Mill's argument and objections

(People desiring heroin can also simply be mistaken in what they desire)

1 Happiness is desirable.
2 The general happiness is desirable.
3 Nothing other than happiness is desirable.

Part 1

Mill

Mill begins his argument for utilitarianism by attempting to establish that pleasure is good through an analogy with perception. In Utilitarianism (1863), he asserts that just as the only proof that something is visible is that people see it, the only proof that something is desirable is that people actually desire it. Mill is therefore an ethical naturalist. He believes that what is good can be understood in natural properties (pleasure).

Moore

This, according to Moore, is a mistaken inference because it attempts to define "good" in terms of a natural property: "desirable". This is what Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy. Moore's reasoning is based on his open-question argument, which aims to show that goodness cannot be reduced to any natural property. If "good" simply meant "desirable," then the question "Is what is desirable good?" would be meaningless because it would be equivalent to asking "Is what is desirable what is desirable?". However, since this remains an open and meaningful question, it follows that goodness is not identical to being desired.

Secondly, Moore objects to the analogy between "visible" and "desirable". Whereas "visible" means "*can* be seen", "desirable" means "*worthy* of being desired". When something is seen, empiricists would argue that this is enough proof that it *can* be seen. However, when something is desired, this might be enough proof to argue that it *can* be desired but not that it is *worthy* of being desired.

Sturgeon

Against the first counterargument, I argue, as Sturgeon does, that there are two objections to Moore's argument. Firstly, the question "Is water H2O?" is also an open question (at least for a large part of human history). Does this mean that water is not *metaphysically* equal to H2O? No, it simply means that the method that Moore uses to determine whether definitions are correct is not valid. Furthermore, just as how humans found out that water is H2O, namely through empirical observation, humans could also find out that goodness is desirableness through empirical observation.

Secondly, as Crisp/Hall argues, Mill is not interested in definitions. Sturgeon might call Mill a nonreductive naturalist. Mill is not trying to reduce the definition of goodness to other naturalist properties. Because goodness is, according to Mill as he is an ethical naturalist, a natural property, it is not necessary to define goodness with nonethical natural properties. Mill is not trying to define goodness, he is only making the substantial claim that if something is desirable, then it is good.

Against the 2nd objection

I think, as Crisp argues, that Mill is only saying that, indeed, when someone desires something it is the only proof that it is desirable. We can still desire bad things (heroin …) but this is all that we have got. Therefore, it becomes an empirical question whether something is desirable. Rational healthy humans would, for instance, not desire heroin. So if we wanted to find out whether it is desirable to eat a pancake, we simply go around and ask people whether they desire eating pancakes.

My opinion

Without this objection, I think Mill's argument works. It is impossible to provide a complete, deductive proof. Just as with math you need initial axioms before you can start proving things, the utilitarian principle (pleasure is good) is needed before one can truly deductively proof things. Mill is, as Crisp also argues, only trying to provide evidence that pleasure is good. One could object to this that we also desire bad things and therefore it is not good evidence, however one could also object to the fact that seeing something is enough evidence for "visibility" in the same way and everyone still accepts that as, if not a proof, enough empirical evidence. The only evidence for the fact that it is raining is that we see that it is raining. Although, just like that we can desire things which are not desirable, we can also see thinks that are actually not visible. We can hallucinate, see things which are not there or dream and see things which are completely our imagination. Yet, most people would accept that seeing things is usually enough evidence too conclusively say that it is visible. The same could then be said about desirable.

It is not good evidence. We only have desires because we've evolved to have them. Therefore, it seems as if Mill is saying that whatever increases our fitness is desirable and therefore good. However, this seems rather arbitrary. If we only desire certain things because we have evolved to desire those things it is not at all good evidence that it then also is desirable.

Part 2

Mill

The aggregate happiness is a good for the aggregate of persons. However it is hard to go from here to the idea that every human being's happiness is a good to every other human being. It seems as if Mill is relying on multiple assumptions: moral assumption, aggregative assumption, impartiality assumption, and ideological assumption.

