Mill’s Utilitarianism

These eight lectures – seven given by me and one either not given at all but posted as notes or else given by a guest – will cover much the same ground as previous lectures on *Utilitarianism* given by Dr Crisp and Dr Tasioulas, but in a somewhat different order and with a somewhat different slant. This means that previous reading lists will remain very useful as a resource, and everyone is encouraged to download them and make use of them. Because this will be for most students their first exposure to moral philosophy, these lectures will be particularly concerned with Mill’s own view of what he was doing in writing *Utilitarianism*, and with placing the work in the context of the work of his predecessors and opponents.

1. **Mill’s Programme; Utility Before Utilitarianism: Aristotle and Hume**
   Mill as a propagandist; the polemical character of *Utilitarianism*; what Mill thought morality was. The place of happiness in earlier ethical theories – Aristotle and Hume as examples; why they were not utilitarians, and why Mill believed that Aristotle was one.

2. **Mill’s Opponents: Kant, Whewell, Intuitionism and Moral Sense Theories**
   Mill’s argument for a hedonistic theory of value: morality must have a purpose; the Art of Life and morality’s place within it; the anti-utilitarians – Kant and Whewell and duty for duty’s sake; what’s wrong with intuitionist and moral sense theories.

3. **Moving on from Bentham: Quantity and Quality**
   Bentham and the invention of utilitarianism; the felicific calculus; Mill’s introduction of considerations of quality as well as quantity: Socrates and the fool; should Mill have worried about the puzzles raised by 20th Century critics?

4. **The ‘Proof’ of the Principle of Utility (given by Daniel Kofman: the outline below may be wholly misleading, therefore)**
   Does the idea of proving a moral principle make sense? What does Mill’s proof really attempt to achieve? The analogy between ‘visible’ and ‘seen’ on the one hand and ‘desirable’ and ‘desired’ on the other; alternative renderings of Mill’s proof.

5. **Utility and Obligation: Why we should be moral.**
   Why was Mill so concerned with the ‘sanctions’ of morality? Mill’s understanding of morality once more; Mill’s opponents and their doubts about the efficacy of utilitarian reasoning; Mill’s response. Does Mill confuse motivation and obligation?

6. **Utility and Justice**
   The conflict between aggregative and distributive values; can justice reduced to utility? Mill’s understanding of the issues at stake. Mill’s analysis in terms of security; and his analysis in terms of individual interests. Is he more nearly right than his critics?

7. **Utility and Rights**
   The utilitarian analysis of rights: Mill versus Bentham; natural rights, moral rights, and ‘nonsense going on stilts.’ How far can Mill get in analysing rights on a utilitarian basis: which rights are more resistant than which others? Kant once more.
8. **Beyond morality: from *Utilitarianism* to *On Liberty***

   Morality as only one aspect of the Art of Life; duty vs the supererogatory; personal excellence as a non-moral goal; making the world safe for more important values than moral values.

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**Reading:**

**Texts:**

Roger Crisp, *Utilitarianism*, (OUP, 1988) has a very useful commentary and notes. Alan Ryan, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* contains Mill’s essay on Bentham and his critique of Whewell’s moral philosophy, as well as extracts from Bentham’s *Principles of Morals and Legislation* and a long introduction.

**Commentary:**

Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism*

John Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, ch 9


Fred Berger, *Happiness, Justice and Freedom*

**Essential Reading:**

Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

Bernard Williams and JJC Smart, *Utilitarianism, For and Against*

John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*

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