

Ethics and society: Utilitarianism Philosophy 150: Handout 2

Utilitarianism

1. Mill's argument for utilitarianism
 - (1) "All action is for the sake of some end; and rules of action ... must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient."
 - (2) Through observation, examination, and induction, we discover that **HAPPINESS** – pleasure and the absence of pain – is the ultimate end of all human actions.
 - (3) So, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."

2. The principle of **UTILITARIANISM**

An act is right just in case it contributes at least as much to the proportion of happiness to unhappiness in the world as any available alternative.

3. The first objection: Utilitarianism "represent[s] human nature in a degrading light" by depicting human beings as beasts who seek only to gratify themselves and to satisfy their appetites.

4. Mill's response to the first objection: Happiness includes not only pleasures "of mere sensation," but also "pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments."

5. Mill's test for greater desirability

Mill claims that some of the kinds of pleasures listed above are more desirable than others. Here's the test:

"Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure."

Mill also claims that pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments have "a much higher value as pleasures than [d]o those [pleasures] of mere sensation."

6. The second objection: Many people sometimes (or perhaps often) choose the lower pleasures over the higher ones.

7. Mill's response to the second objection: "Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable." "Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them, and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying."
8. Utilitarianism is a *non-egoist* moral theory: The utilitarian standard is "the greatest amount of happiness altogether," not "the agent's own greatest happiness."
9. Problems with utilitarianism
 - A. Does it sometimes permit (or require) injustice?
 - B. Does it require us to perform acts that we normally think of as being above and beyond the call of duty?