

Mill's Replies to Objections to Act Utilitarianism

To suppose that life has ... no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they [Mill's critics] designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine (33)

Act Utilitarianism (U7) sometimes seems to dictate clearly immoral or crass actions

E.g., a life given over to maximizing personal pleasure might often trump (in positive utility) a life devoted to more noble pursuits, such as philosophical research, etc.

Bentham himself argued that: "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry."

In our terms (U7)

1. If U7 were true, the only morally relevant considerations would be how much pleasure and pain an act and its alternatives would produce.
2. It is not the case that the only morally relevant considerations are how much pleasure and pain an act and its alternatives would produce.
3. Therefore, U7 is not true. (34)

Argument pattern?

Mill rejects his critics interpretation of the first premise

He argues that, besides the *quantity* of pain and (hedonic) pleasure produced by actions, there's also their *quality*

1

The quality of a pleasure (pain?) refers to the type of pleasure (or pain?) experienced, not just to its *duration* or *intensity*

The (ordinary hedonic) pleasure of an action = *intensity x duration*

How to determine the quality of a pleasure: ask those who've tried both

Mill is confident that those who've tried both the pleasures produced by "the lower faculties" and those of the "higher faculties" will prefer higher over lower pleasures

Mill: "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied"

If so, the full pleasure of an action = *intensity x duration x quality*

One problem: How does one distinguish the various elements in the above product?

E.g. suppose three actions produce equal total pleasure, how do we separate out the quality from the quantity (duration and intensity)

Do people always and only prefer "higher quality" pleasures???? (Sandel)

Robert Nozick's anti-hedonistic thought experiment: Imagine an "experience machine" that will maximize the amount of pleasure we feel for the rest of our lives.

2

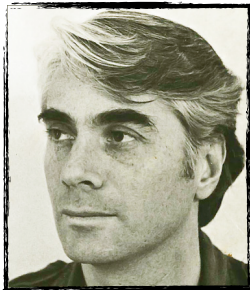
If the doctrine of swine objection is correct, we *should* always choose to hook ourselves to such a machine; but we (often?) have good reason not to attach ourselves to such a machine.

Nozick's good reasons:

1. "It is only because we first want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them." (Nozick, *Anarchy, State & Utopia*, 43)
2. "There is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated." (Nozick, 43)

The argument formally:

1. If feeling as much pleasure as possible is all that matters to us, then if we experience more pleasure by doing x than y, we have no reason not to do x rather than y.
2. We will experience more pleasure if we plug into the experience machine than if we do not plug into the experience machine.
3. **Thus:** If feeling as much pleasure as possible is all that matters to us, then we have no reason not to plug into the experience machine. (B1 1, 2)
4. We have reason not to plug into the experience machine.
5. **Therefore:** Experiencing as much pleasure as we can is not all that matters to us. (MT 3, 4)



3

"Too High for Humanity" objection

Mill puts the objection as: "it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society" (37)

Imagine that for every action you perform, you must first consider whether it would best promote the overall interests of society

Clearly

- (1) The calculation difficulties might lead to decision paralysis
- (2) People seldom act from these kinds of reasons: e.g. we do things to get along better with our neighbours, because we feel guilty, because we just feel like doing them, because we'll make more money, etc.

Formally:

- (1) If U7 is true, then an act is morally right only if it is motivated by a desire to promote the general interests of society.
- (2) Some acts are morally right even though they are not motivated by a desire to promote the general interests of society.
- (3) Therefore, U7 is not true. (38)

Mill argues that (1) is false: Act utilitarianism only requires is that our actions do in fact promote the general interests of society.

In other words, we don't always have to be calculating maximal utility; we just need to be actually promoting it in our actions

4

Problem 1: What are the odds that our unreflective actions do in fact promote the good of society?

Problem 2: Should we then praise e.g. an attempted murderer whose actions unintentionally maximize social well being?

Should we morally condemn a doctor whose attempt to save lives accidentally destroys many because of a virus the doctor unknowingly carries?

Mill's answer to problem 2? Praising and condemning should not be thought of as what actions or people deserve.

Rather, to praise or condemn a person for their actions is to be done just in case this praising or condemning maximizes utility

What about the first problem?

THE "LACK OF TIME" OBJECTION

Some of the actions we need to perform are urgent, and leave no time for weighing out all the alternatives

E.g. do we act immediately to prevent the crazy person from jumping into the tiger pit, or do we calculate the utility of several ways of preventing the jump vs. letting the jumper do his thing

5

(1) If U7 were true, then it would always be right for us to calculate the utilities of all our alternatives before acting.

(2) Sometimes it is not right to calculate the utilities of all our alternatives before acting.

(3) Therefore, U7 is not true.

(Express this argument using *modus ponens*)

Mill: It is truly a whimsical supposition that, if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young and enforced by law and opinion. There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness. (40)

The basic idea: People have been trained since they were small to be able to swiftly "see" the action that is (relatively maximal) for such cases

We should also distinguish between *practical* and *theoretical* normative ethics

Practical normative ethics: attempts to create moral rules that make moral decisions easier and quicker to achieve

6

such rules would usually get the right answer even if they weren't theoretically perfect
e.g. heuristics, satisficing

Theoretical normative ethics: seeks to find true moral rules, irrespective of whether these are difficult to learn or apply

If Mill's U7 were only a rule of theoretical normative ethics, then the lack of time objection wouldn't defeat act utilitarianism

MILL'S PROOF THAT UTILITARIANISM IS THE CORRECT MORAL PHILOSOPHY

A person's happiness is a good for that person, Mill argues, because each person desires their own happiness, and so that happiness is *desirable* for that person. Since everything that is desirable is a good, "each person's happiness is a good for that person"

