

Handout on John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Selections)

Problem Framing:

- Mill sees a major problem in the traditional understanding of morality: **On what basis can we objectively determine right and wrong?**
- Many moral theories appeal to intuition or divine command, but these lack a common, empirical standard.
- Mill proposes to ground morality in the **Greatest Happiness Principle**, linking ethics with observable human experiences of pleasure and pain.

Mill's Solution:

- The *Greatest Happiness Principle*: Actions are right insofar as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness.
 - **Happiness** is defined as *pleasure and the absence of pain*; **unhappiness** as *pain and the deprivation of pleasure*.
 - Thus, morality should aim at maximizing happiness for the greatest number.
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Core Themes and Arguments:

1. Defining the Standard of Morality (Chapter II)

- **Utilitarianism** asserts that the only things desirable as ends are *pleasure* and *freedom from pain*.
- All other desirable things are either:
 - *Inherently pleasurable*, or

- *Are a means to pleasure and the avoidance of pain.*
 - **Important Supplement:**
Mill's theory is a form of **hedonistic consequentialism**, but unlike simple hedonism, he introduces a qualitative distinction among pleasures.
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2. Qualitative Distinctions in Pleasure

- It is *not merely quantity* of pleasure that matters, but *quality* as well.
- **Higher vs. Lower Pleasures:**
 - *Higher pleasures* engage our "higher faculties" (e.g., intellectual, aesthetic, moral pursuits).
 - *Lower pleasures* are those of mere sensation or immediate gratification.
- **Test for Higher Pleasures:**
 - If people competent to judge (having experienced both kinds) consistently prefer one pleasure—even with more discontent—it is *higher*.
 - Famous quotation: "*It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.*"

Key Technical Term: *Competent Judges* — those capable of assessing both higher and lower pleasures through experience.

3. Individual vs. Collective Happiness

- Utilitarianism does *not* focus solely on the agent's own happiness but requires impartiality: **the greatest happiness for the greatest number**.
 - Echoes the "**golden rule**": Act toward others as you would have them act toward you.
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4. Addressing Objections

Mill anticipates and responds to several classic critiques:

- **Objection: Human life cannot attain happiness.**
 - Mill distinguishes between unrealistic "rapturous" happiness and a life with a *preponderance of pleasures over pains*.
 - A "satisfied life" requires either tranquility or excitement—or ideally both.
 - **Objection: People can live without happiness.**
 - True: heroes, martyrs may renounce personal happiness for higher causes.
 - However, their sacrifice is still *instrumentally valuable*—intended to *increase overall happiness*.
 - **Objection: Utilitarianism demands too much.**
 - Mill clarifies: moral *standards* define right action, not the *motives* behind them.
 - Ordinary life typically pursues local, immediate goods; large-scale utilitarian calculations are rare outside public policy or exceptional cases.
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5. Utility vs. Expediency

- **Misconception:** Utility is wrongly equated with short-term expediency.
 - **Mill's Clarification:**
 - Expediency that violates a long-term rule (e.g., truth-telling) is *not* true utility.
 - Moral rules (like honesty) exist because their widespread observance maximizes utility in the long run.
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6. Proof of the Principle of Utility (Chapter IV)

- **How can we prove that happiness is the ultimate good?**

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- Mill argues by analogy to empirical perception:
 - Just as we know something is visible because people see it,
 - So we know happiness is desirable because people *desire* it.
 - **Two critical points:**
 - Each person's happiness is a good to that person.
 - Therefore, general happiness is a good for the aggregate of persons.

Metaethical Note:

Mill's "proof" has been critiqued for **committing the naturalistic fallacy** (deriving an "ought" from an "is")—an issue famously discussed later by G.E. Moore.

7. Virtue and Secondary Ends

- **Virtue** is initially desired as a means to happiness but can, through habituation, become desired *as part of happiness* itself.
 - Mill uses the analogy of **money**: initially sought as a means, but often becomes an end in itself.
 - **Important Distinction:**
 - Virtue, when internalized, is part of the individual's conception of their own happiness.
 - Still, it remains within a **broad hedonistic framework**: all intrinsic goods are subsumed into the pursuit of happiness.
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