Assumptions

The book was addressed to people who already wanted to be moral, not to those who had to still be persuaded to be moral. Therefore, the moral assumption is that if, as we have shown, happiness is good, we should also care about the happiness of others.

The aggregative assumption is important because of the fallacy of composition. Take the example of a lion eating a gazelle. It is *good for* the lion to eat the gazelle but it is *bad for* the gazelle to be eaten by the lion. It is unclear what the *aggregate* happiness is for *aggregate* of the lion and the gazelle. What does it even mean for the aggregate of beings to be happy? This is also the fallacy of composition, ascribing to a set what is true of its members. Another example of this: we, each of us, are individuals does not license we, all of us, are an individual.

It seems, therefore, that Mill, which is supported by a letter he wrote, is not really talking about a relational account of goodness (good for the lion) but about a substantial account of goodness (something is either good or bad, not for someone). This makes it more reasonable that goodness can be summed. The assumption that it can be done is the aggregative assumption. And one no longer needs to talk about the aggregate agent, even though he did write about this in his text. However, this is much less plausible. Suddenly it seems as if the lion's desire to eat de gazelle is desirable *as such* instead of being desirable for the lion, but this seems a bit weird.

The impartiality assumption is that, when summing the individual happinesses, the distinction between persons is irrelevant. Someone's happiness is not worth more than someone else's happiness. We only care about maximizing the total happiness.

The Ideological assumption, then, is that moral rules are justified only to the extent that they promote some end or good.

Morality and concern for others are clearly something to be taken seriously (the moral assumption). Morality itself will be grounded solely on the promotion of good (the Ideological assumption). The proof in chapter 4 is intended to show that happiness is such an end, indeed the only end. Now if happiness is the only end, then, given the aggregative and the impartiality assumptions, we are led to utilitarianism, the view that each agent is rationally required by morality to maximize overall happiness.

Against the moral assumption and the impartiality assumption

Without these assumptions, the general happiness is only desirable if one already desires the general happiness (as desire is the only proof for something begin desirable). If the only evidence that something is desirable for someone is that it is desired by them, it is unclear whether there is any evidence that the aggregate happiness is desired by anyone. I do not know anyone with such a desire, and I know plenty with desires which directly conflict with such a desire. So, without these assumptions, only people who are already utilitarians would be persuaded by Mill's argument. However, it is therefore difficult to win over rational egoists who do not accept the moral assumption or the impartial assumption.

According to Mill, no reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. However, this seems quite implausible without the moral assumption: if I desire to eat my slab of butter and your desire to eat yours, no one desires that we eat all the butter.

There are some argument here: we in fact all desire the general happiness (but only people who are already utilitarians seem to be this), Mill can say that the general happiness is good for each of us (but although this might be true, this does not mean that we desire it), Mill can say that we all should desire the general happiness (but this begs the question, this presupposed utilitarianism to prove utilitarianism).

Hall

Maybe, as Hall argues, Mill is not trying to prove that the general happiness is desirable. Mill is only attempting to present the greatest-happiness principle in a way that will make it seem acceptable for rational humans.

Part 3

Mill

In part 3, Mill tries to prove that only happiness is desirable. However, even if we accept part 1 and 2, we can use exactly the same arguments to argue that virtue is desirable (namely that virtue is desired). There are two ways in which something else than happiness can be put into his utilitarian framework.

Firstly, many of the things that we desire are only desired because they *cause* happiness. Secondly, many things we desire for their own sake, such as virtue, because they are an ingredient of happiness.

For the second interpretation, it cannot be that we merely desire the pleasurable experience of being virtuous. In many scenarios (for instance a gay person in a very Christian family being virtuous and standing up for gay people even though this gives him very much displeasure or being a good friend when your friend is in need) being virtuous is not a pleasurable experience.

Another interpretation would be using associationism, when two impressions have been frequently experienced (or even thought of), either simultaneously or in immediate succession, then whenever one of these impressions, or the idea of it, recurs, it tends to excite the idea of the other. This would be more in line with the causal explanation. We begin by desiring virtue merely as a means to get pleasure. But, as an association develops in my mind between virtue and pleasure, I begin to desire virtue for itself, no longer as a means.

