

## Philosophy 13

### Lecture Notes; Introduction to Mill's *Utilitarianism*

Recap: So far we have distinguished some opposed views about the nature of ethical claims.

Ethical claims are claims about how we ought to live, what actions we should choose, what character we should develop. Ethical claims include claims about what is good and choiceworthy in human life as well as claims about what is prudent to do and what is morally right (permissible or required) to do. Example of an ethical claim: Abortion is morally wrong.

Cognitivism. Ethical claims make genuine assertions, capable of being true or false. Some significant ethical claims are true.

Noncognitivism. Ethical claims do not make genuine assertions, capable of being true or false. There are varieties of noncognitivism.

- According to emotivism/expressivism, ethical claims express the emotions or attitudes or commitments of the speaker. According to the emotivist, "Abortion is wrong" means roughly Boo on abortion! "Abortion is morally right" means roughly Yeah for Abortion!
- According to prescriptivism, ethical claims are somewhat like commands or orders. The function of an ethical claim is not to state some purported truth but to induce people to behave as you want them to behave.

The Error Theory. When we use ethical language, we commit ourselves to making genuine assertions. But when we do this, we are systematically in error. No ethical claims actually succeed in making genuine assertions that could be true or false. Our moral and ethical language as ordinarily understood by competent speakers embodies a big confusion.

These and other possible views about the nature of moral claims don't take a stand as to substantive ethical issues about what we ought to do, how we should live. You could be a cognitivist or a noncognitivist and believe, for example, that we should always keep our promises. Equally, you could be a cognitivist or a noncognitivist and deny that we should always keep our promises. One question is, what sort of thing is an ethical claim—what are doing when we make ethical claims. A different question is, what ethical claims should we accept. Our course authors are mostly addressing this second question.

#### Mill.

John Stuart Mill doesn't say much in general terms about the nature of ethical claims, but of the views sketched above, he appears to be a cognitivist. He pretty much takes it for granted that there are true moral claims. Moreover, we can have knowledge regarding some ethical claims, as to whether they are true or false. There can be a systematic body of ethical knowledge, an ethical science.

John Stuart Mill published his short book *Utilitarianism* as a series of magazine articles in 1861. Mill himself was raised as a utilitarian. In England in the early nineteenth century, the utilitarians were a loose grouping of political and social reformers, followers of Jeremy Bentham. He proposed that government ought to seek "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." They opposed the domination of the aristocracy and aristocratic values, favored democracy and the emerging market economy.

In chapter 1 Mill says all the major opposed viewpoints on morality all agree there is moral knowledge and there can be a science of morals. But the science of morals is presently in bad shape. Why? What's the problem?

Mill: we lack "a criterion of right and wrong"--in other words, a principle that fixes or determines what is right and wrong.

In this little book Mill will present and defend a proposed criterion of moral right and wrong--a moral theory.

Right at the start important moves get made that shape Mill's entire discussion. First paragraph: Mill identifies the question of the summum bonum (highest good) with the problem of the foundations of morality--the quest for a

criterion of right and wrong. What's the connection? Why does figuring out an answer to the question, what is the highest good, solve the problem that we need a criterion of right and wrong?

Next page, a clue. Mill writes: "All action is for the sake of some end and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient." When we engage in pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem to be the first thing we need."

My suggested paraphrase.

1. *Rationality in choice of conduct is maximizing the satisfaction of one's chosen goal (or the goal that is best to pursue).* This conception of practical rationality is concisely expressed by the 19th century American labor leader Samuel Gompers. Asked, what does the American working man want, his answer was, "The American working man wants more."

2. *Moral rationality is maximizing the fulfillment of the moral goal, the goal that morality tells us to pursue.*

Mill goes on to propose that the rational goal of human striving is happiness, and happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain. This is the rational goal of any individual who is trying to do the best she can for herself. If my goal is to do as well as I can for myself for me-now, I should do what maximizes happiness- for- me- now. If my goal is to do as well as I can for myself over the entire course of my life, I should do what maximizes happiness-for-me-over-my-entire-life. Acting effectively to achieve this goal is being prudent. Prudence requires a kind of impartiality. To maximize happiness over my entire life, I must treat all times of my life the same, and give the same weight to pleasures and pains no matter when they occur in my life. Being prudent is being impartial in pursuing one's good over the course of one's life. So, if eating six ice cream cones right now gives me 2 units of happiness now at a cost of causing a stomach ache and 3 units of unhappiness later, prudence says I should not eat six ice cream cones now.

According to Mill, morality involves a further degree of impartiality, beyond prudence. Prudence requires me to treat all times of my life the same and maximize my fulfillment over my entire life. Morality requires impartiality across all persons. According to morality, one person's good counts the same as the equal-sized good of any other person.

So in addition to 1 and 2, Mill holds:

3. *The rational goal of human striving is happiness, and happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain.*

4. *The moral goal involves impartiality. One person's good counts the same, in the determination of what is to be done, as the same-sized good of any other person.*

5. *The moral goal equals the aggregate happiness of all persons.* (Mill adds: *and of all sentient creatures.* Animal happiness counts as well as human happiness. For now we mostly ignore this important claim.)

