

Mill's Programme; Utility Before Utilitarianism: Aristotle and Hume

Mill as a propagandist:

Mill's upbringing; education as described in the *Autobiography* – and the possibility that Mill exaggerated its austerity; the intention to create a propagandist for advanced opinion; Mill's partial acceptance of the role and his own gloss on it – Goethe as well as Bentham; the enemy: conservatives and intuitionists.

The polemical character of Utilitarianism:

U is a very short book; it began as articles in a fortnightly magazine; it is not, in the 20th Century sense a work of moral philosophy (what sense is that?); the dividing line between *U* and Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*; Mill's aim: to seize the moral high ground *and* the intellectual high ground; *U* impossible to understand without taking that into account: what looks like sloppiness in failing to answer 20th Century questions is more a matter of fighting different battles entirely.

What Mill thought morality was:

there is *no* universally accepted view of what morality is; nor is there a universally agreed view of what Mill thought it was; Mill, in fact, wobbles between a *narrow* and a *broad* view. 'Narrow' morality is concerned with the *business* side of life, which is to say with the aspects of human life other than our deepest personal ideals; as such, it deals with *interaction* and not self-regarding activities; it is the realm of *duty*, of *rules*, and of rules that are enforced by *sanctions*. There are two perspectives on narrow morality, the first *external* and that of the spectator, the second *internal* and that of the actor – though spectators can imagine themselves taking the internal view and actors can step back and ask critical questions. *Externally*, morality can be described as a coercive social practice in which agents invoke the psychological sanctions of public opinion and individual conscience to secure particular lines of conduct (including omissions) from each other. *Internally*, agents invoke the reproaches and encouragements of opinion – their own and others' – in praising and blaming conduct. An external agent who does not take seriously the grounds on which a given society allocates praise and blame can nonetheless 'play' the society's game by working out what its members think and predicting what they should do and feel. By the same token an agent can step away from the practice and ask whether it should be taken seriously. 'Broad' morality is narrow morality together with all those other –

generally self-regarding – aspects of life that are of serious concern to us; Mill, although not everyone agrees with him, separates out the realm of *self-regarding ideals* and the *supererogatory* from *duty*, assigning the latter to narrow morality and the whole trio to broad. The role of *criticism* in morality is not impossible to describe: what we ask ourselves is ‘what rules enforced by the sanctions of opinion would it be for the best to enforce?’ *But*, this is not the same question as ‘what should I do, here and now?’ and will usually not have an identical answer.

The place of happiness in earlier ethical theories – Aristotle and Hume:

No ethical theories are literally hostile to happiness; we shall see that Kant comes very close to thinking that any action that gives us pleasure *cannot* be morally right; but even he thinks that the virtuous *should* be happy – but won’t be in this life. The issue is the role of happiness in ethics. There are four plausible views. i) what morality is about is ‘the good life for man’ and such a life will for the right sort of man be a happy life; the goodness of that life is not *constituted* by its being a happy life, but by its being a life in which the virtues are practised; ii) what morality is about is obedience to the will of God, and God has willed forms of conduct that will bring happiness to those who practise them and to those who are benefitted by that practice; goodness is not *constituted* by the happiness it brings, but by the fact of obedience to the will of God; iii) morality is about the sentiments of approval and disapproval aroused in the heart of a spectator who is in possession of the appropriate moral sensibility; the sentiment of approval is aroused by actions and motives that give pleasure, and disapproval by those that give pain; goodness is not *constituted* by happiness; iv) morality is about the coercively enforced practices that will generally produce happiness for everyone concerned; goodness is *constituted* by happiness. The last is utilitarianism. The first is, roughly, Aristotle; the third is, roughly, Hume. The second is a view that a utilitarian can hold; Mill’s friend, John Austin, the legal theorist, held it – the *obligation* to follow the dictates of morality is based on divine command, but the *content* of the divine commands is dictated by utility.

why they were not utilitarians:

The criteria for being a utilitarian are not universally agreed; Mill called Aristotle a ‘judicious utilitarian,’ although Aristotle never used the term ‘utility’ but talked of *eudaemonia*; Hume used the term utility a good deal, but is not best understood as a utilitarian. For Aristotle, *eudaemonia* is what the good man gets out of behaving well.

The goodness of his behaviour is not defined in terms of its promoting his happiness or anyone else's, but in terms of it displaying one of the various virtues – courage, temperance, wisdom, justice – that a good man displays in his behaviour. Aristotle asked a different question from one that we tend to ask: 'ethics' in his sense includes both more and less than 'morality' in the modern sense. He assumed that most educated Greeks knew what the good life was and spelled it out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As a philosopher, he thought the very best life was that of philosophical contemplation – thinking the thoughts of God – but good lives were such as could be lived by anyone of reasonable intelligence and resources. Hume was closer to what we would think of as a utilitarian, especially in his account of what he termed 'the artificial virtues' such as justice; but he was, as true utilitarians are not, a 'moral sense' theorist, who explained moral distinctions as prompted by the moral sense. It would be odd if the moral sense was not prompted by utility, but it is not only prompted by utility; where it is not, a utilitarian would wish to correct it; Hume does not.

Why Mill believed (or said at least) that Aristotle was one:

It is interestingly difficult to know why Mill described Aristotle as a judicious utilitarian; the obvious explanation is for propaganda purposes: Aristotle was a respected figure, utilitarians were thought to be godless and disrespectful of tradition; to secure Aristotle as an ancestor is a good rhetorical move. More interestingly, Mill is anxious to find a place for the virtues in ethics; he has many motives for doing this, as we shall see, but three to bear in mind are: first, the need to show that when well understood utilitarianism incorporates everything worth preserving in all (rational) ethical traditions; second, the need to show that the irreducible reliance on self-interested motivation in any utilitarian system is consistent with moral agents pursuing a life of virtue; third, Mill's own vision of what fully-realised human lives might be like, which is – to put it crudely – a form of modernised Aristotelianism.

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