

Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism¹

Utilitarianism claims that the only thing that is good, and so the only thing that our actions and lives should aim at, is happiness. Why believe this, and how can we know what is good? In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill seeks to prove that utilitarianism is right about happiness being the only good. The proof has two stages. In the first stage, Mill argues that happiness is good. In the second stage, he argues that it is the only thing that is good.

STAGE 1: HAPPINESS IS GOOD

Mill argues that you can't strictly 'prove' that something is good or not. That is, it is not something that you can deduce from other premises. This is normal for 'first principles' in any area of knowledge, and a claim about what is ultimately good is a first principle in ethics. Nonetheless, we can give a reasoned argument about what is good.

First, some terminology. What is good is what we should aim at in our actions and lives. So what is good is an 'end' - the purpose - of our actions. Philosophers understand actions in terms of means and ends. Ends are why you do what you do; means are how you get it. So I might cross the street to post a letter. My end is posting the letter, my means is crossing the street. Now, of course, my posting a letter is also a means to an end, the end of communicating with someone. This, too, may be a means to an end. Perhaps I am asking them for a favour. So I cross the street in order to post the letter in order to ask someone a favour. What is the end of asking them for a favour? What am I ultimately aiming at?

What we should aim at is what is desirable, says Mill. So what he wants to show is, first, that happiness is desirable, and second, that only happiness is desirable. If he is right, then the answer to our previous question about why I am asking for a favour will be 'happiness'.

Since we can't deduce what is good, we have to appeal to evidence. Mill's argument that happiness is good has three parts.

1. 'The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it ... In like manner ... the sole evidence ... that something is desirable is that people do actually desire it'
2. 'No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person ... desires his own happiness.'
3. 'This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 220-5

person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons' Put more clearly, each person takes their own happiness to be good, and so, adding each person's happiness to that of others, the happiness of everyone - the general happiness - is good for people in general.

Clarifying the argument

G. E. Moore objected that Mill commits the fallacy of equivocation in this argument, confusing two meanings of a word. The word 'desirable' has two meanings. Its usual meaning is 'worthy of being desired'. Anything desirable in this sense is good. This is the sense it has in (2), since Mill is arguing that the general happiness is good. But another meaning could be 'capable of being desired'. To discover what is capable of being desired, look at what people desire. This is the sense it has in (1), it seems, since Mill links what is desirable to what people desire. But what people actually desire is not the same as what is worthy of being desired (good). People want all sorts of rubbish! Mill has assumed that what people desire just is what is good; he hasn't spotted that these are distinct meanings of 'desirable'.

But Moore's objection misinterprets Mill's argument. Mill is asking 'What evidence is there for thinking that something is worthy of being desired?' He argues that people in general desire happiness. Unless people in general desire what is not worth desiring, this looks like good evidence that happiness is desirable. Is there anything that everyone wants that is not worth wanting? If we look at what people agree upon in what they desire, we will find evidence of what is worth desiring. Everyone wants happiness, so it is reasonable to infer that happiness is desirable (good).

Other philosophers have objected that Mill commits the fallacy of composition in (3). This is a fallacy of inferring that because some part has a property, the whole of which it is a part also has that property. Mill seems to be saying that because each person desires their own happiness, everybody desires everybody's happiness (the general happiness). But this doesn't follow. For example, suppose that every girl loves a sailor (substitute 'own happiness'). From the fact that for each girl, there is some sailor that she loves, we cannot infer that there is one sailor (substitute 'general happiness') which every girl loves.

But this is also a misinterpretation of Mill's argument. At no point does Mill feel that he needs to defend the idea of impartiality in ethics. He simply assumes that ethics is concerned with what is good in general. He is not trying to infer that we ought to be concerned for others' happiness. Having argued that happiness is good, it follows from his assumption that ethics is impartial that we should be concerned with the general happiness.

STAGE 2: ONLY HAPPINESS IS GOOD

The claim that happiness is good is relatively uncontroversial. It is much more controversial to claim that it is the only good. Mill must argue that everything of value - truth, beauty, freedom, etc. - derives its value from happiness.

Now if people only ever desired happiness, he could use the previous argument to show that happiness is the only good. But clearly, people desire many different things. Of course, we may desire many things as a means to happiness, such as buying a nice house or having a good job. But it isn't obvious that everything we desire is a means to happiness. For example, we want truth (being in touch with reality) and not because it has some psychological effect on us. So going by the evidence, many different things, and not only happiness, are good.

Mill's response is to clarify further what happiness is. Happiness has many 'ingredients', such as truth and freedom, and each ingredient is desirable in itself. We can explain this in terms of a distinction between 'external means' and 'constitutive means' to an end. We usually think of the relation between means and end as an instrumental relation; i.e. that performing the means achieves the further, independent end. Think about having a good holiday. Suppose you have to get up very early in order to catch the plane. You do this in order to have a good holiday, but it isn't part of having a good holiday. Getting up early is an external means to the end. But there is also another relation between means and ends, a constitutive relation. Later on, you are lying on the beach in the sun, listening to your favourite music. Are you doing this 'in order' to have a good holiday? Not in the same sense. This just is having a good holiday at the moment. Lying on the beach is a constitutive means to the end of having a good holiday. Having a good holiday is not something 'further' or additional that you achieve by lying on the beach. In these circumstances, here and now, it is what 'having a good holiday' amounts to.

The same applies to happiness, Mill argues. For example, when someone desires to know the truth 'for its own sake', their knowing the truth doesn't cause their happiness as some further and separate thing. Rather, in this situation, their happiness consists in their knowing the truth. Knowing the truth for its own sake is part of happiness for them. So, Mill claims, whatever we desire for its own sake is part of what happiness is, for us.

Why believe this? Mill argues that to desire something just is to find it pleasant. It is, he says, 'physically and metaphysically impossible' to desire something that you don't think is a pleasure. As pleasure is happiness, we only desire happiness, and happiness is the only good.

But is Mill right about the relation between pleasure and happiness? Preference utilitarianism allows that, if we understand pleasure as a psychological state (which we should), we can desire something without desiring it 'as pleasant'. What we desire is part of our happiness because happiness is the satisfaction of desires, not because happiness is pleasure which is caused by the satisfaction of desires. J.J.C. Smart adds an evaluative element to happiness. For example, we are made happy by knowing the truth because we approve of knowing the truth, and not simply because it brings us pleasure (in the sense of contentment).