

John Stuart Mill 1806 - 1873)

Utilitarianism

Definition: *The philosophical doctrine that considers utility as the criterion of action and the useful as good or worthwhile, esp. the doctrine that all moral, social, or political actin should be directed toward achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people. (The American Heritage Dictionary)*

Chapter I. General Remarks

- In order to know what morality dictates, it is necessary to know by what standard human actions should be judged
- No sense or instinct of right and wrong. Our moral faculty supplies us only with the general principles of moral judgments; it is branch of our reason, not of our faculties of sense
- Mill's goal was to contribute something towards the understanding and appreciation of the Utilitarian or Happiness theory and towards such proof as it is susceptible of
- Ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof
 - The medical art is proved to be good, by its conducing to health; but how is it possible to prove that health is good?

Chapter II. What Utilitarianism Is

- Utility is defined as pleasure and the absence of pain
- 'Greatest Happiness Principle' – the ultimate end is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality – (comparable with Epicureanism)
 - Human pleasures are superior to animalistic ones when we are made aware of our higher faculties
 - Lower vs higher quality pleasures – If a pleasure is of a higher quality people choose it (even with pain) over another greater pleasure
 - "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied"
- Utility (*Greatest Happiness Principle*) holds that actions are:
 - Right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness (pleasure and the absence of pain)
 - Wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness
- A Happy life = an existence made up of few transitory pains, with many and various pleasures
 - The main constituents of a satisfied life are: tranquility, and excitement
 - Main causes of an unsatisfactory life
 - Selfishness
 - Want of mental cultivation – educational and social arrangements could change this

- Great sources of physical and mental suffering: indigence, disease, unkindness, worthlessness or premature loss of objects of affection – most could be alleviated by a wise and energetic society devoted to their elimination
- Utilitarian Morality
 - The utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of *all* concerned
 - Considered Jesus of Nazareth's golden rule to be the complete spirit of the ethics of utility
 - Utilitarianism and God - If it is a true belief that God desires the happiness of his creatures - utility is more profoundly religious than any other

Chapter III- Of the Ultimate Sanction of the principle of utility

- Principle of utility has all the sanctions which belong to any other system of morals
 - External: Hope of favor; fear of displeasure from our fellow creatures or from the Ruler of the Universe
 - Internal: The ultimate sanction of all morality is a subjective feeling in our own minds, these are more powerful than external sanctions

Chapter IV – Of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible

- The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable and the only thing desirable, as an end
 - The only proof that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it (like the only proof that an object is visible is that people hear it)
 - No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness

Chapter V – On the connection between Justice and Utility

- One of the strongest obstacles to the reception of the doctrine that Utility or Happiness is the criterion of right and wrong had been drawn from the idea of Justice
 - It is just to respect and unjust to violate the *legal rights* of anyone
- Ethical writers divide moral duties into two classes:
 - Duties of perfect obligation: those duties in virtue of which a correlative right resides in some person or persons
 - Duties of imperfect obligation: the particular occasion of performing it are left to our choice as in the case of charity or beneficence
- The interest of mankind collectively must be in the mind of the agent when conscientiously deciding on the morality of the act
 - A rule which all rational beings might adopt with benefit to their collective interest