



Utilitarian Ethical Theory in Modern Perspective

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Introduction:

(1) An Outlines of John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian Theory

Utilitarian theory can be understood as a movement of legal, socio-political reformation theory which flourished in the first half of the 19th century. But it is also, and more persistently, a general ethical theory and it is almost exclusively in this sense that I shall be concerned with it. As a theory of ethics it provides a criterion for distinguishing between right and wrong action and given an account of the nature of the moral judgment that characterize action as right or wrong.

Utilitarianism is one of the most significant works in moral philosophy. The chief exponent of it is Stuart Mill. The main focus of his idea is on: "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, utility, or The Greatest Happiness Principles, hold that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."¹⁸

The above statement or passage very clearly elucidates about utilitarianism of Mill's moral theory. Here, he has very categorically mentioned two main aims in utilitarianism. It is possible to prove an account of utilitarianism. The word 'right' mean 'morally right', since Mill is speaking of a 'creed' or theory concerned with the foundation of morality. Mill is confident and believes that the actions are right in so far as they increase their happiness or actions are right in so far as they decrease happiness. As per the action the result will be visible immediately and depend on the performance. If action is wrong the result will be unhappiness and when the action is right the result will be happiness. We can say that the rightness or wrongness is the matter of degree.

Generally, without any evidence we may think that the right action may produce the most happiness or pleasure overall, at the same time it may also produce great suffering.¹⁹ The alternative action may produce less pleasure and high balance of pleasure over pain would be preferable. The right action will produce greatest balance of pleasure and greatest balance of pleasure over pain. The following is the description of an imaginary situation about greatest pleasure and pain derived from different actions.

"Action A: 20units of pleasure +6 units of pain.

Action B: 15units of pleasure+ 2units of pain.

Action C: 15 units of pleasure + 0 Units of pain".²⁰

The balance of pleasure over pain is calculated by subtracting the number of units of pain from the units of pleasure. So action A is morally preferable to action B, since its total is 14 rather than 13. But action C is superior to action A, since its total is 15. So the right action is C. Because of simplicity we may follow the Utilitarianism. Mill explains that our act leads to maximize welfare or happiness, in other words, the balance of pleasure over pain. At the sametime we may also find that facts are having many variations, some of them subtle, others quite radical, between different forms of utilitarianism.

Mill and other modern ethical theorists focus on action. Their focus is on what is right to do? Beside that we need to focus on character and also on the basics of the above two focused ideas. One may raise a question regarding what sort of character we should have. Mill's answer is that the action should produce and maximize pleasure. Accordingly, one should have a character which produces and maximizes happiness or utility for greatest number of people.

Mill's view may be called externalism since it takes into account only what externally would happen to the right action in any circumstance is the one which will externally turn out to produce the greatest possible balance of pleasure over pain.

There would be an alternative version of utilitarianism which takes probabilities into account. The version is just one of a large number of moral theories which offer an account of rightness in terms of what the agent is justified in believing at the time of action. The probabilities will suggest that most facts are externally relevant in assessing rightness and wrongness. In assessing the rightness or wrongness of courses of action the numbers representing the welfare levels are to be multiplied by the probabilities of their succeeding ones. Mill's don't make any difference between the externalism and probabilism. For example, Mill's primary interest is to speak of the morality of an action depending on its foreseeable consequences. In the context of the doctor his claim regard in the treatment that he adopts can be characterized as morality of action in Mill's terms. Mill believed intention to be the foresight of consequences. As per Henry Sidgwick's distinction between objective and subjective rightness, the objective point of view, the doctor in the example did the right thing, since here action was the one that maximized overall happiness. But doctor had no good reason for thinking that her action would succeed, and doctor is opened to criticism from the perspective of subjective rightness.

The objective rightness, then, consists in the maximization of overall happiness, subjective rightness consist in the maximization of expected overall happiness. The objective or subjective distinction enables one to accept both. Both theories elaborate the concept of rightness. But the doctor should not think subjective or objective while he is treating the patients. According to utilitarianism, praising and blaming themselves are also subject to the principles of rightness, so that they are objectively right if they maximize expected happiness. Blame, for example, is not necessarily applicable in a case where a person has done what is objectively or subjectively wrong.

Mill must assure that the consequences of our actions from the point of view of their production of welfare or happiness will end somewhere. For otherwise he could be faced by an infinity of time in which to maximize anything would be acceptable since no action could cover that which maximizes happiness or indeed expected happiness overall. For Mill the objective of morality is to govern life on the earth. Why is he putting this restriction on him? Surely the welfare of all beings in the universe should be our concern, in which case

utilitarianism does have to assume that life with a capacity for welfare is finite. Utilitarianism has to assume that such life may be finite, so that the notion of welfare maximization may have application.