However, this explanation is not enough to draw the conclusion that only pleasure is desirable because he still admits that virtue is desired for its own sake, even though the reason for this is that it is associated with pleasure. The only way for Mill's argument to work is if, in fact, we are desiring the enjoyable experience of being virtuous. The enjoyable experience of being virtuous is an ingredient of happiness, they are part of the end. Being virtuous not only becomes a means to my happiness but also a constituent of it.

As Hall argues, only that which is experienced as pleasant is sought for its own

sake. Many things originally not themselves experienced as pleasant come to be so through association with pleasant effects. Thus money or virtue really are desired as ends, but only so far as they are experienced as pleasant. This can then be expressed loosely by saying only pleasure is desired, yet other things are also—as concrete parts of it. It would be better to say: Only things experienced as pleasant are desired for their own sakes. If pleasure and pain are the causes of one's coming to desire power or fame as ends, then they are necessary conditions for such desires. It is therefore psychologically impossible to desire something as an end unless it has first been associated with pleasure or avoidance of pain

Moore

Moore argues that Mill confuses what is a means to an ends with what is part of an end. He says that first, Mill claims that for instance money is only desired as a means to happiness. But then Mill also says that people desire money for its own sake. Mill's patch then becomes that when something is desired for its own sake, it must be part of happiness.

Warnock

However, as Warnock also argues, it only seems like Mill is doing this because of the words he uses (means to ends and desired "for itself"). As Warnock argues, whatever end anybody suggests as a possible object of desire, it is always open to Mill to say that pleasure is part of that end, though the end is desired for its own sake. This would lead to a tautology which is maybe why Mill argues that it is a *metaphysical* impossibility to desire anything but pleasure.

12. Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism fails because what we ought to do is not a matter that could ever be settled by mere 'observation and experience.' Is this correct?

(2014)

(49 answers) Many of the answers to this question were disappointing. Candidates seem to have thought little about what it might mean to establish a moral theory, empirically or otherwise. Not a few seemed quite unaware of what Mill himself maintained about the status of his own proof, and even where it was known what he said, only minimal efforts were made to really understand what he might have meant by it. Many thought it enough to reference the difference between desired and desirable, but left it unclear what connection this had to 'observation and experience.' Quite a few others (closely following Crisp) urged that Mill was not 'proving' but merely 'offering evidence', but there was a widespread assumption that if that was indeed the case, it must be an alright thing to do. The meta- ethical question of just how empirical evidence could lend support to a normative theory was rarely touched on, but the best answers did explore this point in interesting ways. Having dealt with the first, most people rushed on to consider the second and third steps, but by this time they appeared to have wholly forgotten the issue of observation and experience, and the answers tended merely to repeat standard analyses.

Plan:

Talk about ethical naturalism.

this question is clearly getting at Moore's open question argument. Good cannot be defined in naturalistic or empirical ways. He tries to illustrate this with his open question argument: is what is desirable really good? This is clearly still open for discussion and therefore they are not identical with each other. Because, if they were identical, it would be more like asking the question "is a vixen a female fox?". Clearly, this is true, a vixen is, by definition, a female fox. However, it is, as Moore argues, impossible to *define* 'good' just like it is impossible to define 'yellow'. One can try to define yellow as "the color of a banana'. However, no matter how you define yellow, someone who has never seen yellow would not really know what it is. Moore calls this the naturalistic fallacy as it assumes that 'good' is a natural property.

First, there are a few objections to the idea that, if something is still an open question, it is not a good definition. For instance, the question "is water H2O?" was an open question for a long period of history. Yet now we are able to answer this question with a resounding yes, able to describe water in a naturalistic way. Does that mean that, before, water was not H2O? Clearly, water has always been H2O so it is very unclear what this would mean for Moore. (Or: is the morning star the evening star or Venus...? Superman is Clark Kent?) Clearly, property identities need not be obvious, and the

openness of a question does not guarantee that they are not the same. Metaphysical identities need not be conceptually necessary.

