

## **Utilitarianism**

### **The Argument in Context and in a Nutshell (Strauss and Cropsey)**

J.S. Mill differs from Bentham and James Mill (the early utilitarianism) only in the fact that he does not think that the difference between right and wrong is known – rather this can only be ascertained by observation. For J.S. Mill the fundamental principle of morality is not known a priori. He integrates this with the earlier utilitarian innovation that the end of the state is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain

Mill's contributions to U

- role of experience and observation
- importance of quality of pleasure in distinguishing humans from animals

This observation is important because it connected U to his theory of human progress. Cultivation requires human freedom, man can live more justly and with higher human achievements when there is freedom.

For Mill the role of government is to educate people to pursue higher pleasures. Moral education Society should provide the conditions for the individual to develop his particular talents. At each stage in the progression, new things are learned

Representative government is best suited to achieve these goals because it privileges the individual as a vehicle for social change and encourages individual involvement. It protects the rights of individuals and promotes their highest moral and intellectual development. Representative government is also the most practical in the modern world and in large states. A prerequisite for such a system to work is that the interests of the governors and the governed are the same. Before that stage you have to work towards that. The ultimate goal of government action is to ensure the complete freedom and independence of action.

### **Mill – Chap. 2**

“Actions are right in the proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness pain and the privation of pleasure.”

Pleasure has to be assessed by quantity and quality. Mental pleasures (pleasures that employ higher faculties) tend to be superior to bodily pleasures because they are more permanent, safer, and less costly.

Relative desirability is determined by whether all or most prefer one type of pleasure to another, regardless of any moral obligations to like or dislike a given pleasure. Ideally this would be determined by two people familiar with and competent to judge two competing options.

Higher mental faculties creates more capacity for pleasure and pain. Pleasure can be acquired in more ways but with greater mental abilities comes the knowledge of imperfection and the possible happiness that has been unattained.

Dignity keeps the human from wanting to be a lower life form. Mill draws a distinction between happiness and contentment. The lower beast is content because it has little capacity to understand happiness. Dignity has an overriding importance in determining happiness and prevent the descent into animal-like behavior.

Humans often subject themselves to lesser pursuits, indulging sensual pleasures at the expense of their health. They do this because these less pleasures may be the only ones to which they have access and they then lose the ability to derive pleasure from higher pleasures. They addict themselves to inferior pleasures.

**The goal of U is total happiness of all, not just the agent's happiness.** There is no trade-off between nobility and happiness because that which generates the most happiness also generates the most nobility.

Anyone with sufficient interest in public good and private affections has the moral and intellectual prerequisites to live an enviable life. Through that concern for public good social ills like poverty and suffering will be narrowed if not eliminated.

Sacrificing life for another is the highest virtue to be found in man when that sacrifice increases the pleasure of others. Readiness to make such sacrifices is the best preparation to be happy because it frees one from excessive concern with evils in the world and cultivates satisfaction with the sources of pleasure available to him.

**Utilitarian morality** – do unto others as they would do to you, love thy neighbor; education should be used to inculcate the link between individual happiness and the collective good.

**Object of virtue** – the multiplication of happiness, whenever possible on an “extended scale” but otherwise private happiness of a few individuals is sufficient.

### **Critiques**

- U claims too much, is good way of thinking about happiness but cannot be a total system of morality. Impaired by **lack of interpersonal comparability of utilities.**
- there is no clear way to define happiness, definitions vary across people, emotion will triumph over reason, no clear way of pursuing happiness

Critiques of The implicit components of Mill's definition of happiness:

- contentment: Mill argues we should be content with what we have but those with lower mental faculties are only “content” rather than happy because they cannot comprehend certain sources of happiness.
- mental cultivation: He is ok with Mill's final statement on this that cultivation is more than mere curiosity but a “a moral and human interest” should be taken in them.

- improved laws: does not seem easily attainable. It is not obvious what would constitute better social arrangements. Seems like too naïve a faith in the ability of human reason

#### Rule versus General Utilitarianism

- general: diminish respect for general rule of law

#### Questions Asked in Previous Years

- Can we use utilitarianism as a methodology of social science as well as a moral guideline to design social institutions?
  - economics
  - moral guidelines: distributional implications
- Why is utilitarianism so successful in political theory? What is attractive about it?
  - egalitarian in that everyone has a certain ability, state can draw that out
  - flexible, happiness can exist throughout (versus protection of rights)
- utilitarianism: its strengths and weaknesses as a moral and descriptive theory
  - lack of interpersonal comparability (economics)
  - lead to counter-intuitive example (lack of respect for individual rights)
  - differing risk
  - distributional implications of util.

#### GOOD

- egalitarian
- flexible
- Is utilitarianism egalitarian or realistic?
  - notions of otherness in virtue