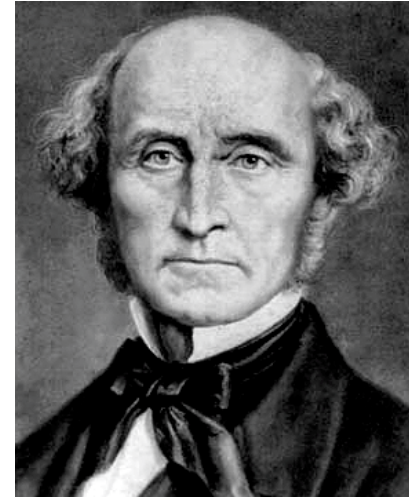


MILL



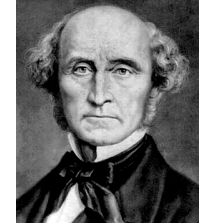
The principle of utility determines the rightness of acts (or rules of action?) by their effect on the total happiness.



Metaethical starting points

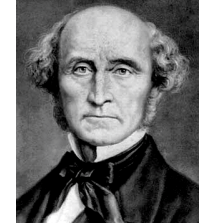
- **Mill begins with a few comments on [what later was termed] metaethics, claiming that ethics and other (“practical”) theories concerning action run in the reverse order from scientific theory.**
 - **The general principles have to come first, rather than being derived from particular observations (i.e. judgments of cases), since we need some way of deciding cases consistently.**
 - **What determines rules of action must be the ultimate end of action – which he’ll go on to identify with happiness.**
 - **He notes that the *ultimate* end of action isn’t subject to proof in the strict sense, since the only way of justifying an end (= goal) is as a means to some further end. But he’ll later give considerations in its favor (ch. 4).**

Mill's principle of utility



- “[A]ctions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness,” with happiness understood roughly as “pleasure and the absence of pain” (p. 55).
- Its simplest interpretation takes “tend” as referring to the causal tendencies of specific acts and hence their *actual* (vs. probable) consequences – though some say Mill later applies it to general rules or types of act (ch. 5).
- Mill identifies the principle with Bentham’s “Greatest Happiness Principle,” understood as referring to *total* happiness (vs. the number of people made happy) and extending to all “sentient beings” (= beings capable of feeling pleasure or pain), including animals.
 - But unlike Bentham, Mill doesn’t take happiness just as a mathematical sum of pleasures minus pains, differing only on quantitative measures like intensity and duration. (Cf. Bentham’s “hedonic calculus.”)
 - Pleasures of distinctively human faculties are also said to be superior in *quality* to pleasures of the sort we share with animals – as determined by those who’ve experienced (and are still capable of experiencing) both sorts of pleasure.

Responses to misunderstandings



□ of hedonism:

- pleasure an aim worthy of swine (pp. 55ff.). Higher, distinctively human, pleasures outweigh mere bodily pleasures shared with swine.
- happiness an inappropriate aim (pp. 59ff.). The aim isn't ecstasy but just to minimize pain and achieve a comfortable mix of pleasures. Total happiness, not just one's own, is the standard of right action (vs. motive of the virtuous agent).

□ of utilitarianism ["proper"]:

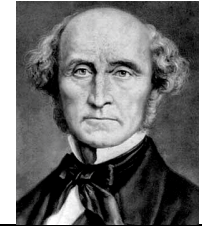
- leaves no room for beauty, ornament, amusement (p. 54). popular misconception
- a "godless" doctrine (p. 68). Spells out what a benevolent God would want.
- undercuts "principled" adherence to rules (pp. 68ff.): Rule-breaking is almost always forbidden because of harmful side-effects. Established rules sum up the general tendencies of acts to promote utility. We should limit direct appeal to the principle of utility to cases where the rules conflict.



Acts vs. motives

- **Mill holds that we need to settle first which acts are right before raising questions about the worth of persons or their motives.**
- **How can we recognize virtuous persons or motives, except by the acts they do or lead to?**
- **In footnote [B], in response to a counterexample -- of saving someone from drowning just in order to torture him – he distinguishes between motives and intentions.**
- **Intentions are really *part* of the act being judged – what one is trying to do -- not a further aim the one hopes to achieve by doing it, i.e. a motive.**

Motivating utilitarian morality



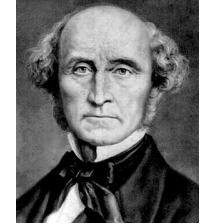
- **Mill considers a further objection in ch. 3: that people won't be motivated by the principle of utility unless they happen to care about promoting the total happiness (as very few people do).**

- **Mill replies that motivating action on any moral system, not just utilitarianism, depends on two kinds of “sanctions” (= punishments for wrong action), that need to be set up or modified by society.**
 - *external*: legal or divine punishment, social disapproval, etc.

