Lecture Five: *Utility and Obligation: Why we should be moral.*

**Recapitulation**

It may seem odd to take Mill’s Proof and his discussion of the Sanctions of Morality in reverse order, but remember structure and rhetoric of the book: Mill thinks that such consistency as morality possesses is provided by adherence to utilitarianism by people who do not know that they are adhering to it. So, **most** of the argument in concerned with clearing up what utilitarianism is, and removing obstacles to its acceptance. Logically, however, the question whether utility is the test of ethics – the ‘proof’ – comes before the question whether people can operate the principle – the ‘sanctions’.

**Why was Mill so concerned with the ‘sanctions’ of morality?**

There are two main reasons: the first is that talk of the pursuit of happiness upsets the virtuous, so that Mill has to show that utilitarians are entitled to all the notions of duty that anyone else is; the second is more interesting, which is that Mill is concerned about the *principle of utility* rather than ‘don’t kill innocent people.’ That is, he is concerned that the *ultimate principle* may seem less compelling than the lower level rules.

**Mill’s understanding of morality once more**

We have seen that Mill sees morality in terms of sanctions; we call something right and wrong in terms of whether we are prepared to lean on people to make them do or forbear (and whether we are happy to train our consciences to lean on ourselves). Oddly, however, Mill here treats utility as the direct object of moral commitment; that is, ‘the general happiness’ is what it is we feel an obligation to pursue. If he had had a clearer grasp of his own resources, he’d have had an easier time, because he would
have seen that he didn’t have a problem, after all. That is, the principle justifies obligations, but its direct pursuit is not itself obligatory. [Why not?]

**Mill’s opponents and their doubts about the efficacity of utilitarian reasoning**

Mill’s opponents held various views, but had it in common that we either perceive the obligatoriness of rights actions or that we legislate duties on ourselves in a Kantian fashion. Their objections to utilitarianism varied, but in general they held that any instrumental theory such as utilitarianism made duty too optional; they wanted duty to be absolute and imperative, and not goal-oriented. They also confused the issue by assuming that utilitarianism was selfish, whereas the better complaint is that it imposes too much on the individual rather than too little.

**Mill’s response.**

Mill’s argument was that there was no need to posit a moral sense that ‘saw’ what was obligatory, but he did not deny that by the time we are adults we have acquired something very like a moral sense – more or less instinctive habits of decision and a strong sense of obligation. So the question as he understands it is: are any of the usual sanctions unavailable to utilitarianism, and how do they apply to utilitarianism? The answer is roughly: ‘external’ sanctions are either divine or earthly punishments and rewards, and if God is a utilitarian, utility has His sanction; equally, the ordinary social pressures seem obviously available to utilitarianism because we all want others to take due heed of our interests. In any case, ‘external’ sanctions work only through subjective appreciation – that is, they have to become ‘internal’ sanctions. How do we acquire those? The crucial idea is that everyone’s interests are to be equally regarded. In almost all societies other than pure despotism, some equal relationships exists. And we all want others to like us.

**Does Mill confuse motivation and obligation?**

One oddity of the argument is that throughout *U*, Mill argues – rightly – that the presence of a feeling about something does not guarantee that the thing towards which
the feeling exists exists itself: we may feel moved to pray to God, but there may not
be a God, we may feel thepromptings of Duty, but there may be no duty doing the
prompting; but in the chapter on the sanctions of morality, much of the argument is
devoted to explaining how utilitarians can inculcate the same feelings as everyone
else can. Many critics think Mill confuses obligation in the sense of there really being
a duty out there with motivation in the sense of our feeling moved by conscience or
whatever. This is perhaps unfair: that is Mill wants to know – as we saw – how it
comes about that selfish babies get turned into more or less moral adults. And to that
he gives a fairly persuasive answer.