6. *So, moral rationality equals maximizing aggregate human happiness.*

Mill thinks that 1, 2, and 4 are just obviously true. He does not say much about them or try to support them. The views are not implausible but they are controversial, we'll see.

Most of the action in Mill's book is directed at claim 3, the answer to the question, what is the summum bonum, what is really good, worthwhile to pursue.

Notice that there is a doctrine of individualism built into Mill's view. What is morally right is maximizing total human happiness, and human happiness is just the sum of the happiness (or unhappiness) of all individual human individuals. Nothing else matters except what is good for individuals. In particular, the good of other entities such as corporations, tribes, communities, states, and nations does not matter, except insofar as creating advantages for some such entity turns out to be the best way of creating advantages for individual persons. According to Mill's doctrine, so long as individual Canadians live well, it does not matter what happens to the Canadian nation. If the Canadian nation collapses, but nothing bad happens to the individual persons who constitute the Canadian nation (or to anyone else who might be affected), nothing bad has happened that should register on moral evaluation.

**The criterion of moral right and wrong.**

If we look ahead to the start of chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism*, we see a first statement by Mill of the criterion of right and wrong that he is going to defend. This is utilitarianism.

Mill: "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals 'utility' or the 'greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness."

Happiness = pleasure and the absence of pain.

Unhappiness = pain and privation of pleasure.

Call this the righter/wronger test. The more an act tends to produce happiness, the righter it is. The more an act tends to produce unhappiness, the wronger it is.

As stated, this test produces an odd judgment when anything one can do including doing nothing will produce unhappiness. The odd judgment is that anything one does would be wrong, and the act that produces least unhappiness would be least wrong, but still wrong. But if one acts in a way that produces a morally better outcome than any other outcome one could instead have brought about, how can Mill think what one does could still be morally wrong?

So maybe we should amend the stated test slightly to avoid this odd result. This is what Mill has in mind, I think, when he states his chapter 2 paragraph 2 version of his proposal of a criterion of right and wrong:

**The righter/wronger test: The act, of the alternatives available to an agent, that would produce the best outcome--the most happiness or, if all the alternatives are bad, the least unhappiness--is the morally right act, the thing the agent should do. Each of the remaining alternative acts the agent could do is more or less wrong, depending on the amount of the shortfall between its results and the results of the morally right act.**

So according to this test, if you are ordering beer at the bar, and all the available beers are pretty good, then even if you don't order the very best beer (the one drinking which would produce most net happiness), but some lesser beer instead, what you do is wrong, but not very wrong. But if instead of ordering any beer you could kill the bartender, and you do that (producing lots of unhappiness), that act is not just wrong, but seriously wrong, wronger by far than the other beer-ordering alternatives.

A further wrinkle.

Mill actually speaks not of acts that produce happiness or unhappiness, but of acts that tend to produce happiness or unhappiness. What does it mean to talk about the tendency of acts?

One possibility. Suppose for example that I am a medical doctor with a cancer patient. There are two options. I could do one or the other but not both:

Surgery--the result would be a 50 per cent chance of saving the patient's life

Or

Radiation--the result would be a 40 per cent chance of saving the patient's life.

If nothing else matters here except saving the patient's life, the thing to do is surgery. But of course, even though surgery gives better odds, it could be that with surgery, the patient dies, and with radiation, the patient lives.

We might distinguish two different utilitarian notions of the morally right act: The *objectively right* act is defined as the act that in the circumstances would do most good. The *subjectively right* act is defined as the one that, given the information available to the agent at the time of acting, is likely to do most good (maximizes expected utility). Speaking of the tendency of an act might be speaking of its expected utility (expected relative to the information available to the agent).

Mill's utilitarianism as we have it so far conjoins three claims:

1. The morally right action is the one that maximizes aggregate good.
2. What is good is the happiness of individual humans (and other sentient creatures).
3. Happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain.

Mill next considers the objection (against 2 and 3) that utilitarianism so understood is a "doctrine worthy only of swine" in the next few paragraphs of chapter 2. We'll come back to this discussion at the end of today and continue it on Thursday. The objection is not a worry about claim 1, but about 2 and 3. Roughly, the objection is, if happiness is just pleasure and the absence of pain, there must be more worthy and noble ends in human life than seeking happiness for self and others. Pleasure is maybe good, but not the only good, and not the most important good.

### **Back to chapter one.**

Mill asserts, we need a criterion of what is morally right and wrong. In other words, we need a moral theory. A theory is a set of principles that settles what we should do in any circumstances we might face. If we have a moral theory, we have a set of principles such that in any situation, given a full relevant specification of the facts (the relevant facts are the ones the theory specifies to be relevant), from a statement of the principles together with a statement of the facts one can derive what one ought to do. Otherwise stated: A theory tells us what factual information we need to know, in order to be able to decide what to do. And the theory includes principles that determine what we should do in the face of those facts.

