
Handout on John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* (Ch. II & IV)

I. Framing the Problem: The Nature of Morality

John Stuart Mill, in *Utilitarianism*, addresses a central and enduring issue in moral philosophy: **What is the ultimate standard of right and wrong?** More specifically:

- **Problem:** Many ethical theories offer conflicting answers to the question of what constitutes morally right action. Mill sees a particular urgency in defending **utilitarianism**—a doctrine often misunderstood, caricatured, or dismissed.
 - **Mill's Aim:** To offer a **clear and compelling articulation and defense** of the **Greatest Happiness Principle** (GHP), and to answer key **objections** leveled against it.
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II. The Core Claim: What Utilitarianism Is

- **The Greatest Happiness Principle:**

“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” (p. 1)

Here, *happiness* = *pleasure and the absence of pain*, and *unhappiness* = *pain and the privation of pleasure*.

- **Theory of Life** underpinning utilitarianism:
 - Pleasure and freedom from pain are the **only** things desirable as ends.
 - All other things are desirable **either** because they are pleasurable **in themselves**, or because they are **means** to pleasure or pain avoidance (p. 1).
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III. Qualitative Distinctions in Pleasure

- **Not all pleasures are equal:** Mill breaks from Bentham's purely quantitative approach by emphasizing **qualitative differences** among pleasures.
- **Competent Judges Test:**

- If those experienced in both types of pleasure (e.g., intellectual vs. bodily) consistently prefer one—even at the cost of greater discontent—that pleasure is of **higher quality** (pp. 1–2).
 - Famous formulation:

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” (p. 2)
 - This distinction preserves the **dignity of human nature** and responds to objections that utilitarianism is a doctrine “worthy only of swine.”
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IV. Whose Happiness Counts?

- Utilitarianism’s standard is **not the agent’s own happiness**, but the **greatest total happiness** (p. 2).
 - The virtuous person may suffer, but their actions promote general happiness—making the world a better place even if they themselves suffer.
 - Mill explicitly affirms the **impartiality** of utilitarianism:

The agent must be “as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator” (p. 5).
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V. Objections and Mill’s Responses

1. Happiness is unattainable

- **Mill’s Reply:** This objection confuses happiness with continuous excitement.
 - Happiness consists in a life with “few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures” (p. 3).
 - Key constituents of a happy life: **tranquility and excitement**—each balancing the other.
 - Major obstacles to happiness: selfishness and lack of mental cultivation (p. 3–4).

2. Self-sacrifice is noble—how can utilitarianism account for this?

- **Mill's Reply:** Self-sacrifice is only admirable when it contributes to others' happiness.
 - Sacrifice *per se* is not a good; it must be evaluated by its **consequences** (p. 5).
 - Mill critiques the ascetic ideal: "He may be an inspiring proof of what men can do, but not an example of what they should."

3. Utilitarianism is too demanding

- **Mill's Clarification:**
 - A **standard of right action** is not the same as a **motive** for action.
 - Most moral actions are performed from habit, affection, or desire, not from a conscious desire to maximize utility (p. 6).
 - Utilitarianism concerns itself with **rules and effects**, not inner psychology.

4. It confuses Expediency with Principle

- **Mill's Rejoinder:**
 - The truly **expedient** is consistent with long-term utility.
 - Lying may bring short-term benefit, but undermines **social trust**, which is essential to collective well-being (p. 6).
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VI. The Proof of the Principle of Utility (Ch. IV)

- **Key Epistemic Challenge:** How can we prove that happiness is the ultimate end?
- **Mill's Answer:** The only proof that something is desirable is that it is *actually desired*.
 - Each person desires their own happiness.
 - Therefore, the general happiness is desirable for the aggregate of all persons (p. 7).

- **Objection:** People desire things other than happiness—like **virtue**.
 - **Mill's Reply:** Yes, but those things become desirable because they are **components of happiness** (pp. 8–9).
 - Analogy with **money**: once merely a means, now often treated as an end—because it has become psychologically entwined with happiness.
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VII. Virtue, Money, and the Nature of Ends

- **Virtue, fame, and wealth** are often **desired in themselves**, but only after they've become associated with pleasure or avoidance of pain.
 - Thus, these are not counterexamples, but **confirmations** of utilitarianism:
“What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness has come to be desired for its own sake.” (p. 9)
 - Even when these become ends in themselves, they are still *parts* of happiness - concrete elements of a broader total good.
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VIII. Supplement: Background and Key Terms

- **Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism** (though not explicitly drawn by Mill):
 - *Act*: Evaluate individual acts by the GHP.
 - *Rule*: Follow rules whose general observance promotes the GHP.
 - **Moral Psychology**: Mill emphasizes how **education and habituation** shape moral sentiment and align individual happiness with the public good (p. 5).
 - **Competent Judges**: Not an elitist move, but an epistemic tool to determine pleasure quality. Similar in role to experts in aesthetic or sensory experience.
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