DOES "BEING GOOD" MEAN "MAKING PEOPLE HAPPY"? MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

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In this lesson, we'll be looking at an ethical theory called **utilitarianism.** More specifically, we'll be looking at the version of this theory defended by **John Stuart Mill (**1806-1873), important British philosopher, economist, and politician. Mill was a vocal critic of slavery, an early proponent of women's rights, and a strong advocate of government programs for education, health care, and assistance to the poor. He served as a member of British parliament, and also wrote on technical issues concerning scientific methodology, especially as they related to economics. His best known works includes *The Principles of Political Economy,* "On Liberty," "On the Subjection of Women," and "Utilitarianism." He often credited his long-time friend (and eventual wife, after her first husband died), **Harriet Taylor Mill** (1807-1858) as being something like a "coauthor" of his books.

WHAT IS ETHICAL THEORY? WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THEORY IN PRACTICAL CHOICES?

An **ethical theory** provides an answer the general question "Under what conditions is an action ethically OK?" So, for example, consider the following simple theories:

- **Divine command theory** states that "an action is ethically OK if and only God commands it."
- **Ethical egoism** states that "an action is ethically OK for subject S if and only if that action maximizes S's *personal* welfare."
- **Cultural relativism** states that "an action is ethically OK in culture C if and only the relevant people in C (the majority, the rulers, etc.) approve of that action."
- **Subjectivism** states that "an action is OK for subject S if and only if that action is consistent with the values that S has chosen for him- or herself."

These relatively simple ethical theories have usually been rejected by people writing on ethics. (However, more complex versions of these theories are still alive and well.) Mill argues that ethical theories work in something like the opposite way as scientific theories do. Here's the basic idea:

- In science, decisions to accept particular pieces of evidence usually come *before* decisions about whether to accept a general theory. So, for example, scientists often agree on what the evidence is, and most of the work concerns finding a theory that can make sense of it.
    - Example: Most scientists working in public health agree that there is a statistical correlation between exercise and lifespan (particular evidence). They disagree, however, on how this correlation can be explained (general theory). A person who didn't accept the statistical data in the first place couldn't even participate in this conversation.
- In ethics, by contrast, one must often make decisions about which theory to accept *before* one can make particular ethical judgments. Much of the work concerning ethics involves applying an ethical theory to particular cases.
    - Example: All utilitarians agree that the goal of government policy should be to maximize well-being of all citizens. They may disagree, however, on which policies actually accomplish this (for example, concerning drug policies, gun control, or assistance to those in need). A person who rejected utilitarianism, however, couldn't even participate in this conversation.

Mill's goal in "Utilitarianism" is to present a general ethical theory that he thinks we can use to solve practical ethical problems (concerning both political and personal morality). Mill's theory has proven remarkably popular, especially among economists and political philosopher. As we'll discover, however, not everyone is willing to accept that Mill's theory is the correct one.

WHAT IS UTILITARIANISM? WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Mill defines *happiness* and *utilitarianism* as follows:

The creed [utilitarianism] 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. … [P]leasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

The basic ideas can be expressed as follows:

- **Utilitarianism** is the theory that an action is ethically OK if and only if maximizes (or at least "promotes") overall happiness. *Nothing else matters to whether or not an action is ethically OK.* Utilitarianism is the most popular and influential form of a more general theory called **consequentialism**, which holds that whether or not an action is morally OK depends solely on the consequences of the action.
- Utilitarianism is opposed to two other prominent moral theories: deontology (which holds that moral actions adhere to certain rules) and virtue ethics (which hold that moral actions are those that would be chosen by perfectly virtuous actors).

- **Happiness** simply means "pleasure" or "the absence of pain." Mill holds that happiness is the *only* thing that is intrinsically valuable for humans (or for any other sentient beings). Everything else that is valuable (art, knowledge, relationships, and so on) are (instrumentally) valuable to the extent that they promote happiness.

