

NOTES ON JOHN STUART MILL'S *UTILITARIANISM*

1. THE THEORY

[257,288] The aim of all moral actions is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, which means maximising pleasure and minimising pain. Happiness is the only thing desirable as an end, but this fact cannot be proved.

[259] Human beings are made happiest by 'higher' pleasures, which are the ones preferred by people who have wide experience.

[263] The happiness of "the whole sentient creation", including animals, must be taken into account.

[319] One person's happiness, including that of the agent, counts for exactly as much as another's.

2. OBJECTIONS DEALT WITH BY MILL

a) [258] **The theory is "mean and grovelling" because it advocates the pursuit of squalid pleasure.**

Answer: [259,261] It isn't squalid if it aims at higher pleasures, as agreed by experienced people.

b) [260-61] **People tend to prefer the 'lower' pleasures, especially as they grow older.**

Answer: [261] People may opt for such pleasures through laziness, but they still know that they are inferior pleasures.

c) [262] **A noble character is usually thought morally preferable to happiness.**

Answer: [262] Noble people make others happier, even if they themselves are not happy.

d) [263] **Happiness is unattainable for human beings.**

Answer: [264-5] A "life of rapture" is not the target, but normal reasonable happiness, and mental cultivation and social progress can extend that to most people.

e) [263] **Renunciation and self-sacrifice are the basis of moral goodness, not happiness.**

Answer: [267] We only value sacrifice because it benefits other people. We do not admire futile sacrifice.

f) [269] **The theory expects too much of people.**

Answer: [269] Ethics sets out our duties, but it doesn't expect us to do nothing except our duties.

g) [270] **The theory seems to ignore the motives of people's actions, and only thinks of the consequences.**

Answer: [270] Motives are important in judging the agent, but not the action; as good deed is good even if the motive is bad, and vice versa.

h) [273] **The theory is sometimes thought to be a "godless doctrine".**

Answer: [273] If God wants our happiness, then utilitarianism is doing His will. And if we have to interpret the Christian message, the theory is a reasonable attempt at the interpretation.

i) [275] **There isn't time in life to calculate all the consequences of an action.**

Answer: [275] Evolution and experience have taught us to think fast about consequences, and we tend to agree with one another in our predictions.

j) [277] **People will tend to exempt themselves when any sacrifices are needed for the greater good.**

Answer: [277] That doesn't alter the principle of what they *ought* to do.

k) [279] **Why should we feel any obligation to make other people happy?**

Answer: [279] The feeling of obligation accompanies whatever is the customary morality, which might be utilitarianism, or some other theory. The pressure can be external (God or public opinion) or internal (duty or conscience). [284] Anything can be made to appear a duty.

l) [283] **Maybe morality is found in our innate intuitions.**

Answer: [283] If so, maybe our moral intuitions tell us to make other people happy. [284] We are, after all, naturally sociable animals.

m) [289] **Virtue is the aim of morality, not happiness.**

Answer: [292] Virtue can be loved as part of happiness, as well as being a means to happiness. [290] Money is similar.

n) [293] **We may desire pleasure, but the will directs us at other things.**

Answer: [294] What we will originates in our desires, though it may become mere habit after a while. The will enables us to pursue our desires in a steady way.

o) [296] **Morality is to be found in our natural sense of justice, not in our desire for pleasure.**

Answer: [306] Justice arises if rights are a stake as well as duties. Justice arises from our natural feelings of self-defence and sympathy for others. [309] If people have rights then society should defend them by means of punishment. [310] The reason for this is general security and happiness. [316] Justice is a major virtue because it is crucial to happiness.