



Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill

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Introduction to Philosophy

John Stuart Mill

- 1806-1873
- Contributed to political theory, economics, and ethics
- One of the most influential proponents of Utilitarianism
- Childhood was heavily influenced by Jeremy Bentham, the originator of Classical Utilitarianism



Consequentialism



- The general belief that **only consequences matter**
- It is an ethical theory that proposes we judge the morality of an action solely on the consequences of that action
- Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism because it adopts this forward-looking approach

Classical Utilitarianism

- First proposed by Jeremy Bentham
- Hedonistic because the theory supposes that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and that we are driven by our desire for this good
- Since pleasure is the only desirable end, we can use pleasure to evaluate the morality of our actions



Greatest Happiness Principle

- “By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”
- “... actions are right in proportion as they tend to **promote** happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”



- Bentham offers seven criteria by which we can **measure happiness**:
 - Intensity
 - Duration
 - Certainty or Uncertainty
 - Propinquity (proximity) or Remoteness
 - Fecundity (capability of producing more of the same type of feeling)
 - Purity (probability that an experience will not be followed by the opposite type of feeling)
 - Extent (the number of people who would be affected by the experience)
- The sum of these criteria is the overall value of the experience, with pleasant experiences having a higher value than unpleasant experiences

Criticisms of Bentham's Utilitarianism

- But this ethical principle has been criticized for degrading human nature:
 - Supposes that we are no better than animals because we only pursue things for the sake of pleasure
- And for not instructing that we aim for higher pursuits:
 - It can not answer the question: “why shouldn't I just get my pleasure from doing drugs or drinking?”



Mill's Defense

- We find the comparison of our desires to the desires of animals degrading because we view ourselves as having higher faculties than animals
- The critics are actually the ones degrading human nature by assuming we are incapable of seeking pleasures that are more sophisticated than the pleasures beasts would seek
- Those with higher faculties require more noble sources of happiness

Higher and Lower Pleasures

- In order to address this criticism, Mill acknowledges that there are two kinds of pleasure: higher pleasure and lower pleasure
- **Higher pleasures** are the pleasures we derive from activities that exercise our higher faculties
 - Attending the opera, volunteering at a soup kitchen
- **Lower pleasures** are the pleasures that appeal to our primitive natures
 - Sex, alcohol
- These two kinds of pleasure are not equal; one is more desirable and, therefore, valuable than the other
- Mill claims that people will select the more noble pleasure, opting for the activity that possesses the “intrinsic superiority of the higher”

A Moral Absolutist Approach

- Although Utilitarianism does not provide an explicit list of duties, it is still prescriptive
- The theory acknowledges that a morally sound action exists and offers guidelines that help us select that right action
- Since the theory rests on imperfect knowledge occasional errors can be expected, but these errors should not detract from the strength of the theory
- Again, the theory acts as a formulaic guide for calculating the action that would provide the most pleasure, not a set of commandments

Discussion Questions

- When assessing the morality of an action, do you feel comfortable disregarding motive and situational context?
- Is pleasure the only end that we seek, or has Utilitarianism oversimplified our desires?
- How do you feel about Mill's claim about superior and inferior pleasures? Is he being elitist?