

## The Origins of Morality

*Utilitarianism and On Liberty*

John Stuart Mill

### Overview

#### Basis of Morality

- The basis of morality is pain and pleasure
- There are two kinds of pleasure
  - Higher
  - Lower
- We discover what is right and wrong through experience

### What Utilitarianism Is

“. . . Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 186*

### What Utilitarianism Is

“According to the Greatest Happiness Principle . . . The ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable, is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . .”

*Utilitarianism, pp 190*

### What Utilitarianism Is

“The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words, to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons is all he has to attend to.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 196*

### Greatest Happiness Principle

- Rightness of an action is determined entirely by how much pleasure it creates or pain it prevents
- Wrongness of an action is determined entirely by how much pain it creates or pleasure it prevents

### What Utilitarianism Is

“If one of the two [pleasures] is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent . . . We are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 187*

### What Utilitarianism Is

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 188*

### Greatest Happiness Principle

- The amount of pleasure and pain are determined by both quality and quantity
- What actions have a higher quality of pleasure can only be figured out by experience
- Individuals who have experienced different sorts of pleasures are the best judges

### Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility

“For the customary morality, that which education and opinion have consecrated, is the only one which presents itself to the mind with the feeling of being in itself obligatory; and when a person is asked to believe that this morality *derived* its obligation from some general principle round which custom has not thrown the same halo, the assertion is to him a paradox; the supposed corollaries seem to have a more binding force than the original theorem.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 203*

### Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility

“The ultimate sanction, therefore, of all morality . . . being a subjective feeling in the mind, I see nothing embarrassing to those whose standard is utility, in the questions, what is the sanction of that particular standard? We may answer, the same as of all other moral standards—the conscientious feelings of mankind.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 205*

### Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility

“On the other hand, if, as is my own belief, the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason less natural. It is natural to man to speak, to reason, to build cities, to cultivate the round, though these are acquired faculties.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 206*

### Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility

“But there *is* this basis of powerful natural sentiment . . . . This firm foundation is that of the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilization.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 207*

Reflect

### Act Utilitarianism

It is the amount of pleasure and pain **each individual action** causes that determines its rightness or wrongness

### Rule Utilitarianism

There are certain **kinds of actions** that tend to produce more pleasure and less pain. These actions are what are right.

### A Small Town Crime



### Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible

“The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.”

*Utilitarianism, pp 210*

### Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible

"Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but is capable of becoming so; and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness . . . . What, for example, shall we say of love of money? There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles . . . . What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake."

*Utilitarianism, pp 212*

### Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible

"Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so."

*Utilitarianism, pp 213*

## Reflect

### Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible

". . . Happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part if included in the whole . . . . [The truth of this] can only be determined by practiced self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others."

*Utilitarianism, pp 213*

## Overview

### Freedom and Society

- Each individual is best equipped to serve his own interests
- Intervention is only justified when another will be harmed

### Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual

"To individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society."

*On Liberty, pp 147*

**Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual**

“The interference of society to overrule his judgment and purposes in what only regards himself must be grounded on general presuppositions; which may be altogether wrong, and even if right, are as likely as not to be misapplied to individual cases.”

*On Liberty, pp 148*

**Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual**

“... the opinion of a ... majority, imposed as a law on the minority, on questions of self-regarding conduct, is quite as likely to be wrong as right ... . There is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it; no more than between the desire of a thief to take a purse, and the desire of the right owner to keep it.”

*On Liberty, pp 154*

**Reflect**

**Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual**

“What I contend for is, that the inconveniences which are strictly inseparable from the unfavorable judgment of others, are the only ones to which a person should ever be subjected for that portion of his conduct and character which concerns his own good, but which does not affect the interest of others in their relations with him.”

*On Liberty, pp 150*

**Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual**

“When, by conduct of this sort, a person is led to violate a distinct and assignable obligation to any other person or persons, the case is taken out of the self-regarding class, and becomes amenable to moral disapprobation in the proper sense of the term ... Whenever, in short, there is a definite damage, or a risk of definite damage, either to an individual or to the public, the case is taken out of the province of liberty, and placed in that of morality or law.”

*On Liberty, pp 152 - 3*

**Reflect**