Lecture IV: Mill’s Proof

[Because of a minor glitch, lectures III and IV are reversed; Mr Kofman will do III, and very differently from me. So I will post my own lecture III on my website, and will explain below why the order of the discussion does not matter.]

The ‘Proof’ of the Principle of Utility
Mill’s short chapter offers a proof of the principle of utility in a very few lines.

Much of the rest of the chapter (Chapter IV) is about a topic that may seem remote from proving anything: how it is that we come to be able to pursue moral goals for their own sake. This is the subject of goals changing from means to an end into ends in themselves, and will be tackled below. As always in these lectures, it is worth recalling the distinction between a first principle of valuation and an ultimate moral principle. Much of Mill’s argument is about first principles of any sort, and only remotely about moral principles; the issue of how we can pursue goals that seem remote from our own happiness really runs backwards from Chapter IV and is part of the discussion in Chapter III of the sanctions of utilitarian morality, which is to say of how we can be got to behave as we ethically ought. We’ll see more of this in fifth week.

Does the idea of proving a moral principle make sense?
There are two distinct issues. First, whether you can prove a first principle, second, whether moral principles are the sort of thing you can prove. Mill, you notice, does not offer what he thinks of as a proof in the strict sense. What he offers is considerations capable of determining the intellect. The sceptic dislikes that thought because the sceptic thinks a well-regulated intellect is only determined by a proof. The less sceptical think that the whole of life operates on much less than proof – you ask what is across the room and I say, ‘Look!’ – and why not ethics? To which, perhaps, the sceptic replies that he agrees life operates on much less (or perhaps just on something other) than proof, but that somehow ethics seems especially unamenable to proof. There are reasons in Mill’s account of the Art of Life for thinking that he, too, would have thought this: which makes the question of what he was up to in Chapter IV harder to answer.
**What does Mill’s proof really attempt to achieve?**

In many ways, the whole of *U* is the proof. The five lines of argument from ‘desired’ to ‘desirable’ give hostages to fortune, but are only a fragment of the real argument. In some ways, Bentham’s *PML* Chs 1 and 2 provide an extended version – and a very joky one – of what is happening even in *U*. That is, Mill wants to show that almost everyone really agrees with him about what the *point* of human action is, although they may have odd views about ethics, and odd views about how you discover ethical truths, and those odd views may then get in the way of sensible discussion. And part of the way of showing that is to show that you cannot consistently be a non-utilitarian – which is easy, but perhaps insufficient. (That is, someone might cheerfully agree that you choose the nicest tasting breakfast etc., but still say that morality is a matter of intuiting the word of God. You have to be able to go and demonstrate that the word of God is essentially a projection of utilitarian calculation, or that they pick and choose among candidates for the word of God by making utilitarian calculations; and that looks impossible.)

**The analogy between ‘visible’ and ‘seen’ on the one hand and ‘desirable’ and ‘desired’ on the other**

Mill’s proof has always been thought to be scandalous. And some people have devoted much effort to showing that it isn’t. A contemporary of Mill made the obvious point about the problem it raised but Mill didn’t respond other by saying that it was an old objection. It is very simple. Mill says the only proof of something being visible is that people see it; so the only proof of something being desirable is that people desire it. The proof that happiness is desirable is that people desire it. (Don’t forget that he also has to show that happiness is the only thing desired for its own sake.)

The objection is that visible means *can be seen*, but that desirable means *should be desired*. The fact that people see something really is a knock-down proof that it is visible; the fact that people desire something is not in the least a proof that they should desire it. (Some people wanted Arsenal to beat Manchester United.) This looks such a simple refutation of Mill that a lot of people have thought he had just lost his grip on the argument, and that it was simple nonsense. There are other possibilities, none wholly satisfactory, but some quite interesting.
First, there is everything to be said in favour of the view that desirable relates very closely to desired. A ‘desirable’ residence is one that people who want to live in thus and such a house are likely to want; their desires for accommodation make it ‘desirable.’ Again, you tell someone that six hours sleep would desirable before a big game; in effect, he wants to play well; if he sees clearly, he will want his six hours sleep.

Second, if we place the claim within Mill’s view of what utility is about, it looks a bit different. Mill argued that all choices were based on utilitarian considerations – our own welfare, the general welfare, rethinking what happiness involves. Mill’s ‘proof’ is a way of re-running the claim that choice starts from what we want, and more contentiously that the proper description of what we want for its own sake is best described as happiness. The trouble with that is that it seems doomed to be either vacuous or false.

Third, Mill knows what his problem is: on his view, we either want what makes us happy or else what is a means to making us happy. What, then, is the ultimate principle? It can’t be a means to something else, if it ultimate. Putting ourselves in the shoes of the average random person we want what makes us happy on average; looking at the world on behalf of all of us, we want what makes all of us happy. This looks very like the principle of utility.

Fourth, this does not do much to resolve the anxieties of anyone who thinks you cannot prove a moral principle. But, Mill isn’t proving a moral principle; what he is doing is – he hopes – providing as much proof as there can be of the ultimacy of happiness as a goal of action. ‘It makes them happy’ is the stopping point of a justification of action – subject to a lot of further questions about countervailing considerations that undermine the justification.

Fifth, Mill is inclined to waver between a substantive and a formal understanding of happiness, and this does his cause no good. That is, sometimes it looks as though happiness is a distinct state of mind such that it makes sense not to want to be in that state – even if you would be rather odd; and sometimes, it looks as though ‘happiness’ is just a place-holder – how we are when we have what we want.
Alternative renderings of Mill’s proof.
Finally, what else might be going on? One thought is this: if morality is a social practice of a coercive kind, it needs justification. The justification must relate to its practicality and to the plausibility of its goals. What ultimate principle we can agree on to tell us what rules to construct then becomes the question. If – and this is where trouble looms – we each begin by wanting our own happiness, the only principle on which we can agree is that we should all promote the happiness of all of us. But this seems implausible; if what I want is *my* happiness, that is what I want. Wanting the general happiness is something else entirely.

But some such thought animates Mill’s long discussion of the possibility of getting people to *want* to be moral. In effect, he has to work from the thought that we want to be on good terms with others, through an instrumental attachment to the principle of promoting everyone’s utility on fair terms and by the use of coercive measures when they are appropriate (and not otherwise), to the thought that eventually we become fully moralised agents to whom the moral good is something desirable for its own sake.