(2). Conceptual understanding of Act and Rule Utilitarianism

Philosophical understanding is conceptual understanding in each aspect. Utilitarianism as Bentham defines it holds that, action is best which leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Here greatest number is redundant. If we seek the greatest happiness, numbers will take care of themselves. This deal will not have a great imagination but the principle would condone some very questionable actions.

Act utilitarianism is to be contrasted with rule-utilitarianism. Act-Utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the consequences, good or bad of the action itself. Rule-utilitarianism is the view that the right or wrong of an action is to be judged by the goodness and badness of the consequence of a rule that everyone should perform in actual circumstances. There are two sub-varieties of rule-utilitarianism according to whether one construes 'rule' here as 'actual rule' or 'possible rule'. The latter rule is permissible to interpret Kant's principle 'act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' and act only on that maxim which you as a human and benevolent person would like to see established as a universal law.²¹ Kant would resist appeal to human feeling, but it seems necessary in order to interpret his doctrine in a plausible way. Rule-utilitarianism has certain objective. The rule-utilitarian presumably advocates his principles because he is ultimately concerned with human happiness.

A Kantian philosopher like David Lyons recently argues that rule-utilitarianism collapses into act-utilitarianism.²² Suppose an exception to a rule R produce the best possible consequences. Then this is evidence that the rule R should be modified so as to allow this exception. We get a new rule of the form 'do R except in circumstances of the sort C'. That is, whatever would lead the act-utilitarian to break a rule would lead the Kantian rule-utilitarian to modify the rule. Thus adequate rule utilitarianism would be extensionally equivalent to act-utilitarianism.

Rule-utilitarianism is often identified with rules like "do not walk on the grasses" or "do not fail to vote at an election." The rules like this will not benefit maximum members of the society and where they may be regarded as false rules. We need to distinguish the action of doing something for largest number people and those actions done if from action of doing it. Rule will come and enjoin the same actions in the same way as principles do. These types of cases are very interesting. They require a different treatment. Many people do not do the same action X, but each person must plan his action in the ignorance of the other person does. Example, what A does depends on the action that the performances what A does. An adequate rule-utilitarianism would not only be extensionally equivalent to the act-utilitarianism principle but would in fact consist of only one rule 'maximize probable benefit.'

Any rule which can be formulated must be able to deal with an indefinite number of unforeseen types of contingency. No rule can be safely regarded as extensionally equivalent to the act-utilitarian principle unless it is that very principle itself. The rule –utilitarianism of the Kantian sort must collapse, and act-utilitarianism becomes stronger. It must become a 'one-rule' where rule utilitarianism which is identifiable to act-utilitarianism.

(3) Distinction between Act and Rule

While understanding Mill's utilitarian theory, now I shall turn to another important distinction between types of utilitarianism. As per Mill the right action is that which maximizes happiness. The heart of the theory is maximizing happiness principles. This may be called as an act utilitarianism or philosophers have called a direct moral theory, which applies directly to acts. Some philosopher has interpreted Mill's view as indirect, which is, rule utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism also focuses on the theories on actions. But rightness or wrongness of actions depends not directly on whether they maximize happiness, but rather on certain rules, viz., those which will maximize happiness most will be accepted by people. J.O.Urmson's influential rule utilitarian interpretation of Mill many be cited in this connection.

The most important factors of the view Urmson ascribes to Mill are as follows:

(A) A particular action is justified as being right by showing that it is in accord with some moral rule. It is shown to be wrong by showing that it transgresses some moral rule.

(B) A moral rule is shown to be correct by showing that the recognition of that rule promotes the ultimate end.²³

As per the difference of Mill's view on promising, if I make a promise to you, and a situation may arise to break the promise in order to maximize utility. Act-utilitarianism requires me to break the promise. As per Urmson, this goes against what we ordinarily believe, for we need to think that one has a duty to do what one has promised just because one has promised. In the reverse explanation, Mill can agree with this. He can claim that a rule which requires people to keep their promises would, if generally accepted, promote happiness to the greatest possible degree. In this situation when the promise is broken it is difficult to keep trust on people. Since breaking of promise is forbidden by the rule it can't be morally justified. So, since it would be forbidden by a morally justified rule, my breaking the promise in this particular case would not be justified. Some of the interpretations are considered for the development of further discussion. Both intuitive and inductive schools agree that the morality of an action is a matter of the application of a general law to a particular case. Some of the moral philosophers have developed their argument on the basis of observation and experience. The morality of an action involves applying general laws or rules to particular cases. But general law that he argues for the act-utilitarian principle.