Mill recognizes that different things make different people happy (or unhappy). Given that we can't make *everyone* happy, however, we need to have some way of *comparing* how much different sorts of happiness "count for." Mill's general solution to this problem is basically this: "If you are trying to figure whether action A or B promote happiness better, ask someone who has experienced both, and find out which one she prefers." He says "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." Here's the basic idea:

- **Bodily (lower) pleasures** are those humans share with lower animals (sex, food, warmth, avoiding pain, and so on). Mill emphasizes that such things are morally relevant, and that we ought to promote them (in both humans and animals). However, he does *not* think that we ought to try to maximize these at the expense of mental pleasures**.** (So, for example, Mill would think it would be ethically wrong to make everyone "happy" by giving them super-powerful drugs that filled them with continuous ecstasy.) By their nature, these pleasures tend to be of shorter duration than mental pleasures, and the mindless pursuit of them can easily lead to conflict with others (and hence, to an increase in overall suffering).
- **Mental (higher) pleasures** concern the sorts of activities that most human would say make them truly happy: academic activities, sports and games, close relationships with others, and so on. Mill thinks that, after people's basic physical needs have been met, we ought to focus on maximizing these pleasures because (1) most people who have experienced both sorts of pleasure say they prefer these and (2) these pleasures tend to be more stable and long-lasting, and enjoying them can often have good effects on *other* people.

Remember: Utilitarianism says that ethical actions maximize *everyone's* happiness (including not just humans, but all sentient beings). It does NOT say that ethical actions will end up maximizing your *own* happiness (that position is called *ethical egoism*).

ACT UTILITARIANISM IN PRACTICE

John Stuart Mill defends a version of utilitarianism that's now known as **act utilitarianism.** On this theory, a morally action is defined as whatever action maximizes happiness (or, equivalently) minimizes suffering for everyone affected by it. The other most common version of utilitarianism is known as **rule utilitarianism,** which holds that we should do these sorts of utility calculation only to figure out what sort of rules, we should live by, and then just follow these rules (instead of trying to figure it out on a case-to-case basis). In either case, however, utilitarians think that morality/immorality of action will depend on the following things:

1. **The scope of the action.** To begin with, we need to figure out every begin (human or animal) who level of utility or happiness could possibly be affected by the action. This includes both those who are affected by something we do (a person who benefits from our giving them money) and things we DON'T do (an animal benefits from us seating a salad instead of a burger). Utilitarians do NOT distinguish between things that you "cause" and things that you simply "allow" to happen. A utilitarian sees no (theoretical) difference between you shooting someone, and you simply failing to stop *someone else* from shooting someone (supposing there was some way for you to do so).
2. **The magnitude and nature of the effects.** Once, we've figured out the scope, we need to figure out how large the likely effects on these beings will be (in terms of how much change it makes to their lives, and levels of utility), and whether this change is positive or negative. Many actions will help some people/animals and hurt some others. So, for example, if I am deciding whether to give money to charity, I'll have to consider both how much I stand to lose by donating (how much happiness am I "giving up"?), and how much the other person stands to gain.
3. **The probability that any given person will be affected.** Except in a few special cases, we can almost never say with *certainty* how our actions will affect the lives of others. What we do instead is consider how probable various outcomes. So, for example, let's say I think that I am considering telling a lie to Jones in order to spare him pain about something, and I think there is 90% chance, he'll never find out (and if he doesn't find out, he'll have +1 happiness). However, there is a 10% chance he will find out, and it will ruin his life (-20 happiness). This means that, over all, the **expected utility** of lying is: +1 *0.9 – 20 * .1 = -1.9. This means that lying has a negative expected utility. Does this mean we shouldn't do it? Maybe. But figuring this will depend on what the alternative courses of action are (sometimes, *every* alternative will have negative expected utility, which means that we'll simply have to choose the smallest number).
4. **We need to do this for *every possible action,* and choose the *best one.*** At any given moment, utilitarians hold that we are required to do the *best* action. This means that we need to think of all the possible actions, their possible scopes, the effects, probabilities, etc., and choose the single action with the highest expected utility. Does this mean we should just stop everything, and simply sit and think all of the time? No! After all, thinking is itself an action, and isn't always the action with the highest expected utility (since the time wasted thinking could have been spent doing something to help people).

Most act utilitarians (including Mill himself) argue that we should only rarely stop to "calculate utilities" in this sort of way. Instead, they think that, for the vast majority of life, we can follow easy-to-remember rules (be nice to people, don't hurt them, be generous, etc.), since

this precisely what promotes overall utility. Utilitarian calculations come into play only when it seems like there is a genuine question over what is right or wrong. For Mill, this meant that utilitarianism had a big role to play in setting political/economic/public health decisions, but not as much a one in private life. Modern utilitarians have claimed that utilitarianism has a role to play in private life, too (though they agree that we shouldn't be calculating utilities).

