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Introduction to John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, which first appeared in three installments of *Fraser's Magazine* in 1861, was intended as a defense of the notorious doctrine identified with the liberal reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and with the author's father, James Mill (1773-1836). The defense was successful. While "the principle of utility, or as Bentham has latterly called it, the greatest happiness principle," may have scandalized Victorian England, Mill's *Utilitarianism* became one of the defining documents of modern British and American liberalism. It is impossible to appreciate contemporary social and political life without coming to grips with utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806. He was named after his father's early benefactor, the Scottish aristocrat John Stuart. Under his father's tutelage, young John began Greek at three and Latin at eight, and in addition to the classics, he mastered history, mathematics, and political economy. In 1823, at the age of seventeen, Mill entered government service, where he remained until retirement in 1858. In 1830, Mill met Harriet Taylor, the witty and intellectual young wife of a well-to-do druggist, and they began an affair that lasted two decades. Mill's friends, including Thomas Carlyle and his wife, were scandalized. Mr. Taylor died in July 1849 and less than two years later, in April 1851, Mill and Mrs. Taylor married. When Harriet died at Avignon in 1858, Mill bought a house overlooking the cemetery and commissioned a grand tomb. He died in Avingon on May 8, 1873.

British utilitarianism in the nineteenth century was inseparably linked to the social, legal, and economic reforms advocated by Jeremy Bentham. The son of a successful attorney, Bentham took his degree from Oxford in 1763, after which he studied law at Lincoln's Inn. His interest, however, lay more in the theory than the practice of law. Bentham's earliest publications advocate the principle of utility and the quest for the greatest happiness as the only legitimate guides to legal and social reform. *Principles of Morals and Legislation,* his most famous book, announces at the outset that "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure.*"[1] James Mill became part of Bentham's circle in 1808 and worked closely with his mentor over the next three decades. The utilitarianism of Bentham and James Mill takes for granted that the subject of the social sciences is economic man. Individuals rank alternative courses of action in terms of anticipated pleasures and pains and then attempt to maximize their overall balance of pleasure over pain. The value of any particular object or state of affairs is measured in terms of how many people are willing to give up how much to acquire it. Other measures of value, and systems of law based upon them, are fictions concocted to justify and secure one or another form of social life.

Good legislation and human betterment are to be secured by investigating what people genuinely want and putting into place a system of legal rewards and punishments designed to secure the greatest good for the greatest number. The free market, as understood by Adam Smith (1723-1790) and David Ricardo (1772-1823), is the best expression of the public's desires and the engine generating the preconditions for social progress. The principle of utility allows legislators to test whether a law is truly sound and designed to maximize the pleasures and minimize the pains for citizens. Misplaced restraints like the laws against usury get in the market's way, to the detriment of all.

When John Stuart Mill comes to defend utilitarianism, his first move is to locate the doctrine between the "à priori moralists" and the "intuitive school."[2] By the first he means those thinkers,

among whom Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is pre-eminent, who believe that the rational foundations of ethics may be discovered in reason itself. Once we recognize the "categorical imperative" to act only on principles we could choose to be the law for any reasonable creature, we have a standard against which to test any proposed rule. We can, at least in theory, lay out the whole of a systematic ethics. But, writes Mill, when Kant attempts the feat he can only distinguish the moral from the immoral by asserting that no reasonable person would desire the consequences of adopting a particular law. For example—not an example Mill would have used—it is *logically* possible to will that all human beings must act at all times to maximize their own sexual gratification. This would make our social interactions awkward, to say the least, but would not violate logic. To rule out wicked or impractical rules, the Kantian must fall back on consequences. Once he makes that move, his moral theory is no different from that of the utilitarian.

The "intuitive school" comprises a number of British and Scottish thinkers of the eighteenth century who maintained that human beings are endowed with a moral sense that makes it possible for them to discern immediately what is right and good. However, not everyone has this sense developed to the highest degree, so it is helpful to arrange the findings of intuition systematically to highlight their logical relations. The system can then be used to educate beginners into the moral life.

For both schools, morality is a science, yet according to Mill they rarely "attempt to make out a list of the à priori principles which are to serve as the premises of the science; still more rarely do they make any effort to reduce those various principles to one first principle, or common ground of obligation."[3] Thus in his view, their claims to science have no substance; both are so much smoke and mirrors. In particular, they occupy no higher intellectual ground than the utilitarians themselves.

Chapter two of *Utilitarianism* proceeds to debunk several popular misconceptions. First off, utility should not be contrasted with pleasure:

> The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.[4]

The pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain motivate all our actions. The more pleasure we get, with the less admixture of pain, the happier we are. This has the benefit, for Mill, of being obviously and observably true without any of the convoluted arguments or invisible intuitions of his rivals.

Bentham was interested in law and social reform. As far as the state was concerned, one pleasure was as good as any other. This had the apparently odd consequence that playing tiddledywinks was, morally, on the same level for the tiddledywinker that listening to Beethoven was for the lover of classical music. Mill parts company with Bentham at this point. "It is an unquestionable fact," he writes, "that those who are acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties."[5] Given the opportunity, most people will pursue and enjoy learning, literature, and the arts, simply because that is the sort of creature they are.

