

Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

In this work, taken from *Utilitarianism* (1861), Mill argues that the principle of utilitarianism is the fundamental principle by which we should make our moral decisions. The principle of utilitarianism states that we should always act to create the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, as per a disinterested spectator.

Vocabulary:

Epicureans:	philosophers who believed that pleasure was the goal of life
Stoics:	philosophers who believed in fixed natural laws and that man should remain indifferent to the external world, passions and desires
Gainsaid:	denied
Imputation:	when we attribute something, some quality, to some person
Inculcate:	to teach persistently and earnestly
Appellation:	an identifying name or title
Intrinsic:	belong to a thing by its very nature
Sustenance:	anything that sustains

Tribunal:	a court of justice
Suffrage:	the right to vote
Homogeneous:	of the same kind or nature
Heterogeneous:	of a different kind or nature
Enunciation:	pronouncement; clear declaration
Superfluous:	unimportant; unnecessary

Concepts:

Utilitarianism:
Happiness:
Pleasure:
Mental Pleasure:
Physical Pleasure:

Questions:

1. *Explain Mill's concept of utilitarianism.*
2. *How does Mill define happiness?*
3. *What are the three major differences between physical and mental pleasure?*
4. *What sort of proof does Mill use to justify utilitarianism?*

Utilitarianism

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, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded – namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, habitual dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler

object of desire and pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and groveling; as a doctrine worthy of only swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasure except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation. For if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conception of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do

not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoics, as well as Christians elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasure than to those of mere sensation. I must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former – that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. 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.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is placed so far above the other by those who are competently acquainted with both, even though knowing it to be attended with a great amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestioned fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both, do give a most marked preference to the higher faculties. Few human beings would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of the beast's pleasures. No intelligent human being would consent to be a fool. No educated person an ignoramus, no person

of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy. He is capable of more acute suffering and certainly accessible to it at more points than one of an inferior type. But in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness. We may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most, and to some the least, estimable feelings of which humankind are capable. We may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which the Stoics made a most effective means of inculcation. We may refer it to the love of power, love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it. But its most appropriate appellation is a

sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or another. In some, though by no means in all, this is in proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of their happiness that nothing conflicts with it other than a momentary object of desire.

Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness – that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior – confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness, and contentment. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied. A highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable. They will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question. The other party knows both sides.

It may be objected that many who are capable of the higher pleasures occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable, and this no less the case when the choice is between two bodily pleasures than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but also by mere want of sustenance. In the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the

society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity exercised. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes because they have not time nor opportunity for indulging them. They addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether anyone who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower. In all ages, many have failed to combine both.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend that there can be no appeal. On a question of which of two pleasures is the best to have, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both must be admitted as final. And if those qualified differ, then that of the majority must be admitted as final. And there needs to be less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasure, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of

quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the most intense of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure.

What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgments of the experienced? When therefore, those feelings and judgments declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable in kind, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

I dwell on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of utility or happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard. For that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness all together. And, if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its

nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier and the world in general is immensely better by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were sheer deduction from the benefit, the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

According to the greatest happiness principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. The test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This being according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality, which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human

Part V. Ethics

conduct, by the observation of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all humankind.

From John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 1861.