 - *internal*: feelings of self-reproach, i.e. conscience, or social alienation

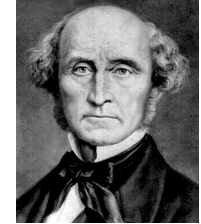
- **Ultimately these all turn on subjective feelings (e.g. fear of punishment), and our social feelings provide a natural basis for concern with the total happiness in the desire we have for unity with others. This just needs to be widened beyond one's family and friends by education.**

Mill's “proof”



- In ch. 4 Mill grants that a principle about ultimate ends is really no more capable of proof than are claims about the bases of empirical knowledge, i.e. about immediate sense experience.
- But we can take desire as analogous to sensation and use it as the basis for a two-stage argument [for the hedonistic aspect of Mill's view]:
 1. Happiness is desirable [= good, an end]: established by the fact that we desire it
 2. Nothing other than happiness is desirable: anything else is originally desired only as a means to happiness – or, later, as part of it, as in the case of virtue and other, less admirable aims (e.g., money, power) that eventually come to be valued for their own sake, as *ingredients* of happiness.
- Mill even goes on to claim that “desirable” and “pleasant” can be seen to be names for the same idea. On two further assumptions – that the total happiness must be desirable for everyone taken together, and that the end for which we act is the criterion of right action – this yields an argument for Mill's utilitarianism.

Twentieth-century objections



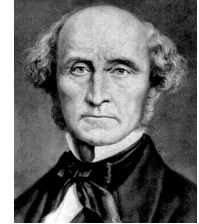
□ to hedonism

- **from interpersonal comparisons**: It's impossible to measure one person's pleasure or pain against another's.
- **from objective good**: We also care about whether our pleasurable experiences correspond to reality (Nozick's "experience machine").

□ to utilitarianism ["proper"]

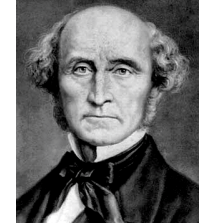
- **from justice**: Utilitarianism allows for "interpersonal trade-offs," or the sacrifice of some to the total good (cf., e.g., trolley cases, "torture," distribution of wealth).
- **from moral emotion**: Utilitarianism would involve too much detachment from emotions essential to moral agency (Williams on "integrity").

Structure of ch. 5



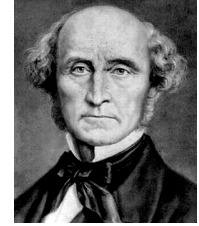
1. **Need to answer objection that response to injustice is a distinct feeling, not obviously explained by the Principle of Utility**
2. **Instances of injustice reviewed to find common feature; many details in dispute**
3. **Etymology reveals link to violation of (what ought to be) a law**
4. **Criterion = deserving punishment, but that picks out a broader category: moral wrong (= violation of obligation)**
5. **Violation of obligation toward a specific person or persons = “perfect” obligation as further feature of injustice**
6. **Natural retaliatory feelings “moralized” only when motive of self-defense is broadened by sympathy**
7. **Principle of Utility needed to resolve conflicts in instances of injustice**

Moral wrong



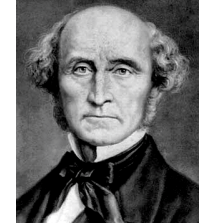
- **Mill argues that our sense of justice, which is based on the primitive urge to retaliate for harm, depends for its content and “binding” moral status on utilitarianism.**
- **His initial review of the types of things that count as unjust, along with etymology, reveals that they have in common reference to violation of a law, real or ideal. But it also brings out conflicting interpretations.**
- **He notes that an act is *morally wrong* (= a violation of moral obligation, or duty) only if it deserves punishment, at least by social disapproval or conscience.**
- **So some acts that fail to maximize the good may not really be wrong but just “inexpedient” – in the broader sense in which Mill uses the term here [as “non-optimal” = not the best].**

Injustice



- **Whether a wrong act counts as unjust depends on something further that justice adds to moral obligation:**
 - **Certain general rules that are essential to our basic security give us duties toward specific persons. Completely specified duties are known as “perfect” duties; the persons or groups toward whom we have such duties are said to have *rights*.**
 - **The particularly strong sense of obligation associated with justice (as opposed to generosity or benevolence, say) results from our natural retaliatory sentiments, but it becomes a moral sentiment of justice only when our urge toward self-defense is extended by sympathy to reflect concern for the social good.**
- **The upshot is that justice is explained by the principle of utility, but as applied to general *rules* rather than acts. However, Mill still says that the rules can be overridden in extreme circumstances, though we may not think of the result as a violation of justice [or even as wrong].**

Resolving conflicts



- Besides the fact that the primitive urge to retaliate needs to be “moralized” by reference to the social good, we also need to refer to the Principle of Utility to resolve conflicts between different conceptions of justice, as stressed in Mill’s initial discussion of types of injustice.
- We disagree, e.g., about what makes a system of punishment or of economic distribution or taxation just, but the only principle for resolving such conflicts is the principle of utility.
- [Later in our readings, Rawls will propose an alternative *set* of principles for cases involving economic justice. However, in “Two Concepts of Rules” (which I’ve put online) he argued that Mill’s view in ch. 5 can handle apparent counterexamples to utilitarian punishment (“telishment”) by applying the principle of utility *only* to rules.
- Unlike Mill, though, Rawls would limit exceptions to those actually specified in a complete statement of the rules, rather than just referring vaguely to extreme circumstances.]