

Mill on Utilitarianism and Liberty

1 Utilitarianism

“By the principle of utility is meant that principle which 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.”¹

“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.”²

“By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct.”³

2 What you expect a utilitarian to say about liberty

the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is ~~self-protection~~ *producing the greatest amount of happiness on the whole*. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is ~~to prevent harm to others~~ *to produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole*.

¹ Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (1789, revised 1823) ch. 1, §11.

² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, (1859) ch. 2, par. 2.

³ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*. Seventh edition. (1907) Bk. 4 Ch. 1 Sec. 1 Para. 2.

3 What Mill did say: the Harm Principle

The Harm Principle

paternalism

moralism

merely self-regarding acts

“The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him, must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”⁴

⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 1, par. 9