

Utilitarianism

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April 1-2, 2008

What is the basis of morality? Can we deduce moral obligations and prescription from some general principles and moral axioms, in the same way that we can deduce mathematical propositions from rules of logic and basic assumptions? In short can morality be made as objective as truth?

Just as in the case of deductive reasoning we must assume some moral facts as given and impervious to doubt. While some things are means to an end and their value are related to the ends they are set to serve, other things are ends in themselves and can be given no further justification than themselves. The point of Mill's essay is to explain the principle of utilitarianism and to defend it from its detractors and to argue that it does encompass what superficially might appear in conflict with it. Basically Mill's position is that of his intellectual grandfather - Bentham¹, a calculus of happiness whose purpose is the greatest possible amount of happiness to the greatest number of people. What is happiness? Happiness is the production of pleasure and the prevention of pain. Happiness is what we all desire, and as such it is the ultimate desire requiring no further justification. Happiness is in short an end in itself, and the principle of utilitarianism is that morality simply consists in promoting happiness, i.e. the pursuit and achievement of pleasure. This notion of elevating the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance to pain as the guiding principle of morality, was first systematically presented by the Epicureans, and has ever since been the object of ridicule and condemnation. It has been seen as an invitation to a life of self-indulgence and hedonism, elevating the basest instincts and reducing men to the level of swine. Clearly this is to a large extent based on the rather frivolous connotations the word 'pleasure' call forth, but Mill has no truck with such things. He points out that the pleasures of man, especially civilized man, is so far above those of the brute beast, that there is no cause to fear confusion. To Mill the pleasures of life are those of the mind, and the pains we seek to avoid are clearly mostly of the body². It is true, once that we extend the concept of pleasure and make it less tied to trivial pursuits, much of the obvious opposition to an Epicurean attitude disappears, but there are still some basic problems that refuse to go away so easily.

First of course there is the very basis of calculus, how to compare pleasures between different individuals. Just as with liberty, individual liberties are in conflict with each other. Some individuals may take pleasure in acts of sadism, and the gratification of those desires may cause an insufferable amount of pain to others. How should we balance one thing against another? The pain caused may be insufferable, but the pleasure enjoyed as a

¹ His father James was a disciple of Bentham

² However, ultimately all pain is related to the mind. We can in effect put up with a lot of bodily pain as long as we are convinced it is for our benefit. But once this trust is broken and we are instead convinced of the opposite, even moderate pain can become unbearable.

result may be sublime. Who is to be the judge? The solution professed by Popper almost a hundred years later is to discount pleasure and only count pain. It is not the obligation of Society to promote happiness, only to try to do away with pain.³ Now this does not seem to bother Mill very much, after all in practical contexts there is little to argue about. But now what about virtuous acts of renunciation. To Mill morality only makes sense in a social setting, the purpose is not to maximize individual happiness but overall, although of course a society as such cannot be happy, only its members; thus any sacrifice of human happiness for the better good need to benefit individuals directly, if not the sacrifice is not moral, it is simply perverse⁴. Do virtuous act bring happiness to the one who performs it, and if so does that detract from the virtue connected to it? Is virtue something that should be thought of as an end to itself? Mill has a theory that things that initially may be more means to an end, such as money, may eventually acquire a value entirely by itself. Thus the pursuit of money would be a component of happiness, regardless of the pleasures its spending may provide. The same thing with virtue, if originally a means of supplying happiness to others, it could become a pleasure by itself.

Now Mill does not consider the pursuit of truth. Is that always pleasurable? Does it not transcend it? Cannot the desire for truth be stronger than the desire for pleasure? Is it always the case that we pursue truth only to make our pleasure keener? Mill has nothing to say on that matter. Maybe because he does subsume the search for truth under the general rubric of progress. Mill was in fact living in happy times when there was faith in unlimited progress. The improvement of mankind is taken for granted, and with that the abolishment of disease and pain, as well as the improvement of pleasure.

Now are not the demands of happiness immense and the concomitant failure to satisfy them a steady source of unhappiness? Would people actually be happier if they are taught to expect less of it? Thus pleasure would intensify if there was less of it. In fact, Mill claims, the expectation of happiness is rather low for most people who are satisfied with a modest amount. In fact two components make up for a happy, or at least contended life. First tranquillity, which makes us do with little pleasure, and excitement, which makes up put up with a fair amount of pain. The happy life consists of a mixture of the two. Too much tranquillity and the mind yearns for some excitement. Too much excitement and similarly there is a yearning for tranquillity.

Also the direction of ones pleasures is important. The individual whose all pleasures are centered on himself is up for grief eventually as old age sets in and the basis for such pleasures invariably shrinks, until there is nothing left but the eventual termination by death. Only if your basis is society as a whole will the source of it survive the vicissitudes of individual decrepitness, and such individuals may preserve until the very end the intellectual vigor and excitement of youth. In fact it is for obvious reasons very important to Mill that the desires of an individual should be congruent with the desires of society at large, the furthering of which is through education. Appealing as such an idea may be,

³ Now of course there might be pain in having your pleasures denied, just as falsification of a statement is a verification of its negation. The tentative solution to this is roughly along the lines of the former, namely to make a distinction between direct and hypothetical pains.