OBJECTIONS TO UTILITARIANISM

There are a number of common objections to utilitarianism. Here are a few of the most important:

- **Problems with measurement and prediction of utility.** According to utilitarianism, in order to figure out what the right thing to do is, you need to know how to measure happiness/suffering, at least in some general sense (murder is worse than assault is worse than being left alone), AND you need to be able to make somewhat reliable predictions about how your actions will affect these sorts of things (e.g., "if I give Sauron the ring of power, that will decrease utility, so I shouldn't do it."). Some critics have argued that this is often impossible, at least for the sorts of actions that individuals are often concerned about ("Should I lie to Jane?"). Utilitarians have replied that, in many case, it ISN'T difficult to do these things (so, for example, many contemporary utilitarians have argued that things like avoiding eating meat and contributing more money to charity almost certainly promote utility).
- **Utilitarianism is wrong that "happiness" is the only thing that matters.** Some critics have argued that utilitarianism's claim that "happiness is the only intrinsic good" makes human life out to unrealistically "shallow." Mill has two basic responses to this. First, he points out that he agrees with these critics that things such as self-sacrifice, courage, intelligence, love, creativity, etc. are super-important, but argues the *reason* they are important is because they promote human happiness. Second, Mill has a very broad of "happiness"—he's will to count "happiness" as whatever it is that humans (and other sentient animals) value in life.
- **Utilitarianism is too demanding for ordinary humans (the "Moral Saints" objection).** As opposed to other moral theories, utilitarianism can seem all-consuming. For example, utilitarianism would seem to entail that, whenever we have extra money beyond that needed to live, we should give it to charity (since this money could be used to feed the truly hungry). Mill doesn't directly respond to this, but does note that utilitarianism is theory about which actions are MORAL and not about our MOTIVATIONS for doing these actions. In general, Mill thinks that capitalist economies (which are driven by self-interest) are often a great way of maximizing happiness, so long as the government makes sure to take care of things like education, health care, feeding the poor, etc. (Mill is very optimistic about the power of a well-informed democratic government to improve the lives of those who are worst off).
- **"Basic moral rights" are, at best, rules of thumb.** Both J.S. and Harriet Mill were strong defenders of the legal rights of women, African Americans, religious minorities, and (in general) the rights of people to disagree with the government (and to say/do things that offended and annoyed their neighbors) without being tortured, killed, publicly shamed, etc. Mill is even recognized as an important inspiration for modern "liberals" and "libertarians," who think that these sorts of rights are the basis of political order. However, according to utilitarianism, these sorts of rights should be honored *only* if doing so led to the greater good; if not, we should simply ignore them. This means that, if we decide that it would be for the "greater good" to violate a particular person's rights, too bad for that person. Mill himself seemed to take something like this view when it came to British colonies like India and Ireland, where he approved of British military control, since these places weren't yet "ready" for full political independence. (At the end of his life, Mill did seem to have some second thoughts as the British began taking colonies in Africa, and acting in ways that seemed blatantly contrary to utilitarianism).
    - A more general version of this problem: Utilitarianism can lend itself to abuse by people who *think* they are acting for "the greater good" and use this as an excuse to mistreat people.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that you are given an opportunity to work for a chemical weapons manufacturer, and that you are opposed to such weapons. It pays good money, and your family is OK with it. Further suppose that (a) if you take the job, you will not be especially hard-working, and will only churn out 5 weapons a year and (b) if you turn down the job, a chemical-weapons fanatic will get it, and she will churn out 25 weapons a year. What would a utilitarian advise you to do? What do you think?
2. Suppose that a madman has captured you along with 20 other people. For whatever reason, he likes you, and has decided to release you. Before you run off, he presents you with a choice: (a) if you agree to kill one of the other hostages, he will let the other 19 go and (b) if you refuse, he will kill all 20. What do you do?
3. One real-life application of utilitarian ethics occurred during the Black Plague. Many cities (such as Florence) quarantined the sick, but suffered death tolls of >50%. Milan, however, began shooting strangers on site, and quarantining entire neighborhoods the second a single person showed symptoms (this often led to everyone in the neighborhood dying). Milan's death toll was around 10%. What city would rather live in? Which policy would you adopt, if you were in charge of a city?