Urmson accepted an act utilitarian way, but claimed that to do so would be to ignore Mill's reference to the tendencies of action to promote happiness or unhappiness. Certain action will promote certain results only if one is speaking of type-rather than token action. For example, drinking alcohol may tend to promote acceleration, but drinking particular glass either does or does not produce it. Mill can well be interpreted here as regarding moral rules as for binding or enjoining type of action, in fact as saying that the right moral rules are the once which promote the ultimate end.

The principle of utility is meant to be a principle which approves or disapproves of every action what so ever. There is a tendency which either argument or diminish the happiness of the agent. As per Bentham, every action is a type of action. Bentham to speak of an action having tendencies as an event having tendencies. Bentham's discussion is concerned with of how to assess the general tendency of any act. This is clearly intended to be a discussion of how to assess the moral quality of individual act. To think otherwise would require Bentham's references to 'any person', the individual person' and so on. These are to be taken as references to type of person. There is as another use of the technical sense of 'tendency' by Mill. The notion of

tendency plays no special role in his definition of utilitarianism. His claim that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness is equivalent to the claim that they are right to the extent that they promote happiness.

Mill allows that there may be secondary moral principles. These principles play the role he describes in section A. An action is right if it accords with rules. Urmson accepted that claim on the ground that such rules as mere aids to maximizing. But, he says, admitting these rules have been arrived at by learning the usual effects of certain type of action which does not require us to interpret them as being anything but rules when once made. Urmson's understanding of their status is mistaken. Mill makes it clear that he takes right and wrong to be 'derived from' moral rules.

In the above I have discussed Urmson's arguments against the ascription of act utilitarianism and in favour of the ascription of rule utilitarianism to Mill.²⁴

(4) Mill's Proof of the Principle of Utility and Greatest Happiness

Utilitarianism means action that is judged as right, good, or wrong on the basis of consequences. The end of an action justifies the means-consequentiality principle. The moral authority of the utilitarianism is mostly calculated on the performance of external results. In this respect Mill formulates the following principles:

- (1) A decision is morally right if it produces greatest good for the greatest number.
- (2) A decision is morally right if the net benefit after considering the cost helps the greatest good compared to other choices,
- (3) A decision is morally right if the indirect and direct features benefits are exceeding compared to other alternatives. The consequentiality principle can be explained as;
 - (a) Utility to the greatest
 - (b) Give right action to promote happiness to large numbers
 - (c) Reduce pain.

In Mill's utilitarianism, we may find four principles which are involved in utilitarianism. Namely universalism, consequentialism, Hedonism (belief that pleasure is the chief good) and maximism.

- (a) Universalism
- (b) Consequential
- (c) Hedonism
- (d) Maximism:

As per the above said principles, we would like to take the two importance principles which will develop my thesis in the right manner.

- (1) The consequentiality principles state the rightness or wrongness of the result flow from the action.
- (2) The Hedonistic principles that any thing that is good in itself is pleasure and the only thing bad in itself is pain.²⁵

The doctrine of the greatest happiness principle is that "the rightness of an action is determined by its contribution to the happiness of everyone affected by it. Bentham says, by the principle of utility, it is meant that which appears to augment or diminish the happiness of the agent whose interest is in question. Bentham goes on saying that: an action may right if it is consistent to the principle of utility. Bentham further hold that the happiness of the community is greater then pain or unhappiness.

In the above statement Bentham explained, first, the notion of ‘general happiness’ and second, that which “actually augments or diminishes it” (happiness). John Stuart Mill says, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and the absence of pain by happiness, and the privation of pleasure”.²⁶ Mill makes the distinction between a morally obligatory action and a morally permissible one. An obligatory action is the right thing to do where as a permissible action, on the other hand, is the one that can be undertaken without any sense of obligation involved in it. And obligatory action is something is that cannot be performed wrongly. As Bentham says, “of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done.”²⁷ One may also say that if it is right it should be done, at least that if it is not wrong it should be done and on action that detracts from the general happiness is wrong i.e., it ought not to be done.

The central aims of Mill are that “the general happiness is the sole criterion of morality”. This claim may be interpreted to mean that the only mark of morally right action is the degree to which it promotes the general happiness. Mill explained between visibility and desirability.” The only proof capable of being given an object is visible is that the people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; and so is the case of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, if there is that anything which is desirable implies that people do actually desire it.²⁸

Mill’s interpretation says that we can validly infer that it is visible. From the fact that people desire something, we can validly infer that it is desirable, in other words, people do in fact desire happiness. Happiness is desirable, of course, is equivalent to saying that happiness is good. Mill concludes as “Each person’s happiness is good to the person.”²⁹ Mill gives proof for above argument which we present in the following way:

(A) In Mill’s proof for the above said aspect we would like to understand and argue the following way:

- (1) Each person’s desire lays his happiness.
- (2) If each person’s desire lays his our happiness, then each person can desire his own happiness.
- (3) If each person can desire happiness, then each person’s happiness is desirable for himself.
- (4) If each person’s happiness is desirable for that person, then each person’s happiness is good for that person.
- (5) Therefore, each person’s happiness is good for that person.

