

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

**Since many people desire ends other than happiness, happiness plainly cannot be the ultimate end of human conduct and utilitarianism must be wrong.’ Do you agree?**

**‘By showing how anything that we value for its own sake could become a part of our happiness Mill inadvertently shows that hedonism is vacuously true.’ Discuss**

**What ought we to desire?**

**‘Is it possible to prove a moral theory?’**

**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?**

**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?**

Plan:

- Thesis: Mill’s ‘proof’ of utilitarianism does not fail because what we ought to do *can* be settled by observation and experience.
- Have a discussion about the difference between “what we ought to do” and “what is good”, for this essay I will make the moral assumption, as Mill does, and assume that we ought to do what is desirable. Therefore the question becomes: can what is good ever be settled by mere ‘observation and experience’.
- Ultimate ends are not deductively provable. Just like how for mathematics you need initial axioms of which you can deduce the rest, moral theory also needs an ultimate end. Instead, Mill is trying to inductively ‘prove’ utilitarianism, which is probably the only way to ‘prove’ an ultimate end.
- Explain the comparison to ‘visible’.
- Explain Moore’s counterargument: Mill is equivocating on ‘desirable’.
- Explain that Moore is wrong, as Crisp argues, Mill is only trying to provide evidence of what is desirable, and what is desired is the only evidence of what is desirable.
- The more interesting discussion: is this okay? Is it okay to only provide empirical evidence based on ‘observation and experience’? And what about bad things that we desire such as heroin? There are multiple ways to defend Mill:

- Mill is not really proving, instead he is just trying to persuade the reader. 'Utilitarianism' was more of a manifesto and might not have the philosophical rigour that we are expecting. However, I think we should be more charitable to Mill.
  - Maybe this is ok because it is the only thing that we really can do. Probably the only way to have objective morality would be if we assume that a God exists who simply tells us what is desirable and what is not. However, again, I think this is not a very strong argument and not charitable to Mill.
  - Ethical naturalism: Mill is an ethical naturalist. He believes that moral properties can be explained using natural properties.
    - Sturgeon's non-reductive ethical naturalism is an option.
    - But this is probably a bit too anachronistic and not what Mill meant. However, as long as, which Crisp argues that Mill thinks, have experience of what is good, then it is fine. If we can, then we it is very possible to 'prove' inductively a moral theory using observation and experience.
    - **(This would be a good place to talk about what it means to experience what is good. I won't make the evolution argument, but I don't think we really can experience what is good, are there other arguments in the literature?)**
  - Talk about Sayre-McCord's defense of Mill. In general we don't get proofs in deductive ways, it is almost always by empirical experience. Why would moral theories be different? Maybe then, there is more merit to the first way of understanding Mill (he is just trying to persuade us), because it is appealing to commitments that people already have, it is therefore epistemically justifiable.
- **Are there more interesting arguments here? Have I missed anything?**

**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.**

Plan:

- Thesis: the fact that people desire something is evidence that it has value.
- Value is an ethical property, something that has value can be said to be good or worth pursuing. Therefore, in this essay, I will assume that if something is good, then it is valuable. In this essay I will use the two words interchangeably.
- Firstly explain the relevant premises in Mill's argument:
  - If something is desired, then that is the only evidence that it is desirable.