Utilitarianism is not, however, just the latest incarnation of ancient Epicureanism. Mill thinks a comprehensive account of the good life, based on the greatest happiness principle, will need to incorporate doctrines from Stoicism and Christianity in order to combat selfishness, the greatest source of social conflict. Once people have been educated away from self-interest and provided with a decent education, they are more than capable of securing the good life. "Even that most intractable of enemies, disease," Mill writes:

> may be indefinitely reduced in dimension by good physical and moral education, and proper control of noxious influences; while the progress of science

> holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe. . . . All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort.[6]

Here Mill stands foursquare in the progressive spirit of nineteenth-century liberalism: The dignity of the free individual, the power of science, the prospect of a new and ever better life together.

Mill's utilitarianism is expansive enough to embrace Christian revelation. Accusations of "godlessness" against the utilitarians are simply misplaced. If "God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other."[7] God, on Mill's account, is the ultimate utilitarian. In any case, the utilitarian is in no worse shape than the Christian theologian, who needs a supplementary account of ethics to flesh out God's will.

In chapter three Mill argues that however you describe it, the ultimate justification for utilitarianism has exactly the same status as that of conservative theists or anyone else, namely the feeling that certain actions are our duties. One person is convinced that duty is defined by the pronouncements of scripture, literally interpreted. Another believes that the virtues of Aristotle capture the good life for human beings. It is the feeling that one argument is more convincing than the other that keeps the Christian and the pagan standing pat in their moral certainties.

Nor is virtue for virtue's sake alien to the utilitarian. Once virtuous action has become a pleasure, then it is desired for its own sake and, when successful, it is more predictably conducive to maximizing the happiness of the many than any of its rivals. We have the best of reasons, as utilitarians, for advocating justice and the other virtues as desirable for their own sakes.

Different communities may disagree on what justice requires, but they all agree that justice demands that greater goods are not to be sacrificed for lesser goods. The utilitarian account of

justice simply registers that most people feel that "certain social utilities . . . are vastly more important, and therefore more absolute and imperative, than any others are as a class."[8] We pass laws to protect dependent minors from the sexual interests of others. In doing so, we acknowledge the widely held feeling that incest and child sexual abuse call for a ban that is absolute. That different groups explain this in different ways needn't, for the utilitarian, obscure the more fundamental feeling that they share.

It has always been a criticism that unrestrained utilitarianism opens the door to the tyranny of the majority, whose happiness might well outweigh the misery of an oppressed few. Skeptics worry that utility may become a justification for brutal oppression, if not outright slavery. Slavery was integral to the classical world on whose literature Mill was raised. Mill himself had written just two years earlier, in his essay *On Liberty*, that barbarians and members of less-developed cultures were not candidates for true liberty. The clear implication here is that our benevolent concern for the welfare of third-world peoples require that, like a good father, we oversee their development until they are mature enough to take care of themselves.

At the level of technical philosophy, F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) criticized utilitarianism both for the incoherence, as he saw it, of its psychology and for its failure to grasp the complex relations between the individual and society. G. E. Moore (1873-1958) took Mill's moral theory to task as a particularly simple-minded naturalism, subject like all naturalisms to the question, "But is that particular feeling good?"[9] If there is nothing more fundamental than the feeling to invoke, there is no answer to this question, and Mill's version of naturalism is no more, albeit no less, commendable than any other.

Of recent philosophers, the most persistent and articulate critic of utilitarianism has been the Cambridge philosopher Bernard Williams (1929-2003). Williams argued that utilitarians typically maintain that we are responsible not only for our own actions, but for the whole state of the world brought about by our

actions. So, to use an example from J. J. C. Smart, had a casual passerby jumped into the Rhine in 1938 to save a drowning man, only to discover it was Hitler, the state of affairs brought about would not be as good as it would have been had Hitler drowned. Thus saving the drowning man was not the right thing to do. The passerby couldn't have known that, but that's a matter of whether or not he should be punished, not the objective rightness of the situation.[10] As Williams sees it, this "negative responsibility" would make it impossible for people to maintain the integrity of their own lives, which typically involve pursuing individual goals and balancing complex and sometimes competing goods. We may not know exactly how to weigh the competing interests and concerns involved, but what Williams thinks is clear is that there is no simple way to perform a utilitarian calculation.[11]

Despite these philosophical criticisms, utilitarianism remains appealing for its perceived humaneness, its grounding in the concrete realities of life, and its freedom from dogma. Varieties of utilitarianism have been developed by secular and religious thinkers. Joseph Fletcher's "situation ethics" is an explicitly Christian approach to moral decision-making, particularly in medical and sexual ethics, in which Christian love replaces utility as the touchstone for deciding what to do in tragic situations. Catholic moral teaching, for example, absolutely bans all direct abortions, but the situationist asks whether or not it displays genuine Christian love to allow both the mother and the fetus to die in those tragic cases where letting a pregnancy come to term will kill both mother and child. The situationist says that the right move is to save the mother.

Among professional philosophers, utilitarianism remains alive and well, if still controversial, in the writings of Peter Singer. Singer argues on utilitarian grounds for allowing some severely defective newborns to die so as to save them even a short life of excruciating pain. On the same grounds, he condemns factory farming, which abandons sentient animals to lives of misery just to serve the culinary whims of overfed Americans. Singer's views

horrify many. He has been assaulted on the lecture platform and his appointment to Princeton University's prestigious Center for Human Values led some prominent alumni to withdraw their support from the university. But Singer's arguments are the twenty-first-century heirs of John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism.* To read *Utilitarianism* is to encounter modern liberalism at its fount and origin.

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