The fallacy of equivocation: in an argument, using a word with two meanings as though it has a single meaning, and in such a way that its apparent "validity" depends on confusing the two meanings

On this reconstruction, Mill seems to equivocate between two meanings of "desirable"

First sense: just as something that can be done is doable; so too, something that can be desired is desirable

In other words, desirable =df. can be desired

7

It's also true that (usually) something is called "desirable" only if it is actually good for someone, not merely that it is possible for someone to desire it

But people often don't desire those things that are good for them; i.e., not everything that is desired is good for them

The fallacy of composition:

Examples:

- Sodium metal and chlorine gas are poisonous; so the "aggregate" of these (sodium chloride) is also poisonous
- Every ant weighs much less than a gram; so all ants in aggregate weighs much less than a gram
- Each person's happiness is a good to that person; so the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of people???

8

Problems for Act Utilitarianism

AU seems to imply we can never act beyond the call of duty

Supererogatory action =df. an action that is both (i) morally praiseworthy, but (ii) beyond what is strictly morally required

We often admire certain actions because they seem *heroic* or *noble* in that they require more self-sacrifice or courage than is usually expected of a person

Examples?

The question is whether utilitarianism can make sense of a distinction between performing a basic moral duty and a supererogatory one

A dilemma: either an action produces maximum utility and so is a duty or it does not produce maximum utility and so it should not be done

It follows that, if there are supererogatory actions, and act utilitarianism (U7) says there aren't any, then AU is false.

AU responses?

- (i) Our common-sense view about supererogatory actions might be mistaken
- (ii) No moral philosophy, AU included, requires people to do more than they reasonably can do; and most of the time what we call supererogatory actions are those that are more than most people (most of the time) reasonably can do; so we don't have a practical ethical rule to do these actions

9

AU seems to imply that even (seemingly) trivial choices are morally important: one must perform that action which produces more utility than any alternative

E.g. suppose I have three movie choices: From past experience with such movies, I can reasonably induce the number of hedons that will be produced by each type of movie

Action/adventure	+20
Sci-fi/fantasy	+22
Documentary	+18

It seems that, if AU is true, I am **morally** compelled to go to the sci-fi/fantasy film

But surely I am not so morally compelled (morality is indifferent to this choice); so...?

How might a sophisticated AU response go?

10

Act Utilitarianism and Keeping Promises

Given AU (U7), it seems that the only circumstance in which we should keep our promises, is when doing so produces more utility than does breaking them

Why might keeping promises generally create more utility than breaking promises?

Imagine some appropriate cases where utility requires that we break our promise, and we actually think it is right to do so

Imagine some inappropriate cases where utility requires that we break our promise, and we actually think it is clearly wrong to do so

Going fishing with grandfather

use body for bait	+25
bury body, according to promise	-10
let body rot where it is	-2
throw body in sea	-1

- (1) If U₇ is true, the grandson is not morally required to bury the body.
- (2) The grandson is morally required to bury the body.
- (3) Therefore, U₇ is not true.

11

AU replies: reject either (1) or (2)

Rejecting (1):

- a. negative utilities of a guilty conscience
- b. negative utilities of people finding out that others will easily break their promises

Rejecting (2): In such an **odd** case, perhaps using the grandfather for bait really is the best choice

We need to examine all the factors

Biggest complaint: AU provides the *wrong sort of analysis* of the moral duties surrounding promise keeping.

AU implies that promise-keeping is morally required if and only if it produces more utility than does breaking promises

By doing this, AU ignores the promise as such, and focuses only on the future consequences of keeping or breaking it

But most moral thinkers (and most ordinary people) will understand promises in terms of internal, **past obligations**, rather than of external, **future consequences**

It is in the internal *nature* (ontology) of making a promise, that it should be kept (deontological approach)

12

ACT UTILITARIANISM AND PUNISHMENT

Utilitarians treat pain as a measure of wrongfulness, but punishment by its very nature metes out future pain for already past pain

So at first look, it seems that act utilitarians must be opposed to punishment

But utilitarians will allow “punishment” if and only if the pain produced by punishment produces greater benefits than not punishing

Historically, utilitarians have been important prisons reformers

Utilitarians and pickpockets

Utilitarians and debtor’s prison

Some ways in which punishment can bring about greater happiness:

1. Rehabilitation
2. Deterrence
3. Vengeance

Still, according to ordinary *retributive* morality, punishing actions is **only** the proper consequence of a bad action

But for the utilitarian, “punishment’s” only justification is whether it promotes overall happiness

13

This seems to allow for occasions where AU might require that people be “punished” even when they have done nothing “deserving” of punishment

Morality of Punishment Objection: While it may be true that retributive punishment can be outweighed by utilitarian considerations, this isn’t always the case

But since AU argues that utility is the only factor in punishment, it can’t be a complete moral theory

PROBLEMS WITH JUSTICE

AU would permit what is normally called injustice, if these unjust actions produced more happiness than justice did

14

Ford Pinto Discussion questions:

1. List as many (positive and negative) factors as you can that might affect the overall utility created by the Ford Pinto (as manufactured until 1977). Include approximations of the numbers of people affected, and then the overall costs and benefits.
2. How many of the above factors did Ford incorporate into its judgement that manufacturing the Pinto without gas-tank protection produced more social benefits than costs? Did Ford leave out any social costs associated with the Pinto?
3. Was the true total benefits of the Pinto greater than its costs? (Your answer should include a calculation.)
4. How might a purely cost-benefit analysis be inappropriate in such cases?

15