

‘Human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either part of happiness or a means to it’ – Is this true? Why is the answer to this question so important to Mill?

In Chapter Four of *Utilitarianism*, Mill attempts to prove his moral theory: ‘actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness’¹. According to Crisp, his proof comprises three stages: happiness is desirable; the general happiness is desirable and nothing other than happiness is desirable. Mill sides with the inductive, empirical school, believing the intuitionists too unscientific, complementing his naturalism i.e. the natural sciences, including psychology, can explain everything. This essay shall examine each of the three stages and assess the link between human nature and desire. Finally, the importance to Mill that nothing apart from happiness is desired shall be considered.

The first stage is that happiness is desirable, providing a basis for the remainder of the proof. Mill needs to prove that happiness is actually desirable in order to argue that humans desire nothing else other than happiness. He believes that the only evidence that something is desirable is that it is actually desired. He compares this to proving an object is visible. ‘The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it’². He illustrates that each individual’s happiness is a good to that individual. The principle of utilitarianism rests on the only good or ultimate end being happiness. Mill suggests that it is possible to appeal to the desiring faculty in the case of good and ultimate ends. The most significant objection to the first stage of the proof comes from G.E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*. He considers Mill’s link between ‘visible’ and ‘desirable’ as naturalistic fallacy. He objects that Mill defines the word ‘good’ as ‘desired’ because it clearly rests on an open question argument. However, Roger Crisp argues that Mill was not intending to define but to suggest that ‘happiness is good, desirable, an end’³. Another criticism is that what is desired is not necessarily good and that ‘there may be desirable objects which are not desired’⁴. Nevertheless, Mill is fairly successful in showing that happiness is desirable and it is certainly reasonable that happiness could be considered a good and an ultimate end.

In the second stage, Mill extends the individual’s happiness to the collective happiness. Mill suggests in 4.3 of his *Utilitarianism* that the only reason why the general happiness is desirable because each individual desires his own happiness. Therefore, as each person’s happiness is a good to himself and to the general happiness, thus happiness is a good to the aggregate of individuals. Mill makes three assumptions: the moral assumption, the impartiality assumption and the teleological assumption. The first is that individuals are already moral, not egoists concerned only in their own happiness. Therefore, since happiness is a good, people should be concerned about the general happiness. There are a number of objections to this assumption, the most significant is it may be difficult to persuade the egoist that morality matters. This is a key issue in Williams’ *Egoism and Altruism*. Mill is interested in proving his **moral** theory and according to Williams, ‘morality implies altruism...the general disposition to regard the interests of others’⁵. Williams

¹ Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill 2.2

² Utilitarianism 4.3

³ Mill: On Utilitarianism, Roger Crisp, P.74

⁴ Mill: On Utilitarianism, Roger Crisp, P.76

⁵ Principles of the Self – Egoism and Altruism, Bernard Williams. P.250

considers the egoist amoral and parasitic, thus only able to survive because others are altruistic. Williams judges altruism necessary for society and society for human life, including the life of the egoist. Despite this external justification of egoism, he does not think that this will be sufficient to persuade the egoist to alter his outlook. There are a number of arguments that an egoist could use whilst remaining perfectly rational such as if he can consider self-interested behaviour which is harmful to others, then it is perfectly permissible for others to 'pursue hostile courses'⁶ against him.

The second assumption consists of 'when summing happiness, the distinction between persons is irrelevant'⁷. Crisp is taking impartiality, as Mill understood it, thus it implies maximisation. Yet, Mill does not clarify how happiness can be summed. Furthermore, pure impartiality may not convince the egoist or someone who believes in the existence of other ends which might give reasons not to maximise the greatest good. The third assumption and conception of morality, teleological, is that moral rules can only be justified if they promote some end or good. He states that 'all action is for some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and colour from the end to which they are subservient'⁸. Therefore, with the only ultimate end being happiness, any means to happiness can also be desired without departing from Mill's proof in the slightest. However, a counter-argument is that human behaviour ought to be guided by moral rules rather than ultimate ends. This assumption leads to the final stage of Mill's proof

Finally, Mill tries to prove that there are no other ends than happiness. In the first two stages, he has sought to prove that happiness is desirable and that maximum overall happiness should be accepted as the end of our behaviour. The key initial objection is that, even if happiness is an end, then there are other ends as well. Mill attempts in his final stage to refute this challenge. The intuitionists would produce virtue as an end different from that of happiness and Mill does state in 4.4 that virtue is 'in common language...decidedly distinguished from happiness'⁹. Mill, as maintained by Crisp, is more likely to claim that acting virtuously is pleasurable rather than virtue alone, which he believes is not an enjoyable experience and could be painful.

