

What is the most telling objection to Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle?

Jeremy Bentham founded utilitarianism in the nineteenth century as an ethical principle. In its original form utilitarianism had numerous deficiencies and was heavily criticised by philosophers and advocates alike. John Stuart Mill later refined and modified utilitarianism as to make it more accessible to society.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) a philosopher and Economist was one of the most influential liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century. The son of James Mill, John was given an intensive private education, in which he began Greek at the age of three, and Latin at the age of eight. John Stuart Mill was an advocate of utilitarianism, "The Greatest Happiness Principle". The doctrine was key in the naissance of many humanitarian landmarks in the nineteenth century. The reform acts of 1832 and 1867 were spearheaded by ideals of utility. Utilitarianism was the spine upon which democracy was built. This very simple doctrine has been at the centre of much criticism. This essay aims to explore whether such criticism is founded and if so why? The following essay will encompass the major objections leveled at utilitarianism.

Contemporary views on morality centre on actions. This has dramatically changed from the ancient notion of living a "good life" which Aristotle, Plato and Socrates outlined. Are philosophers trying to find an order, a system under confusion? Is there a system to be found at all? Personal experience and judgement shape views on morality, therefore, no two people have an identical moral code. Which jokes are funny for example? Encompassing such ideas John Stuart Mill redefined utilitarianism. The doctrine its self is a simple one; "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness". Happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. Unhappiness is pain and the privation of pleasure. The Greatest Happiness Principle deems consequences rather than motives as important. Actions are right as long as they produce the "greatest good for the greatest number of people".

As utilitarianism centres around pleasure one would conclude that there is no higher end. Human beings, therefore, are solely motivated by pleasure. Nothing else, therefore, is of importance or matters. This has obviously led to criticism in many factions of society. To state that there is no higher end than pleasure is "utterly mean and grovelling". Utilitarianism is a doctrine "worthy of swine". Mill was careful to address such points and stated that there were different types of pleasure. Mill rejected Bentham's purely quantitative assessment of pleasure and replaced it with a qualitative one. Mill put far greater stress on the variety of pleasures and distinguished between their respective values. Mill argues human beings, while experiencing 'lower' pleasures in common with animals are capable of certain other higher pleasures-those of intellect-which are beyond the reach of all other conscious beings.

But how do we distinguish between these two types of pleasure? People's opinions as to what are higher and lower pleasures differ widely, and it is difficult to see how general agreement could be reached. Mill proposed, "Competent judges", who have experienced both higher and lower pleasure decide. A unanimous decision from competent judges would deem actions morally right! Majority opinion, even among

the most educated, cannot, make a particular action morally right any more than it can make a scientific theory empirically true. The fact that the majority of citizens in ancient Rome approved of slavery does not justify their having slaves. It was inconceivable to Mill that an intelligent Victorian gentleman would prefer lower pleasures to those of intellect. The fact, therefore, that according to utilitarianism pleasure is our main objective is a central source of criticism.

Utilitarianism in its purest form is incredibly demanding. It is almost impossible to fully obey Mills doctrine. Utilitarianism and its application is almost too high for humanity. According to Mill only actions that increase the general happiness are morally right. To spend an evening out with friends, therefore, would be morally wrong. One could be doing aid or charity work instead and thus be increasing the general 'happiness' of the general population. According to utilitarianism, therefore, socialising is wrong. So would other innocent self-indulgent actions such as "sleeping in" on a Sunday. By the same token when should one stop giving money away to charity? Well one should only theoretically stop when you cannot increase the general happiness of the population. Utilitarianism is clearly and impracticable ideal that could never work in contemporary society.

Utilitarianism does not validate motives. The "rightness" of an action depends on its ability to produce happiness with no reference to its motive. Can a moral code stay ambivalent over such critical matters? Clearly ones motive is as, if not more important than its consequences. Despite these valid points utilitarianism is only concerned with consequences of actions. But how is it possible to calculate all the possible consequences of an action? How can we ever be sure that any action will produce the greatest net happiness? We might be able to assume, with some certainty, that action (A) will have this consequence (B) in ten minutes time; but B will inevitably have other consequences, and these consequences will in turn have other effects and so on. At what point, therefore, does one make ones calculations and determine that ones original action was right or wrong? People react differently and acting the same way towards two different people will result in two different reactions. Humans are not magnesium strips that combust with starting similarity. Human beings are individuals and no one rule is universal. How can one accurately predict consequences? One simply can not!

It remains true... that a man must in the moment of decision do what he thinks is right. He cannot do otherwise. This does not mean that what he does will be right or even that he will not be worthy of blame or punishment. He simply has no choice, for he cannot at that moment see any discrepancy between what is right and what he thinks is right.

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Human beings by very nature interact with each other. Special relationships and responsibilities as a result form. The rightness of these responsibilities does not necessarily derive from the fact that they increase the sum total of human happiness.

For example two men are drowning, one your father and the other a scientist with the cure to cancer, who would you save? According to utilitarianism the scientist should be saved. Many, however, would beg to differ. Utilitarianism does not account for such feelings and responsibility. Lying according to utilitarianism is right as long as it promotes general happiness. Examples include teacher pupil relations. A teacher has a special obligation to his pupils. To give maximum marks to all his pupils, however, would increase the general happiness in the class. According to utilitarianism the teacher should act so.

It may be strange that justice should be a problem for utilitarianism but surprisingly it is. After all, the theory does correct the apparent selfishness of ethical egoism and that when we calculate the effects of an action, no one person can claim special privileges and set aside the happiness of others in the pursuit of their own. Utilitarianism does seek to be impartial, and this one might think is necessary to any meaningful idea of justice. But in another sense utilitarianism is not specifically egalitarian. For while we are told to aim for the greatest possible amount of happiness, and to count everybody's happiness equally, we are not told how this happiness is to be distributed. What happens, for instance, in those cases where the greatest amount of happiness is achieved but through an unequal distribution in which say one person is deprived of happiness altogether. To confiscate all of Bill Gates money and distribute it amongst the poor would be right according to Mill. So would a judge condemning an innocent man to death if he believed a greater good would result. Such actions are intrinsically wrong. Deciding what is right and wrong requires more than a mere analysis of effects. One must move away from teleological theories and towards those that consider the extent to which the morality of an act depends on the nature of the act itself.

Many objections have been levelled at utilitarianism. Each valid and unrelenting in its criticism. Utilitarianism at a glance advocates injustice, lying and stealing as long as they promote "the general happiness of the population". One must not forget, however, that utilitarianism was instrumental in creating ideals and standards in relation to humanity in the nineteenth century. If utilitarianism was so unpractical would have been so influential in so many key landmarks throughout history? In contemporary society, however, it is just an ideal and not a workable solution. For this reason the theory is deemed with considerable antagonism. How can one follow a doctrine that is almost impossible to accurately interpret? One, therefore, could never be truly a utilitarian or live by its manifesto. How can a doctrine state innocent self-indulgent actions such as socialising with ones friends as morally wrong? How can one ever accurately predict another's reaction? In conclusion the inaccessibility of utilitarianism is its major flaw.

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