However, one could argue, as Crisp does, that Mill was not trying to define good as desirable, that Mill was not interested in defining words. Mill is just trying to show that happiness is good, desirable, an end. (read more about this in Hall)

However, talk about the fact that it is impossible to *prove* what the good is. Just as mathematicians use first axioms and from those prove different things. The fact that happiness is desirable is, just like the axioms, the first principle which, therefore, cannot truly be proven. Mill tries to solve this problem by arguing that, just as the fact that someone sees something is the only proof that something is visible, the fact that someone desires something is the only proof that it is desirable.

One could argue that with this, Mill is merely trying to persuade the reader. (finish this point and argue that I don't think this is true, because Mill was very smart)

I think, as Crisp argues, that Mill is only saying that, indeed, when someone desires something it is the only proof that it is desirable. We can still desire bad things (heroin …) but this is all that we have got. Therefore, it becomes an empirical question whether something is desirable. Rational healthy humans would, for instance, not desire heroin. So if we wanted to find out whether it is desirable to eat a pancake, we simply go around and ask people whether they desire eating pancakes.

However, if Mill is only trying to *provide evidence*, what does this mean for that fact that he is trying to prove something. Clearly, inductive reasoning is not a valid proof. However, I think this is fine. Many argue, for instance, that it is only possible to get objective morality (this is good and that is bad) if we assume that God exists. However, without this assumption, it is impossible to determine whether something is truly good or bad. All we then have is empirical desires.

The other reason I think this is fair is that one could make the same objection to visible. The only evidence for the fact that it is raining is that we see that it is raining. Although, just like that we can desire things which are not desirable, we can also see thinks that are actually not visible. We can hallucinate, see things which are not there or dream and see things which are completely our imagination. Yet, most people would accept that seeing things is usually enough evidence too conclusively say that it is visible. The same could then be said about desirable.

However, there is a last issue with this. Perhaps, if we can only use empirical desires as our empirical evidence, this would not be very good evidence whether something is desirable. Evolutionary biologists would argue that we only desire certain things because of how we evolved. If that is true, the empirical evidence of desiring something would not be very good evidence of what is desirable.

However, difference between desired and desirable, this is relevant to the question because it is about observation and experience. Is it true that the only evidence that we have that something is desirable that we desire it. Or in other words, that something *is worthy* of being desired if we desire it. Clearly, we desire many thinks that are not worthy of being desired (heroin, drugs, etc.). However, it is true that it is the *only* evidence.

Is this true, is this the only evidence? Someone argued against this… We seem to be able to judge what is good or bad from other principles.

q. 14. 'Is it possible to prove a moral theory?' (25 answers. 8.2%) (2013)

A relatively difficult question, which invited candidates to think beyond the details of Mill's 'proof' and consider what the latter tells us about how to do moral philosophy. The weakest answers went through Mill's moves and standard objections to those, without giving much thought to what can or cannot be regarded as a proof.
The very best answers used Mill's proof and its various claims as 'heuristic devices' to do precisely that. All candidates averred that a moral theory, unlike theoretic scientific arguments, cannot be proved deductively since it rests on first principles which can only be discerned by intuition or observed empirically. It would have been useful to say something about mathematical proofs in this context, since the latter also rest, it seems, on nondeductively provable assumptions (e.g. Euclid's' axiom of parallels.)

3. Is Mill's proof in ch. 4 of Utilitarianism all which the case for Utilitarianism admits of and all that it is possible to require? (q. 18. 28 answers. 11.2%) (2012)

A standard question on the proof, which proved relatively popular though most answers were rather mechanical (review each of the steps one after the other.) A few

candidates drew on chapters of Utilitarianism other than chapter 4, to good effect, to show that there is more to say in defence of utilitarianism than is contained in the latter chapter. The very best answers discussed the concept of a ‘proof’.

16. ‘The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do desire it.’ (MILL, Utilitarianism) Is Mill right? (2024)

18. In what sense, if any, is the fact that people desire something evidence for thinking that it has value? Discuss the implications of your answer for Mill’s ‘proof’ of the Principle of Utility. (2023)