- If something is desirable, then that is valuable/good.
- I will first discuss the second premise:
  - Mill is an ethical naturalist, he argues that what has ethical properties such as value can be understood with natural properties, namely, as pleasure. And to argue that pleasure is the ultimate end, he argues that pleasure is desirable and that what is desirable is good. Therefore, he identifies the good with desirableness.
  - Moore objects to this view, saying that Mill is equating 'good' and 'desirable'. That Mill is *defining* the good as desirable, that the good just is desirableness. Against this, Moore brings in the open question argument:
    - If good = desirable, the question "Is what is desirable good?" should be meaningless, as it would be the same as asking "Is what is desirable desirable?", which it is not. A metaphysical identity should make it unquestionable that the two things are actually the same, which is not the case for goodness and desirableness. Therefore, Moore argues that Mill is committing the naturalistic fallacy: goodness is not reducible to any naturalistic property.
    - Firstly, the open question argument does not work. Use the example of "Is water H<sub>2</sub>O?".
    - More importantly, regardless of the power of the open question argument, as Crisp argues, Mill is not interested in defining terms. To understand this, let's use Sturgeon's distinction between reductive and non-reductive ethical naturalists:
      - Reductive ethical naturalists believe that ethical properties can be reduced to natural properties (e.g. goodness is reduced to desirableness).
      - Non-reductive ethical naturalists, however, do not believe this. I argue, as Crisp also argues, that Mill is a non-reductive ethical naturalist:
        - One way to do this would be what Sturgeon argues for: goodness is itself a natural property.
        - However, this is not even necessary, and Crisp does not think that Mill meant this. As long as goodness is something accessible by experience, Mill's argument holds as he is just making a substantive normative claim about goodness, he is telling which things are good, not what good means, and so he is treating them as separate properties, not equating them.
        - **(I have a question, is desirableness even a natural property, not a moral property as it has normative value? Maybe I should be talking about**

**desiredness instead, though the argument would still work)**

- For the first premise, Moore is, again, critical. Mill argues that the only, and sufficient, evidence for what is desirable is what is actually desired. Just like how the only evidence for what is visible is that it is seen.
- Moore objects because he argues that desirable and visible have different meanings. Whereas 'visible' means 'can be seen', 'desirable' does not mean 'can be desired' but it means 'worthy of being desired'. These meanings are different, and, therefore, Mill is making a logical error. Sure, that something is seen is enough proof that it can be seen, however, that something is desired does not necessarily mean that it is also worthy of being desired.
- However, Moore wrongly interprets Mill here. Mill does not argue that what is desired is desirable, he is only making the much more plausible claim that the fact that something is desired is the *only evidence* for the fact that it is desirable. This makes sense, if I want to find out whether ice-cream is desirable, I should go around and ask people whether they actually desire it. If they do, then that is very good evidence that is, in fact, desirable.
- Maybe talk about the objection that things which are clearly not desirable are desired (e.g. heroin).
- Conclusion

I hope here my discussion of value/goodness is good enough, by talking about ethical naturalism.

**'By showing how anything that we value for its own sake could become a part of our happiness Mill inadvertently shows that hedonism is vacuously true.'** Discuss

And I have a question about it because I don't think that I fully understand Mill's point about constituents of happiness.

This is how Crisp outlines Mill's idea about ingredients of happiness:

When Mill is trying to prove that nothing other than happiness is desirable he, of course, has a few options in the case of virtue:

- people desire virtue only as a means to happiness
- people desire virtue 'as a thing desirable in itself' (this is what Mill goes with)

The first option would have also been very implausible because people are very oftenly virtuous without that causing them happiness, sometimes even pain.

The way he squares this with utilitarianism is that virtue is constituent to happiness: there are many ingredients to happiness, virtue is simply one of them. So when people desire virtue, they, in fact, just desire a form of happiness.

But then there are, multiple ways to interpret 'ingredient to happiness':

- virtue is just an enjoyable experience (but Mill's example of money probably means that he did not mean this interpretation, as Moore explained)
- people believe that virtue is the same as happiness (idem)
- not virtue, but acting virtuously is enjoyable (similarly: not money, but the possession of money is enjoyable)

The last one is the one that Mill means. This is then finally what the above question is attacking.

However, Mill gives a reason why we then desire virtue: because of associationism, people desire virtue because they have unconsciously started to associate it with happiness that comes from acting virtuously. Therefore, people start desiring virtue, not because of happiness but for itself.

Because of this link, it is a 'metaphysical impossibility' to desire anything except in proportion to its pleasantness (Crisp argues that with metaphysical should be understood psychological).

Would this be a good counterargument against the question? That we only desire other things than happiness because they can cause happiness (the experience of doing them is an ingredient to happiness) and that, therefore, hedonism is not vacuously true because we only desire those things which cause happiness - Mill cannot argue that we can incorporate anything into happiness, only those things that cause happiness, and that therefore we desire them. Or am I not understanding Mill's argument correctly?