The above formation is logically valid. If all premises are true, then the conclusion must be true as we have analysed it in the systematic manner. To understand clearly let us systematically and logically discuss the premise of each and every augment of this proof. As per Mill’s statement and idea that everyone should have desires to be Happy. There may be some disagreements about the first premises but it is true that each person desires his happiness.

The second premise is general the principle that if something in fact does happen, then it can happen. In other words, whatever is true is possible. If people in fact do desire their own happiness, then they can do something on this basis so we may agree with the second premise.

The third premise may be called principle. The fact is that if some point can be scrubbed, it follows that is scrubable similarly, if a mountain can be climbed, it follows that it is climbable. The third premise of the

augment is the application of this general principle to the case of desire. From the fact that something can be desired, we infer that it is desirable.

As per the fourth premise, the idea that the 'desirable' means "good" what is desirable for a person is what's good to him. Thus, if he owns happiness, is desirable for each person, and his own happiness is good for each person. This premise seems fairly possible. Last but not the least, the fifth premise is the same as the earlier premises. Each person's happiness is good to that person. Having established this, Mill proceeds and attempts to prove that happiness is one of the criteria of morality. This means, that the production of happiness is one of the things that makes actions morally right.³⁰

(B) As we are trying to discuss different aspects of argument, now I would like to prove the second stage of Mill's on greatest happiness principles.

(5) Each person's happiness is good to that person.

(6) If each person's happiness is good to that person, then the general happiness is good to the aggregate of people.

(7) If the general happiness is good to the aggregate of people, then the general happiness is a criterion of morality.

(8) Therefore, the general happiness is a criterion of morality.

As per the Mill's last of this proof, Mill claims that everything we desire is desired either as a part of or as a means to happiness. If it is so then nothing other than happiness is a criterion of morality. The ultimate conclusion is that happiness is the sole criterion of morality. By this it is clear that an act is morally right if and only if it maximizes happiness.

(C) After understanding the two level of argument, now I would like to prove the final stage of Mill.

(9) People can desire nothing other than parts of or means to happiness.

(10) If people can desire nothing other than parts of or means to happiness, then nothing other than happiness is a criterion for morality.

(11) Therefore, nothing other than happiness is a criterion of morality.

(12) Therefore, happiness is the sole criterion of morality (from (8)-(11)).

As per the above statement Mill does not make clear what he means when he says that something is desired, "as a part of the happiness". Mill has been accused of committing some of the serious blunder in the argument. Many critics say that Mill fails to distinguish between two different senses of the word 'desirable' which as the critics point out can be clearly distinguished. In one sense, to say that something is desirable it is just to say that it can be desired.

D1: x is desirable₁ = df x can be desired. Generally, everything is desirable₁. In the second sense, desirability is a value property. Not everything is desirable₂.

D2: x is desirable₂ = df x is worthy of being desired.³¹

There is an objection to the analogical part of the argument, namely that "desirable" is meant in D1 and what "desirable₂" is meant in D2 then both are true. But the argument is no longer valid, it then suffers from equivocation. Thus, no matter how we interpret this part of the argument, it does not succeed in showing that each person's happiness is good for that person.

A serious question can be raised concerning each main part of Mill's proof. The first part, the analogical argument, seems to involve the fallacy of equivocation. "Desirable" has to be used in two different senses in order for the premises to be true. The second part, the aggregation argument, seems to involve something similar to the fallacy of composition, though it is hard to tell for certain. Finally, the third part, the part and means argument, is so obscure as to make evaluation difficult. If we interpret Mill's in this way, we must conclude that it is an externally weak argument.

Conclusion:

In defense of Mill, several standard objections to act utilitarianism can be answered. In some cases, the objection admittedly does raise some puzzling question. However, a thorough going, consistent Utilitarian need not feel too embarrassed by that question. We have also seen that Mill's main argument in favour of utilitarianism is seriously defective. In general there is also a wide measure of commonality in the things that make human happiness. By and large sickness, injury, bereavement, hostility and insecurity are obstacles to happiness which anybody will find difficult to overcome. From this it follows that though the interest and inclinations of individuals do differ. In practical deliberation there are at least some general guideline we can follow for the promotion of happiness.

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