with pleasure?
- Relatedly, even if competent judges do take more pleasure in engaging in “higher” activities, are these activities more valuable because they are more pleasurable (as Mill claims), or more valuable because they are more pleasurable? (Cf. the Euthyphro Problem: if we accepted the first answer to this question, rather than the second, wouldn’t the preferences of competent judges seem arbitrary?)
- Does it make sense to maintain both that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable, and that some kinds of pleasures are more valuable than others? (In what respect could they be more valuable?) Also, if higher and lower pleasures are different in kind, how are they to be summed, as utilitarianism requires?
- Is pleasure the only thing we value (or ought to value) for its own sake?

(3) On various worries concerning demandingness:

- Utilitarianism seems to require me to be impartial between my happiness, that of those close to me, and that of strangers
- Does utilitarianism imply that I have moral duties to myself as much as to others?

- Might utilitarianism require excessive sacrifices of me? Is it plausible, as Mill suggests, that it will rarely require me to be concerned for the distant needy, or the general good, rather than the good of my immediate circle?
- Does utilitarianism make for cold moral agents/one thought too many? Does it make friendship impossible?
- Difference between a decision procedure and a criterion of rightness: Mill says we shouldn't "confound the rule of action with the motive of it;" Is a charge of self-effacingness or self-defeatingness a legitimate objection to a moral theory?
- Is it too difficult to calculate what the effects of my actions on utility will be? (Again, the difference between decision procedures and criteria of rightness is relevant here.) Mill suggests we should in most cases guide ourselves by appeal to secondary principles, and appeal to utility only when those secondary principles conflict.
- Secondary principles: Does Mill's appeal to secondary principles help utilitarianism avoid some of the charges leveled against it – that it is too demanding, too difficult to apply, or conflicts with our confidently held intuitions about rights and side-constraints?

(4) On Mill's "proof" of the greatest happiness principle:

- The steps in Mill's proof:
 - (i) Utilitarianism is true iff happiness is the one and only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
 - (ii) The only proof of desirability is desire.
 - (iii) Each person desires his own happiness for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
 - (iv) 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).
 - (v) Hence, happiness, as such, is desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
 - (vi) 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.
 - (vii) Hence, happiness is the only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
 - (viii) Hence, utilitarianism is true.
- (i) is plausible only if "desirable" means worthy of being desired, not if it means capable of being desired. But (ii) is most plausible if "desirable" means capable of being desired. But then there is a real worry that the argument trades on a tacit equivocation between these two different senses of "desirable" and that the argument is, as a result, invalid. (Compare

visible=capable of being seen.)

- Even so, (i) is false. Even if happiness were the one and only thing desirable for its own sake, this would establish only a claim about the good or “ends”. It is not a claim about duty or right action. Utilitarianism not only claims that the good is human happiness but goes on to define the right in terms of promoting the good. The second claim does not follow from the first.
- It is not clear that (iii) is true. It seems as if masochists or selfless altruists might fail to desire their own happiness for its own sake.
- (iv) may be incoherent and certainly does not follow from (iii). It is not clear that aggregates of persons have desires. Perhaps under special circumstances groups of people might form a corporate agent or person. But aggregates of persons, as such, are not persons and do not have desires. Even if they did, it is doubtful that one could infer what the aggregate desires from facts about what its members desire. That would involve a compositional fallacy.
- It is not clear how to understand (vi). One would think that the aim is to make claims that parallel (iv) and (v). But then (vi) needs to be understood as making another claim about aggregate psychology. And this raises some of the old questions about aggregate psychology. However, much of Mill’s discussion surrounding (vi) seems to be about individual psychology. Mill seems to be saying that insofar as individuals do have intrinsic desires for things other than their own happiness the objects of intrinsic desire are desired as parts of their own happiness. Perhaps this is Mill's initial claim from which he then hopes to infer, as he did from (iii)-(iv), that the general happiness is the only thing desired by the aggregate for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else). This inference would, of course, give rise to the same sort of worries we raised about the inference from (iii)-(iv). In particular, we might doubt that aggregates of persons have any aims, much less ultimate aims. And even if we conceded that they did, it is not clear that we could infer facts about the desires of aggregates from facts about the desires of its members. That, we said, would seem to involve a compositional fallacy.
- (vi) has other problems. Mill argues that only happiness is valued for its own sake. Then he considers as a possible counterexample to this claim the suggestion that we also value other things for their own sake, like virtue. But, he says, while we do value virtue for its own sake, and not as a means to happiness, it’s best understood as a *part* of happiness: things we once desired as a means to happiness and then started to desire for their own sake, “in being desired for their own sake...[become] a part of happiness” (p. 310) But this seems to be a problematic argument – of course, if Mill stipulates that anything we come to desire for its own sake *thereby* becomes a part of happiness, then it will follow that anything we desire for its own sake is a part of “happiness”. But this surely stretches our concept of happiness beyond all recognizability: say I desire for its own sake that the Amazon rainforest survive another 1000 years. But its doing so could hardly be thought to contribute to my happiness. Mill may mean that often, after long desiring something as a means to happiness, we come to be unhappy if we don’t have

it (even if it's not serving its usual purpose). The miser comes to value money like this. And Mill suggests that we also come to value virtue in this way, so that we're unhappy if we lack it, even if that lack doesn't result in our producing less happiness. But if this argument attributes to virtue the same kind of value that money has to the miser, it doesn't attribute the value to virtue that we take it to have.

- Even if we accepted this defense of (v) and (vii), this would only establish that happiness as such was the only thing desirable or good for the aggregate. It looks like we could have parallel claims about the agent's own happiness being the only thing desirable or good for the individual. But this might seem to imply that while the aggregate should pursue or promote the general happiness individuals should pursue or promote their own happiness. That would not be a defense of utilitarianism.

(Notes on Mill's "Proof" adapted from *SEP*, "Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy", by David Brink)

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