Maybe this would be precisely the reason that hedonism is vacuously true, Mill can point to any of our desires and explain that we desire them because their experience is a part of happiness, and so hedonism becomes tautologically true.

I don't think I fully understand Mill's argument, what does Mill really mean?

Lastly, and this is my other question, Crisp argues also that the only way for Mill's theory to really be correct is if we don't desire virtue but actually desire the enjoyable experience of being virtuous. But would this not make Mill's entire discussion surrounding associationism irrelevant? Crisp does recognize this, that associationism would only be useful in the example of generosity (we desire the experience of generosity not because that is enjoyable, but because that causes happiness in a different way). How is Mill usually interpreted? And is the whole point of 'metaphysical impossibility' then still relevant, because he no longer uses this psychological way of how we end up with our desires?

Though I guess this would get rid of the objection in the question, because it is now no longer tautological, if we look in our minds for all the things that we desire then we simply just find happiness/enjoyable experiences.

### **Does Mill offer any good reason why one person should take an interest in the happiness of another?**

- Thesis: Mill does not offer any good reason why one person should take an interest of another. In this regard, Mill can offer us little more than an intuitionist can who are precisely the people he did not like.
- Mill argues that happiness is an, and the only, ultimate end. For the sake of argument, I will accept that and I will mainly focus on the second part of Mill's proof.
- The relevant logical step for this question is:
  - o Each of us desires their own happiness, so happiness is good (for each of us).
  - o The aggregate of persons desires the aggregate happiness, so the aggregate happiness is good (for the aggregate of persons).
- Here we must first distinguish between two types of goodness. A substantial notion of goodness and a relational notion of goodness:

- Initially, Mill seems to suggest that he thinks of goodness in the relational sense, so with the “*for ...*”, in the premises I outlined above.
- There are a few issues with this. Example of lion eating gazelle. When a lion eats a gazelle, it is good for the lion, but not good for the gazelle. However, then what does it mean for the *aggregate* agent of the lion and the gazelle. In general, what even is an aggregate agent, and how can an aggregate agent have desires? It is very implausible that we can add up the different goodness’ for people: the fallacy of composition (explain this).
- To become more plausible, Mill later suggests in a letter that he was aiming for a substantial approach to goodness. (Also explain Crisp’s aggregative assumption)
- The substantial approach is that happiness is not good *for me*, but just good *as such*. It is agent-neutral. This makes the logical step a bit more plausible, as it is more reasonable. But a substantial notion of goodness is probably a bit problematic: what does it mean that it is *good* that a lion eats a gazelle. Probably only consequentialists would agree with this notion of goodness.
- However, even if we are charitable to Mill (maybe the discussion above here is not completely relevant to the question so maybe omit?) the only thing we have achieved is that the aggregate happiness is good, not that we should pursue it.
- In fact, Mill does not offer us anything here. He gives us no reason why we should pursue the good, why we should be moral, and why we should care about the happiness of others. He has no response to the egoist who does not care about the aggregate happiness.
- However, for utilitarianism to work, it seems as if we need to end up by concluding that we should care for the happiness of others, and Mill does not prove anything like that.
- As Crisp argues however, we can be more charitable to Mill. Crisp argues that, with certain assumptions, Mill’s argument can work. With the aggregative assumption, there is also the moral assumption, ideological assumption and the impartiality assumption:
  - Mill wrote his book not for those who were not moral already, but he directed it at those who were already moral. The moral assumption is the assumption that we should care about morality.
  - The ideological assumption is a very uncontroversial assumption: morality is justified insofar it promotes an end or good. So in this case, morality is justified insofar it promotes happiness.
  - The impartiality assumption is that the separateness of persons does not matter. So when we sum all the happiness, everyone’s happiness is weighted equally.

- Mill does, in fact, give some reasons why moral assumption is valuable.  
However, it is always completely open to the egoist to just say that he does not care about the happiness of others, and there is nothing Mill can do about that.
  - Mill argues that as we are social creatures we will find the greatest happiness by living in accordance to utilitarianism and by living in harmony.
  - And being impartial to others