

MILL'S PROOF DISCUSSION---CHAPTER 4 OF UTILITARIANISM

On page 5 of Utilitarianism, Mill writes that although questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof, "considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof."

In chapter 4 Mill attempts to provide the equivalent of a proof for the principle of utility--the doctrine that happiness, and happiness alone, is desirable as an end.

Mill divides the argument into two parts: (1) an argument to the conclusion that happiness is desirable, and (2) an argument to the conclusion that nothing else is desirable.

(1). Mill argues:

- a. If anything is desired as an end, we have the only evidence we could have that it is desirable as an end.
- b. Happiness is desired as an end.
- c. Therefore, we have the only evidence we could have that happiness is desirable as an end.

In support of a, Mill urges that just as the proof that anything is visible is that someone sees it, and just as the proof that anything is audible is that someone hears it, the proof that anything is desirable is that someone desires it.

Objection: "Visible means "capable of being seen," and "audible" means "capable of being heard." If anything is actually heard, then it must be capable of being heard. But "desirable" does not mean "capable of being desired." It means "worthy of being desired." Hence from the fact that something is desired as an end it does not follow that this something is desirable as an end.

Objection: Maybe happiness is desired and this is the only evidence we could have that happiness is desirable. From this it does not follow that happiness is desirable. We could equally well infer that since this evidence is inadequate to show that happiness is desirable, then by Mill's reasoning we cannot know that happiness is desirable. Maybe there is no knowledge to be had in this domain. (The argument indicates a problem with Mill's empiricism, the idea that the principles of morality are knowable from experience and observation. How can observation tell me that e.g. killing is wrong or that happiness is good? I can observe people killing and people being happy, but cannot observe that killing is wrong or that happiness is good. Or at least, we need an account, which Mill does not give us, of how observation could support a moral or ethical claim.)

To c, Mill adds: each person's happiness is desirable to that person, therefore the general happiness is desirable to the aggregate of all persons.

Objection: That each person desires her own happiness is consistent with the possibility that no one desires the general happiness. After all, maybe we humans are all selfish egoists, each of whom loves himself, but not humanity. So from the fact that each person desires her own happiness it does not follow that the general happiness is desirable at all, because the general happiness may be desired by no one.

Compare: Each person is interested in interpreting his own dreams, therefore everyone is interested in interpreting everyone's dreams. This inference is clearly fallacious. It could well be the case that each person is interested in his own dreams but no one is interested in the dreams of very many other people, much less everyone's dreams. But this seems exactly like the inference that Mill makes to conclude that the general happiness is desirable.

Comment: It is somewhat plausible to think that what is nonmorally good for a person, what would make her life go best, is determined by her basic desires. (This is the desire satisfaction view of human good.) It is less plausible to think that what is morally good or fair is determined by what people desire. If you are dividing a cake among six people and each person desires to have the whole cake for herself, the fair or morally good division of the cake might be one-sixth of the cake to each person, even though no one desires that division.

(2). Mill argues that nothing is desirable except happiness by asserting that no one desires anything other than happiness. If nothing is desirable as an end except what is desired as an end, and nothing is desired as an end except happiness, then happiness alone is desirable.

Objection raised by Mill: Don't people desire many other things besides happiness, such as money, glory, wisdom, or virtue?

Mill's response: All of these items and much else besides are desired, but all of these things are desired as part of happiness. If you desire wisdom, beauty, truth, affection, excitement, virtue, or whatever, for their own sakes, then you desire them as part of your happiness. Your desire for these things is bound up with the pleasure they give you.

Mill continues (p. 38): ". . .desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable or, rather, two parts of the same phenomenon. . . to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences) and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing. . .to desire anything except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant is a physical and metaphysical impossibility."

Comment: Mill is here assuming the truth of an associationist psychological theory, which was dominant in the nineteenth century, and is the forerunner of modern behaviorism. According to associationism, thoughts become associated in the mind with pleasures and pains that occur together with those thoughts. Depending on the strength of the association with pleasure and pain of a thought, a person will desire what he thinks about,

or shun it, or be indifferent. For example, if my mother cuddles a child while telling her about being a philosopher (or a gangster), and cuddling is pleasant for the child, then the thought of being a philosopher (or a gangster) is to that extent associated in the child's mind with pleasure. Later, when the thought of being a philosopher occurs to the child, thinking the thought will be pleasant. By processes of association with pleasure and pain, according to associationist psychology, all our desires and aversions are formed.

Objection to Mill: Associationist psychology might be true or false. Just assume for the sake of the argument that it is true. It's not clear how this helps Mill argue successfully for the claim that everything desired for its own sake is desired as part of our happiness. Suppose that being heroically virtuous is associated with pleasure for an individual. So when the individual perceives that an act he could perform would be an instance of heroic virtue, there is an association to pleasure. Here the cause of the individual's desiring to perform the heroic act is that the thought of the act gives pleasure. It does not follow and may well be false that the object of the person's desire is pleasure. Suppose the act in question is hurling yourself on a live grenade to save your buddies from injury. You know that this act will produce much pain for you and no pleasure. Still, being virtuous is associated in your mind with pleasure, and this jolt of pleasure according to associationist psychology is what causes you to desire to perform the heroic act and this desire in turn causes you to do the act (if you do it). The object of your desire is saving your buddies understood as an instance of heroic virtue. This is what you are aiming at in acting. In this case the object of your desire is not your own pleasure. You know full well that what you desire will not bring you pleasure, but rather months of writhing in pain in a hospital bed. So associationist psychology, if true, does not support Mill's claim that nothing is desired as an end except happiness (pleasure), once we distinguish the cause of a desire from the object of a desire.

Another objection to Mill: If Mill's psychological account is correct, and one comes to desire, say, money or virtue for its own sake only by associating these things with the pleasure they tend to give, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that if this is what happens, then people who desire money or virtue for its own sake are just making a mistake. What is associated with pleasure itself gives pleasure, so if the thought of virtue is associated with pleasure, the thought of virtue gives pleasure. But if this is what makes virtue desirable, then isn't it just the pleasure it gives that is desirable, not virtue itself?

Further comment: Is it true that nothing moves us to action except pleasure and pain? Consider anger. When someone injures me, and I become angry, I desire to retaliate. Here anger causes me to desire, say, bashing the person who as I suppose did me injury. In my own case, the "self-observation" that Mill recommends (p. 38) does not lead me to discover that the thought of retaliating must be pleasant to me if I am to desire retaliation. Sometimes the thought of acting on anger is gratifying (gives pleasure), but sometimes not. Being disposed generally to get pleasure from acting on anger is sadistic. There are sadists, but not all angry people are sadists.

Toward the end of the chapter Mill discusses and dismisses one further problem for the position that nothing is desirable as an end except happiness. The problem is that people may come to choose to do something on the basis of habit, not desire. Mill acknowledges that people do make choices on the basis of habit but denies that this causes any difficulty for his position. Habit is the child of desire, Mill states. Whatever I choose now from habit I desired at some earlier time, but the habit of choosing may persist even though desire has faded. Mill: "That which is the result of habit affords no presumption of being intrinsically good." The fact that something is chosen merely from habit does not give us any reason to think that something is desirable as an end.