

HSS317: Ethics/Assignment-4/18-March-2020/20171059/CSE

Mill bases his theory of utilitarianism on the principle that actions are good when they lead to a higher level of overall happiness, and bad when they reduce the happiness. Those actions are considered right in proportion which fulfil the first ethical principle of maximising utility or pleasure and promoting general happiness. For Mill, utility is defined as pleasure itself and his theory of utilitarianism appealing to the first principle of maximising utility is commonly known as the 'greatest happiness principle'.

Mill attempts to debunk all objections against the utilitarian theory in his work. One of the objections he faces is that there generally isn't enough time to calculate how a given act will generate long term happiness. That is when Mill talks about moral rules or 'secondary principles' and explains its importance in decision making. Mill says that these secondary principles can be derived directly from first principles as they are not fundamental by themselves. But they have stood the test of time and have been shown to promote the welfare of the society. Hence, we can follow these secondary principles without reflecting much on the consequences. Thus, if there is no conflict between the second-tier principles, there is no extra time needed to evaluate the action's utility.

However, when these second-tier principles conflict with each other, we should appeal to the first principle of utility directly! Mill says that moral difficulties arise *only when* the secondary principles conflict with each other. This is because both these moral rules have been shown in life's experience to promote general happiness. But if there is a situation where the two moral rules are contradicting each other, then it causes a moral difficulty. That's when, Mill says, one must appeal to the first principle directly and see which action leads to the maximum happiness. But if there was no conflict, then such a moral difficulty would never arise, simply because **each secondary principle can be derived directly from the first principle itself!** These moral rules have shown in our experience to promote general happiness and are indirectly leading to the first principle. Mill's claim that difficulties arise only in case of conflicts between secondary principles is very well justified because if there was no conflict, the secondary principle **would eventually boil down to the first principle itself** and hence, there would be no moral difficulty.

Hence, Mill asserts that we should appeal to the first principle only if there is a conflict in the second-tier principles. But can there be a situation where the ultimate principle itself comes in conflict with a secondary principle? What if the secondary principle doesn't actually increase overall happiness? Let us consider two very good friends, A and B, who care about each other a lot. One day, A finds out that B has been doing drugs and ruining his health. A appeals to the moral principle of 'speaking the truth' inside him and ponders whether he should go tell B's parents the truth about A taking drugs. 'Speaking the truth' is one of the most famous

secondary principles and has been shown with experience to promote the well-being of our society. But in this scenario, if A were to go speak the truth, it would extremely dishearten B's parents due to the horrible news. They would be grief stricken and dejected and would reprimand B, leaving him devastated. All three parties involved - B and his parents - would all suffer pain, which is the opposite of pleasure. However, if A does not speak the truth, nothing would happen. B would not be reprimanded and his parents would not go into a shock on hearing the terrible news. The happiness in this scenario would certainly be more if A were to not speak the truth, which conflicts with the principle of always speaking the truth. **Yes, there can be situations, just like this one, where the ultimate principle comes in direct conflict with a secondary principle.**

However, Mill says that such conflicts can be resolved by the 'intellect and virtue of the individual'. He says it's normal to have such conflicts, but they can easily be resolved through **virtue and intellect**. He notes that most people who have experienced both physical and intellectual pleasures tend to greatly prefer the latter. Intellectual pleasures - like friendship, art and reading - are higher and more desirable kinds of pleasures than bodily pleasures. He says that people must use their **'higher faculties' while making a decision**. His theory thus takes into account not just the quantity, but also the quality of pleasures resulting from it. A pleasure is of higher quality if people would choose it over a different pleasure **even if it is accompanied by discomfort**, and if they would not trade it for a greater amount of the other pleasure. Mill observes that the utilitarian's standard for judging an act is the happiness of all people, **not of the agent alone**.

Hence, in our example, we see that A telling the truth would cause some momentary sadness and depression to B and his/her parents. But this would result in B understanding that drugs are not good for one's health. B's parents would ensure that B understands the harmful effects of such substances and refrains from them in the future. B would then stay away from drugs and lead a healthier life. There would be momentary sadness, yes, but this would be **overshadowed by the overall long term happiness of the individual** which is more significant and appeals to the 'higher faculties' Mill talks about.

Thus, such conflicts can be resolved using one's intellect and virtue and being able to comprehend which action would lead to long-term quality happiness. Mill says that most virtuous people in history are those that have renounced happiness. These martyrs sacrifice their happiness which may not seem to be in line with the utilitarian principle. But, these sacrifices lead to a greater amount of happiness for the society and Mill says that to sacrifice one's happiness for that of the others is the highest virtue. Hence, pleasures differ **not only in quantity, but also in quality**. Long term happiness and short term misery is certainly more desirable than bubble happiness and a lifetime of misery. Thus, by developing and appealing to one's higher faculties of intellect and virtue, these conflicts can be resolved.