⁴ Such acts are similar to those performed by ascetics mounted on pillars, Mill remarks, providing more of an example of what man can do, rather than what he should do

still it is a dangerous one.

But what about people who do things that are not pleasurable. Maybe out of spite or distraction or plain stupidity? Mill finds it expedient to make a distinction between will and desire. Will is something that is a manifestation of habit, and habit may make us repeatedly do things we do not desire, nor bring us anyone else any happiness. Thus Mill seem to scoff at the idea of a free will, if taken literally will to Mill is subservient to habit. Maybe there is a freedom of desire? On the other hand we desire happiness only and this surely should be deterministic. Do we actually have a choice as to what we desire? Mill admits that will may pervert desire, so as to make us desire things because we will it.

In the most interesting part of the essay Mill discusses justice and our intuitive notion of what constitute a just act, and our desire that fairness would always be observed and that those who fail to do so should be appropriately punished. Is it simply because the feeling of justice produce pleasure in us. If so why is justice such a source of pleasure?

Justice has to do with the law. To be just is to be in accordance with the law, or to follow the word etymologically, to follow the straight path. But justice seems to go deeper than the law, after all there is a notion of unjust law. Should unjust law be obeyed at all? If so, may be only for the reason that laws should be obeyed on principle, otherwise society would crumble. Maybe the obeying of laws is a super-law, but which for that reason it is never codified as such. Or maybe we have an obligation to flaunt unjust law in order to uphold justice? And ultimately on what is our innate sense of justice based on? A feeling that is subjectively strong does not always have to have an objective basis.

The notion of justice is related to a sense of right and entitlement Mill points out. Our outrage at injustice being done is when somebody's right to being violated, whether of possession of property or life. Thus the notion of justice does not make sense without a sense of what a person is really entitled to, what he is she really deserves. In this part of the essay Mill gets into more concrete details, especially political, thus making it far more interesting. For one thing justice seems to be bound up with impartiality, but is impartiality always bad? Often it does not rouse our censure at all. In fact when they are, Mill maintains, they are rather exceptions to the rule. We all expect that people should show more care and concern to those who are close to them than to mere strangers. Thus the virtue of impartiality only enters in specific contexts, such as being endowed with political office or a public charge, with the expectation of looking into matters squarely without being distracted by extraneous circumstances.

Closely related to impartiality is equality. And justice is supposed to treat everybody equally. On the other hand exceptions due to expediency are often accepted. In fact political inequality is the norm rather than the exception, and where there is inequality in possession and power, the notion of justice dealing equally with one and everyone is a sorry fiction. A crucial test of equality is in the distribution of riches. Some hold that everybody should get equal shares. Others claim that this is unjust, that justice will only be done when those who are neediest receive the largest share to make up for some natural inequality. While of course contrary to such egalitarian principles the idea that those who work hardest and contribute the most, should be entitled to a larger quota. Similarly when it comes to taxation. Should everybody pay the same, the way we all pay the same for membership of a club? The rich would be able to afford it easily, while the poor not at

all. On the other extreme should the rich pay progressively more than the poor on the basis that they can afford it better? Or should we pay in accordance to what we get out of society? The poor is in more need of the services and protection of society than the rich, and hence may justly be expected to contribute more; the rich after all could do very well without a society, enslaving the poor.

Justice being related to law and regulations, how much of life should be regulated by society. How large a space should be entirely the private concern. It is true that relatively harmless excesses as the pilfering of trifles are subject to the punishment by law, but not the far worse offense of letting down a friend. Those are moral questions which we have put beyond the ken of law and legal interference, and thus also impervious to the execution of deliberate punishment. (Then there is of course always the resort to poetic or divine justice, but that is but a sporadic occurrence.). In fact there is a distinction between acts we are obliged to do, and whose failure should be punished, and those that are commendable to do but not obligatory, and hence their execution elicit applause and their neglect no punishment. In this Mill sees a distinction between justice (always connected to some right) and morality.

A discussion follows on natural empathy as well as the desire for revenge. Is revenge pleasurable, when it is assumed to be desirable? Some say it is of the keenest pleasure available. Thus is it conducive to happiness? General happiness? I guess so, the pain inflicted being considered just, and hence not to be entered into the calculation.

But is punishment just after all, even if it so far has been seen as the very manifestation of justice. Some people already during the time of Mill, such as Owen claimed that all punishment is unjust, as criminals are not responsible for the circumstances, such as poverty, deficient education, (and irresistible temptation?) which made him commit the crime in the first place. But if you do not buy such ideas, what is considered appropriate punishment. Proportionality to the offense is a natural requirement, but how literally should that be taken? An eye for an eye, a hand for a hand, to revert back to Old Jewish and Muslim law. In modern civilized societies we balk at such crudeness. Instead there is the notion that punishment should be just as much that is needed to prevent repetitions and discourage emulation. (But maybe this actually would conflict with our sense of proportionality?)

Mill concludes with claiming that the utilitarian principles as to morals only works if there is equality. That every persons happiness is counted as much as every others. If not the principle is a mere form of words lacking any rational signification.

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