



DO ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS? UNDERSTANDING THE UTILITARIAN RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

We all pursue happiness. However, in this pursuit we sometimes we get involved so much that we breach the principles of morality. We have often heard people saying “The end justifies the means”. But if we take this sentence to be our guiding principle, we may have to exonerate not just Hitler but all the perpetrators of wrongful acts. For what they were seeking was their own happiness. Philosophically speaking one school of thought that maintains such a stance is known by the name Consequentialism. Consequentialism claims that the morality of an action is determined solely by its consequences. But a philosophical mind would resent such a thought for no justification could presumably be used to condone massacre, murder, robbery, cheating and even lying, if the consequences were felt to be good enough. In this paper I wish to defend this seemingly horrendous doctrine of ends justifying the means. For this purpose, I discuss a popular and very influential thinker John Stuart Mill whose utilitarianism is an offshoot of consequentialism and therefore not too far from the view that moral rightness of an action is evaluated solely by its consequences. However, there is a twist as Mill introduces an overarching principle, a criterion for making such evaluations and it is ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people’ along with making qualitative distinctions in happiness. This qualification makes Mill’s Utilitarianism more in tune with our common-sense intuition.

Keywords: Consequences, Pleasure, Pain, Happiness, Morality, Utility.

1. INTRODUCTION

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), one of the chief exponents of Utilitarianism is praiseworthy for presenting a precise and systematic account of his theory. His defense of the theory against the attacks from various sides is also commendable. His work Utilitarianism like Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics begins with the assumption that all our actions aim at some end, the end being happiness. But as it progresses the divergences become obvious and clear. One of them is on the question of the agent’s character and motives. Aristotle’s moral philosophy recommends the ultimate end to be attainable by one, who has a strong moral character and whose intention and motives are good. For Mill, however, the true worth of an action lies not with the agent but with the action itself. That is, an action is right if it leads to something useful and wrong if it does not. By the same token an action is right if it gives pleasure and wrong if it gives pain.

2. UTILITY / HAPPINESS THE TOUCHSTONE OF MORALITY

Mill, on the lines of Jeremy Bentham, his predecessor, establishes in his theory that morality is a matter of utility. The worth of an action is to be judged in terms of its usefulness. This means, that the rightness or wrongness of an action is assessed in terms of how it squares with the Principle of Utility.

Bentham formulates the Principle of Utility as:

that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual. (p.35)

This principle therefore, “approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.” (Bentham p. 34)

Somehow dissatisfied with the name The Utility Principle, Bentham renamed it as The Greatest Happiness Principle. For he thought happiness rather than utility to be a clear-cut and more lucid designation for a worthy end of an action. Thus, according to this principle that action which produces greatest or maximum happiness is the right action in that situation. In addition, the greatest happiness of the individual is or has to be in conformity with the happiness of all, or at least majority of individuals.

Bentham’s version of Utilitarianism is what may be called the Hedonistic Utilitarianism. It is different from the straightforward hedonism in that it takes account of the overall happiness of mankind, which is not the case with



simple hedonism. The latter recommends the maximisation of happiness or the minimisation of unhappiness for the individual alone. General happiness is the aim of utilitarianism. Morality, thus, for the Utilitarians has a peculiar meaning. It applies to actions which either promote or vitiate happiness of mankind generally.

Mill's formulation of the Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle is:

actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By Happiness is intended pleasure, and absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. (p. 257)

He also says:

the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. (p. 268)

Thus, all actions derive moral significance from their respective consequences. An action, however, might lead to a result that is an admixture of both pleasure and pain. In that case, the utilitarians argue, the evaluation is done by ascertaining the weightiness of one over the other.

A morally right action is one that produces the greater balance of pleasure over pain, while a morally wrong action produces the greater balance of pain over pleasure. To cite their respective examples two situations may be analysed.

A) In the Mahabharata, there is an instance where Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, is forced to tell a lie. He is requested by his fellows to convey to Dronacharya, the chief of the opposite side, the Kaurava army, that his son, Ashvathama is slain. Yudhishthira keeps the words of his fellows and tells Dronacharya about the death of Ashvathama but refers to the elephant instead that had the same name. On hearing this Dronacharya leaves the battlefield and is killed. This lie from Yudhishthira helped the Pandavas to a great extent to win the battle.

B) Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas was severely insulted in the court of the Kauravas. As a result, she urged her husbands to take revenge for the outrage and vowed that she would not tie her hair unless and until all the culprits are dead. The revenge took the shape of a gigantic battle, consuming innumerable lives. Her own sons got killed in that. The result of the battle was what she wanted but the price was rather high.

The Utilitarians would say that Yudhishthira's action was right because it resulted in the greater balance of pleasure over pain. Despite of the fact that he had to live with the guilt of killing his guru treacherously and that many would be deprived of his wisdom, yet it was right as it paved the way for the overthrow of the Kaurava rule which was based on lawlessness. The action was aimed at the restoration of law and peace thus benefiting the majority of the people.

Second is a clear-cut example of the greater balance of pain over pleasure. Although Draupadi did achieve the end she had desired, for it was a matter of dignity of the entire womankind, yet the pain that she and the others involved underwent surpassed the accomplishment of the womankind.

Utilitarianism thus presents a criterion by which the morality of our actions can be judged. Bentham goes on to the extent of giving a mathematical method for evaluating the pleasures or pains resulting from an action.

3. HAPPINESS – QUANTITY / QUALITY AS GROUNDS OF ESTIMATION

The quantitative approach of Bentham includes seven elements viz. intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, purity, fecundity and extent which help in the assessment of happiness. This technique of assessing happiness has been given the name of felicific calculus.

Pleasures, for Bentham, are all equal. There is no difference between the pleasure derived from having an ice-cream and that derived from winning an award insofar as the quality and the quantity criterion i.e., all the seven factors are taken care of.

Mill quite discomfited with Bentham's quantitative analysis of pleasures argues that all pleasures are not equally worthy. To judge them on the scale of quantity alone would be to undermine their value. Pleasures derived from poetry and pushpin are not of the same kind for the two are entirely different pursuits. Quality of pleasure is also to be recognised as a standard for calculating the worth of an action. Mill says:

It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone. (p. 259)

Thus, for Mill pleasures differ both in quantity as well as in quality and that the qualitative differences in pleasure are as significant as the quantitative ones. Hardly anybody would deny the discreteness between the pleasure derived from writing a poem and the one derived from playing a game. The former delights the mind the later appeases the body. It is the mental or the intellectual pleasures that are superior and more valuable than the mere conglomeration of pleasurable sensations.

Mill asserts that the man of experience always prefers a life in which pleasures of the intellect loom large over a life where pleasures of the body have prominence. And in a situation where a person is unable to decide between two pleasures, he should go by the preference of those who have experienced both.



Human beings are endowed with faculties much advanced and refined than ones possessed by animals which makes them capable of experiencing pleasures of the higher kinds. Therefore, their choice for the intellectual pleasure is obvious in spite of the fact that they may be less in quantity. A being with a sense of dignity would never acquiesce to the pleasures of the lesser kinds. These are contemptible for being beneath the minimal standards of human decency.

Although the pleasures of the lesser kinds are easy to rack up and even satiate yet this man would not downgrade himself to the level of those who willingly partake in them.

Man being possessed of the faculties which instill in him a sense of dignity, refuses the life of cattle which is primarily a life based on bodily pleasures. Mill illustrates this idea in the following words:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides. (p. 260)

Here Mill brings in the distinction between happiness and content. A being who is satisfied with the lesser kinds of pleasures believes himself to be happy whereas the being who knows what it is to be happy, knows that in this imperfect world happiness amounts to much more than what is mere bodily or sensible. Thus, Mill says that the Greatest Happiness Principle is “the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable”. (p.262)

4. THE DESIRABILITY OF PLEASURE OR HAPPINESS

Mill’s hedonistic sentiments however like that of Bentham show concern for the welfare of others. As he says that end, “is not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether.” (p. 262)

He justifies this claim in a reply to one of the objectors when the latter argues that happiness is not something paramount for it is unattainable and that there are evidences where people willingly eschew their own happiness. For example, the ascetics intentionally sacrifice their happiness. Mill does not identify happiness with ecstasy. Unlike Aristotle, he gives a practical description of happiness. A life which is a combination of both pleasurable and painful episodes but with a general predominance of the former over the latter is what could be called a happy life. Mill further clarifies that the ascetics, who sacrifice their happiness, do so because they have a nobler issue at hand which is quite utilitarian. Their aim is greatest happiness of the greatest number. By sacrificing their own happiness, they promote the happiness of their fellows.

