

LECTURE 12 - 13

Mill's Utilitarianism



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TODAY'S CLASS

- ◎ **The social inspiration of Utilitarian Moral Philosophy**
- ◎ **The backbone of Utilitarian Moral Philosophy**
- ◎ **J. S. Mill as psychologist**

Chasers and fugitives

Imagine the following situation: *A murderer is chasing someone in your neighborhood. The fugitive happens to find your house and asks you for a hideaway, which you promptly afford her. Some moments later, the murderer knocks at your door and asks whether the victim is hiding in your house.*

QUESTION: *What would you reply to the murderer?*

Kant - Categorical Imperative

I.Kant - On a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns

“Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise therefrom for him or for any other.”

I.Kant - Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen

“Wahrhaftigkeit in Aussagen, die man nicht umgehen kann, ist formale Pflicht des Menschen gegen jeden es mag ihm oder einem andern daraus auch noch so großer Nachteil erwachsen; [...]”

... continued

“... truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract, and the laws of such duties would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the slightest exception to them were admitted.”

“... weil Wahrhaftigkeit eine Pflicht ist, die als die Basis aller auf Vertrag zu gründenden Pflichten angesehen werden muß, deren Gesetz, wenn man ihr auch nur die geringste Ausnahme einräumt, schwankend und unnütz gemacht wird.”

N.B. See Mill's reply to Kant (p. 134)

On the application of laws to the *context*

What are the consequences of establishing laws on the basis of rights which admit of no exceptions?

One can argue, and certainly so did Bentham and Mill argue, that the idea of establishing what is right and wrong without exceptions goes against the intuition that a nation's legislative system should be sensitive to the context of application.

Social reform and the improvement of institutions were some of the principal concerns to move Bentham's and Mill's philosophies, perhaps even above the philosophical necessity of logical and rational coherence in their ethical systems.

Rights and Laws

The so-called, Classical Utilitarians (Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill) were “concerned with legal and social reform” they had a “desire to see useless, corrupt laws and social practices changed.” (Julia Driver, *The History of Utilitarianism*, SEP).

In general, a law is established on the basis of a right; that is, the reason for there being a law is the fact that there is a right to be safeguarded.

Utilitarian Morality and Legislation

Problem: what type of morality/ethics better serves the needs of society?

“Accomplishing their goal [Bentham’s and Mill’s goal of reforming their society] required a normative ethical theory employed as a critical tool. What is the truth about what makes an action or a policy a morally good one, or morally right? But developing the theory itself was also influenced by strong views about what was wrong in their society. The conviction that, for example, some laws are bad resulted in analysis of why they were bad.” (Julia Driver, *The History of Utilitarianism*, SEP)

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Aside: the Industrial Revolution, the rich, and the need for a new ethics that captures the economic and social changes of the time.

The Middle Ages, and the Christian ethics that flourished within, had valued mostly the *afterlife*, and considered life-on-earth mainly as a necessary and painful passage before being admitted into (or refused entrance to) the realm of God, after Adam and Eve's original sin. Values in medieval ethics were poverty, self-sacrifice, etc. Richness was a sin of which to repent, and kings and emperors alike would donate magnificent treasures to the Church, in order to repent for their sins (e.g. the *Scrovegni Chapel* in Padua - Italy).

With the *Industrial Revolution*, starting from the XVIII century, when Adam Smith was writing his *Wealth of Nations*, living conditions improved to a degree that had probably been unimaginable just a few decades before. Especially, improvement of living conditions had occurred across all social classes: According to A. Smith, an XVIII-century lower-class worker was probably eating better, sleeping better, and enjoying better health than a king of just a few centuries before. Intellectuals of the time had understood that part of the acquired richness was due to a desire for improvement which was moving humanity forward: no more penance for having too much, but desire to have more.

Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and others believed that the new times also called for a new ethics, based on different principles, which legitimized the strive for wealth and prosperity. On this topic, see Mill's comments on self-sacrifice in *Utilitarianism* (p. 147).

The essence of consequentialism

(we discussed this in the introduction to the class)

“All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.

[...]

A test of right and wrong must be the means, one would think, of ascertaining what is right or wrong, and not a consequence of having already ascertained it.”

(p. 132)

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. ... pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends.” (p.137)

TWO MAIN CORRECTIONS TO THE CRITICS OF UTILITARIANISM

- Utility is not *opposed to* pleasure.
- Utility does is not *only* pleasure.

Utilitarianism is neither an ethics of puritans nor one of pigs.

Proving the “Greatest Happiness Principle”

“happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end” (p.168)

THE ARGUMENT - I

GOOD/RIGHT

=

DESIRABLE

That ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ are one and the same thing is, to Mill, a matter of definition. What ‘ought to be desired’ (= desirable) is good/right. In other words, the ‘morally right’ is the same as the ‘desirable’. Cf. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (§40).

THE ARGUMENT - II

DESIRABLE

=

DESIRED

“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.” (p. 168)

A passage in this argument was tagged by G. E. Moore as the “naturalistic fallacy”. “Well, the fallacy in this step is so obvious, that it is quite wonderful how Mill failed to see it. The fact is that desirable does not mean able to be desired as visible means able to be seen. The desirable means simply what ought to be desired or deserves to be desired; just as the detestable means not what can be but what ought to be detested and the damnable what deserves to be damned.” (G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §40).

THE ARGUMENT - III

- Initial Question: what is good/right (= desirable)?
- Mill's wants to argue that that which is desirable is "happiness"; how can Mill argue for that?
- In the second part of the argument he argues that what is desirable is what is desired.
- Therefore, it remains to be seen what it is that all/most people actually desire. The answer to this question is a matter of evidence/psychology; but Mill answer is that what is desired by all is happiness and only happiness. If anything else is desired then it is desired as part of happiness.

DESIRED

=

HAPPINESS

“And now to decide whether this is really so; whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain; we have evidently arrived at a question of fact and experience, dependent, like all similar questions, upon evidence.” (p.172)

I **GOOD/RIGHT** = **DESIRABLE**

II **DESIRABLE** = **DESIRED**

III **DESIRED** = **HAPPINESS**

GOOD/RIGHT = **HAPPINESS**

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PSYCHOLOGICAL THESES IN MILL

- Mill makes a number of empirical and psychological conjectures. They are conjectures because, mostly, he doesn't provide any proof of them.
- EXAMPLES:
 - “[...] that pleasure is the only thing desired is, as Mill himself admits, a psychological question [...]” G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (§40).
 - “So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it.” (p. 471)
 - In chapter III of *On Liberty* Mill argues at length for the thesis that reliance on customs, rather than independent exercise of one's faculty of reason, is bad for one's intellectual development.
 - ...

EXPERIMENT