

PHIL 202: Ethics Core Course
Winter 2005; David O. Brink
Topic: Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy
Paper #1

Recall that you have to write two papers for the seminar – one short paper, approximately 5-6 pages, and a longer paper in two drafts, with the revision being approximately 12-15 pages. I'll assume that students will do the short paper first, though you are welcome to do the longer paper first if you prefer. (If this is your preference, please let me know.) The first paper is due Monday, February 7. I list some possible short paper topics below, though you are free to write on a topic of your own devising, provided that you okay it with me in advance. I think that it makes most sense for me to list possible topics on material covered in the first part of the seminar. Feel free to discuss your paper with me in advance, if you like. If you need an extension, please arrange it with me in advance.

1. What was Mill's attitude toward the motivational assumptions of Philosophical Radicalism? In particular, what was Mill's attitude toward the doctrines of psychological egoism and hedonism embraced by Bentham and his father? (Some main texts here would include ch. ii of Utilitarianism, Mill's essays "On Bentham" and "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," his notes to his edition of his father's Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind ii 217-18, and A System of Logic VI.ii.4.)
2. How should we understand Mill's higher pleasures doctrine and its significance? Several commentators (e.g. Sidgwick, Green, Bradley, and Moore) regarded the higher pleasures doctrine as introducing inconsistency into Mill's defense of hedonism. Why might one think this, and what should we conclude about the consistency and nature of Mill's conception of happiness?
3. Explain Mill's claims about the need for secondary principles in moral reasoning, and examine their implications, if any, for whether we interpret Mill as an act or rule utilitarian. (Some main texts here would be ch. ii of Utilitarianism, Mill's essay "On Bentham," and A System of Logic VI.xii.1-7.)
4. What role do sanctions play in Mill's claims about duty in chapter v of Utilitarianism (v 14)? In what ways is this theory of duty utilitarian, and what is its relationship to act utilitarianism? (Lyons' essays would be very helpful here.)
5. In Utilitarianism Mill identifies rights as claims of individuals that society ought to enforce by law or opinion (v 24-25). In what way is this theory of rights utilitarian? What response, if any, does it give Mill to contemporary worries about the compatibility of rights and utilitarianism?
6. Many commentators think that Mill jeopardized his reputation as a systematic thinker in offering his so-called proof of the principle of utility in chapter iv of Utilitarianism. What's the reading of the proof that gives rise to worries, and what are some of these worries? Do you see any less problematic reading of the proof?