Mill offers a line of arguments confirming the desirability of pleasure as the ultimate end. He says “... the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. (p. 288)

From here he proceeds to infer that because men desire their own happiness, happiness is desirable. He, however, admits the inability on his part to give a constructive proof for why happiness is desirable. He acknowledges:

No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. (p. 288)

For it is an indubitable fact that a person would not shriek away from any opportunity that assures him of some happiness of his own or of his fellow beings. It is a natural tendency in every sane individual to desire his own happiness and because the happiness of the individual is in a proper alignment with the happiness of others. Therefore, the individual by desiring happiness for himself desires happiness for all. Mill points out:

each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. (p. 289)

To corroborate the general happiness thesis Mill hands in the notion of sanctions. Sanctions induce in an agent the reason for doing a particular action. They are of two kinds- external and internal. External sanctions refer to such motives as the hope of winning the admiration and favour of others, or the fear of dislike or disfavour from others, accompanied by such feelings as sympathy and love for the fellow beings and reverence for God.

Internal sanctions invoke the feeling of duty within the agent. The agent is conscious that any delinquency on his part would cause him extreme pain or distress of mind. The external along with internal sanctions are enough to enforce morality within the mankind. Regard for the good of others, then, naturally comes to the agent. His demonstration of feelings for others encourages in others the same sense of sympathy and regard for him.

Both Bentham and Mill accept that a convincing proof for why general happiness is desired is not possible. The theological utilitarians however, provide a justification for the desirability of general happiness in the form of a third sanction – the will of God. They believe that God always wills and wishes the happiness of his creatures. His creatures, on their part, by pursuing general happiness as a duty awarded by God are conferred with everlasting happiness. This view is reconciliation between the two sanctions, that is, the factors like reward and punishment, and the sense of duty.

This line of thought is however not acceptable to Mill for he does not wish to entertain the idea of God within this set up. Mill says:



It is pleasure rather than a transcendent principle that goads men to action, and when this is lacking, so is the motivation. (McGill. p.131)

Mill believes that the assertion that happiness and the absence of unhappiness are the only desirable ends and that all other things that are desired in due course of time are desired for the sake of happiness raises some doubts. For there are certain things, besides happiness, that are desired for their own sake, for example, virtue, money and fame.

Everything that we desire as a means to happiness is also a part of happiness. Virtue, for example, is a good in itself, desired for its own sake. But its importance lies in that it provides a pervading influence on the general happiness. It is to be pursued disinterestedly, only then can it accord with a fitting result.

Money, also is a component of happiness. Although it is desired as a means to satisfy our needs yet there is a strong tendency in people to love it for its own sake. As is said the more you have money, the more you get addicted to it. People cannot imagine being happy without it for “it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual’s conception of happiness.” (Mill p.289) What is initially desired as a means to happiness becomes an indispensable part of it because people begin to identify their happiness with the possession of that which they desire, and its non-possession would give them pain.

These ingredients of happiness are many and they are all desired for their own sake but only in so far as they are subservient to happiness. For Mill “Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole and these are some of its parts.” (p.291)

5. CONCLUSION

Mill is often accused of not being a thorough utilitarian. His arguments reflect his tendency towards Platonic and Aristotelian standpoints. Mill’s example of a satisfied pig was extended long before by Plato who suggested that nobody would ever want to choose the pleasures of an Oyster, whatever the pleasure may be. The preference of intellectual pleasures to those of the body along with the importance of virtue in the moral conduct is quite Aristotelian. Again, Mill follows Aristotle when he says, “the ingredients of happiness are various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate.” (pp. 289-90) The two important takeaways from Mill’s utilitarianism are: one, it is more in tune with our common-sense intuitions; two, it is an impartial theory as it incorporates each person’s happiness and considers their likes and dislikes without discrimination.

Mill remains committed to ‘the ends justify the means’ slogan but warns people against pursuing wrong goals as well as wrong notions of the good.

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