If we don't have a theory, our morality does not even in principle give us practical guidance. Lacking a moral theory, we can know all the relevant facts, and all the relevant principles, and still not be able to determine what to do.

Mill thinks the need for a theory in this sense is obvious and uncontroversial. He thinks his opponents don't deny we need a theory but either can't come up with one or espouse a theory different from the utilitarianism Mill espouses.

Mill identifies his main opponents as INTUITIONISTS. The intuitionists believe there is a natural faculty, a sense or instinct (a kind of moral nose), that informs us what is right and wrong. Mill thinks the intuitionists are the bad guys. At least, their view is wrong.

If the intuitionists according to Mill are wrong, who is right? There are two broad schools of ethical thought, Mill thinks.

The intuitive approach. (The people who go for this are the intuitionists.)

The inductive approach.

According to Mill, both approaches accept that moral claims must be general--a matter of principle. Basic moral claims cannot be particular claims, such as, Johnny should wipe his nose right now. Basic moral claims are general principles, such as, people ought to do what is conducive to good health.

Mill sees his opponents as just asserting a plurality of common-sense moral generalizations or rules. "One ought always to tell the truth." "One ought always to keep one's promises." "One ought always to refrain from attacking innocent, nonthreatening persons." But these common-sense rules that seem intuitively right (at least to most people brought up in a society committed to the rules) can come in conflict. What then? Mill: we need a theory, a set of principles that determines what should be done when our values and norms conflict.

The two approaches differ as to how we can learn which are the correct or most reasonable of the candidate moral principles.

The intuitive school says principles of morality are evident a priori (independently of observation and experience). (What might this amount to? One might hold that moral truths are like mathematical truths. Moral principles and mathematical principles, if true at all, are necessarily and universally true. We don't find out what is true in mathematics or morals by observation and experience, but by reasoning and figuring out what makes sense. One might hold that there are ethical claims such that if you understand their meaning, and find them to be self-evidently true, you are justified in your belief they are true.)

The inductive/empirical school holds that questions of right and wrong are questions to be settled by observation and experience.

Mill thinks the intuitionists end up just asserting convention, what people in a given society have been taught and socialized to accept. Intuitionism he thinks always affirms whatever morality is going, already accepted in our

society. Intuitionism is inherently conservative. [Question: Is this a fair characterization? Why can't intuitionists have unconventional intuitions, and disagree with the ordinary beliefs of most people in society? One's moral intuitions or judgments might make one a radical critic or moral visionary, like one of the Old Testament prophets or like the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists, who opposed common opinion and proclaimed that slavery was morally wrong and should be immediately abolished.] A person's moral intuitions are just her substantive moral judgments. How can one set these aside in deciding what one morally ought to do? Mill thinks that general substantive moral judgments take priority over particular judgments: what makes the particular judgment true is that it follows from some general judgment. Mill thinks also that our general moral judgments cannot just be left as an unordered heap, but must be put into systematic order, yielding a theory. But Mill somehow wants to go further and reject reliance on intuitions altogether.)

But what is the empirical alternative supposed to be? WE can maybe see with our eyes and hear with our ears that some boys are torturing a cat. But can we see or hear that torturing cats is wrong? We can learn perhaps from observation and experience that people do seek pleasure and seek to avoid pain. But how can we learn from observation and experience that what people ought to do is seek pleasure?

Mill thinks that empirical observation somehow yields the result that pleasure is good, but this claim on its face looks mysterious. In chapter 4 Mill goes into this question.

At any rate, Mill in chapter 1 makes three independent claims concerning the nature of morality.

- A. Ethical knowledge must be grounded in a genuine theory.
- B. Ethical knowledge is fundamentally general knowledge not particular knowledge.
- C. Ethical knowledge is a matter of observation and experience.

How does Mill know that what is morally right is maximizing the fulfillment of the appropriate moral goal? Mill seems to suppose this is self-evident. It hardly seems to be the sort of thing one could learn from experience and observation. There's a puzzle here.

If we accept the idea that we ought to do whatever maximizes human happiness as Mill conceives it, we can then go about empirically trying to determine what policies really will be happiness maximizing. But how does observation tell us that what we ought to be doing is maximizing human happiness?

Mill seems to think that basing morality on observation and experience provides a critical perspective on the current morals dominant in the society of one's own day. The final court of appeal in controversial matters of policy and conduct is not to be what common sense of the day finds intuitively correct. This sort of common sense opinion has only limited authority.

### **Chapter 2, the objection that utilitarianism is a doctrine worthy only of swine.**

The objection Mill raises, immediately after his initial formulation of the utilitarian principle, is that "to suppose that life has no higher end than pleasure" is clearly false. There are more noble and worthy goals than getting pleasure, such goals as knowledge, virtue, friendship, and love, for example. Mill makes a flurry of replies to this objection on pages 8-11. His main reply is to distinguish "higher and "lower" pleasure. Does this reply succeed?