Arguably, Mill is heavily influenced by *associationism*, the psychological theory with which Mill grew up. According to associationism, the mind connects experiences that usually occur simultaneously or sequentially. This is what Mill refers to when he explains how means to happiness become desired for themselves. Mill uses this causal argument to explain how virtue can be desired without departing from the happiness principle. Initially virtue is desired as a means to some other desire but due to association, it becomes desired for its own sake. Nevertheless, the associationist argument is not enough to justify happiness as the only end. Even assuming associationism true, the objects are not pleasurable experiences themselves, thus they do not support Mill's proof. Perhaps Mill's most plausible attempt at proving that happiness is the only end is that ingredients to happiness are not only means but a part of the end. Thus it could be true that human beings desire nothing which is not a part of happiness or a means to it. However, the link between the premises and the conclusion is tenuous and could be argued either way.

⁶ Principles of the Self – Egoism and Altruism, Bernard Williams. P.254

⁷ Mill: On Utilitarianism, Roger Crisp, Page 80.

⁸ Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill 1.2

⁹ Mill: On Utilitarianism, Roger Crisp, Page 83.

Psychology is an integral element to Mill's proof and two views are particularly relevant: psychological egoism and psychological hedonism. Crisp considers that Mill only partially supports the latter in the sense that human beings ultimately desire pleasure. Normally, psychological hedonism is that human beings act only for the sake of pleasure and Crisp states that Mill contradicts this in 4.11 when he says that will may be independent of desire. However, in the same paragraph, Mill also calls will 'the child of desire'¹⁰ and that, before habit takes over, we will something and act accordingly to satisfy our desires. This seems to uphold the traditional view of psychological hedonism. Nevertheless, both interpretations support the belief that 'human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either part of happiness or a means to it'. Psychological egoism is 'that human beings act only to further what they take to be their own good'¹¹. Mill does not fully support this either but accepts that one's own happiness can be sacrificed for others, whilst the world remains imperfect. However, Mill does believe that humans only desire what is pleasurable to them. Even if we were to consider Mill's third stage without psychological egoism, it does not solve the problem of alternative ultimate ends.

But, why is Mill so concerned that humans only desire what is part of happiness or a means to it? The entirety of Mill's moral theory is that actions are right if they produce happiness. Mill believes that we either want what makes us happy or what is a means to making us happy. Assuming nothing else is desired, then according to Mill, 'we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable'¹². If happiness is **the** ultimate end, then other ultimate ends cannot exist. If other ultimate ends exist, then Mill cannot claim that happiness is what all human beings should ultimately aim to achieve through their actions. Thus it would be impossible for him to uphold Utilitarianism as originally defined in 1.2.

If Mill could be said to be entirely successful in proving his theory, then there would be a basis for believing that human nature, in the end, desires nothing other than happiness or a means to happiness. However, the number of objections at each stage means that this belief cannot be automatically true. The first stage is certainly plausible in my opinion – happiness is desirable. If the majority of the human population were altruistic and concerned, to a lesser or greater extent, in other people's happiness then the second stage can also be proved somewhat. However, the presence of egoists could contradict the claim that human nature is so constituted to desire nothing but happiness. Mill says himself that each individual is primarily interested in their own happiness. The third stage is perhaps the most contentious and the weakest. Mill seeks to prove that happiness is the only ultimate end, whilst will, justice and virtue are all provided as alternative ultimate ends. His attempt to avoid this objection by arguing that pleasurable experiences derived from each of them make us happy, and therefore could support the claim in the title. In my opinion, human nature is, to a certain extent, constituted to desire what is part of happiness and the means to happiness. Yet, due to the objections and points raised by Moore, Williams and the intuitionists amongst others, I do not think that he has sufficiently disproved the existence of alternative ultimate ends to be entirely convincing.

¹⁰ Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill, 4.11

¹¹ Mill: On Utilitarianism, Roger Crisp. P.88

¹² Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill 4.9