

April 1, 2013

Mill - England

- 1806 - 1873
- Father was friends with Jeremy Bentham, who was a prominent utilitarian
- Child prodigy
 - Read Greek at age 3
 - Nervous breakdown at age 20
 - Poetry saved him
- Feminist/Theorist/Political Activist
 - Harriet Taylor - was the inspiration for his feminism

Context for Mill's essay 'Utilitarianism'

- 1861 - Written in
- A defense and critique of util
 - Building on the work of his father and Bentham
 - Mill is better, that's why we read him
- Utilitarian's were not simply ethical theorists; they were committed to specific political reforms
 - Expanding suffrage/ending slavery/reforming land use and ownership/Advocating for women's rights
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Chapter 1 - General Remarks

- The problem of the book: to determine what is the 'summum bonum'
 - The ultimate good or highest good
- The claim of the book: in determining the summum bonum, we determine the foundation of morality.
 - The highest good is the criterion by which we should decide how to act
 - Highest good is what will make the most people the most happy
- We're looking for a standard for good and bad, for right and wrong.

Sciences and Their Foundations -

- For most sciences
 - Most sciences proceed for a long time, generating results without any firm grasp on the foundations of the science.
- For ethics as science
 - Mill thinks ethics must have a firm grasp of its foundation from the outset.
 - Why?
 - Ethics is concerned with the nature of action
 - All action is for the sake of some end; the end lends the action its character.
 - Means if we lack the foundation for ethics, we can't know what the aim or end is.
 - Lacking the foundation is the same as lacking the end.
 - Thus, the first thing we need is a precise conception of what we are pursuing.

State of Play in Ethics -

- Two main schools of ethics:
 - 1 - Empirical School - right and wrong are questions of observation and experience; determined by induction
 - Hume
 - 2 - Intuitive school - right and wrong are principles evident *a priori* (and so known through intuition)
 - Kant

The Two Schools' Common Ground

- Both Schools agree
 - 1 - morality must be deduced from principles
 - There is a science of morals
- Given these shared assumptions, there must be:
 - 1 - A fundamental principle at the root of all morality,
 - or
 - 2 - If there are several principles, they should provide an order of precedence between principles. The principle for deciding should be self-evident

The Present State of Affairs -

- In practice: "whatever steadiness of consistency these moral beliefs have attained has been mainly due to the tacit influence of a standard not recognized." (3)
- In theory: "Nor is there any school of thought which refuses to admit that the influence of actions on happiness is a most material and predominant consideration in many of the details of morals, however unwilling to acknowledge it as the fundamental principles of morality and the source of moral obligation." (3)

The Aim of the Work -

- The difficulty of proving the theory of util
 - 1 - Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof
 - What does it mean to be a foundation?
 - The atom is the basic building blocks, but it's made of things too. You always end up presupposing something else.
 - 2 - Can provide considerations that move the intellect to give or withhold assent to the doctrine of utilitarianism - this will count as proof

First Principles -

- A way of saying, that there is an ultimate end.
 - Or multiple principles that are good.
 - There should be one that is above all
 - Basic assumptions of moral theory

The Method of the Work

- First step: the formula of util must be correctly understood
- Accomplished by:
 - 1 - Providing illustrations of the doctrine
 - 2 - Distinguishing the doctrine from what it is not
 - 3 - Disposing of objections that originate from mistaken interpretations of util

April 3, 2013

Two Misunderstandings of Util

1. Taking Utility to be opposed to pleasure
2. Taking utility to simply be pleasure in its crudest form

Mill's View: utility is "not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain." (6).

The Greatest Happiness Principle -

- The principle that gives us our aim in acting and our criterion for deciding how to act:
 - "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." (7)
- Happiness = pleasure and the absence of pain
- Unhappiness = pain and the privation of pleasure

Mill/Util - Consequentialism?

- Mill is not a consequentialist.
 - Controversial
- Mill says some actions will violate our nature and be bad
- Consequentialism is metaphysically natural

Mill's Theory of Life -

- Pleasure and freedom from pain are the only desirable ends
- All desirable things (of which there are many) are desirable because they are pleasurable because they are a means to promote pleasure or prevent pain

Objection to Util -

- Doesn't this theory of life conflate human beings with pigs and generally make human life seem mean and groveling?
- Mill replies:
 - Only someone who can't recognize the differences between the kinds of pleasures human beings can have and the kinds of pleasure pigs can have would think this.

Pigs Satisfied or Socrates Dissatisfied?

- Mill insists that we can distinguish between types of pleasure
- Only someone who has experienced both types of pleasure (animal pleasures and higher pleasures) is competent to decide which is better
 - Competent judge - someone who has experienced both types
- Such a person will opt for the higher pleasures rather than the lower.

Qualitative Differences in Pleasures -

- Earlier utilitarian theories treat pleasure as only a question of quantity
 - More or less pleasure determines the rightness/wrongness
- Mill thinks the right way to approach pleasure is in terms of better or worse.

The Quantitative View -

- All pleasure is the same in kind
- Nozick - Experience Machine
 - Machine gives us experiences that are pleasurable - Utilitarian can't explain why we'd prefer to be off the machine

Importance of Qualitative Distinctions Between Pleasures -

- Different kinds of pleasures are indexed to different activities or action types
- If pleasure was essentially a single kind of thing, it would be indexed to individuals
- To say that some pleasures are better than others is to say that some activities are better than others.