Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

Handout 6

Utilitarianism: Mill II

Principle of impartiality. Mill emphasises the universal nature of utilitarianism. A person must act as if he were a disinterested (that is, divested of his own self-interest) and impartial spectator. This, he thinks, will have immediate socio-political consequences: people should think of themselves as ordinary members of a larger community, and education will proceed accordingly.

A standard too high? But can we reasonably expect people to care for everyone in the vicinity indifferently? Indeed, it seems that people have attachments to certain groups of people stronger than to other groups. We care about our immediate family more than we care about our acquaintances, and we care about our acquaintances more than we care about people on another continent. To think otherwise, and to act in a way that eliminates these preferences, is to impose an impossibly high standard on normal humans.

Mill's response: to insist on the priority of consequences. Motives are not crucial in evaluating the value of action. It is the consequences that we examine to establish the moral worth of action. So an action can be done out of a selfish (or otherwise non-impartial) motive, but still produce a good (='happy') outcomes. Then it is still counted as good, regardless of the motive. (But see the footnote below.)

Question 1. Is it coherent to evaluate an action while ignoring the agent's motives?

An obsessive humanitarian? Another objection is that, according to the impartiality principle, a moral person is required to care about a whole world, rather than about his own career, his family etc. For example, a student should not go to the university to pursue a selfish goal of advancing his career. He rather must contribute to fighting poverty in Africa (or at least, he must choose occupation that will help fight poverty in Africa). But this requirement seems harsh and unreasonable.

Mill's response: an important concession. We must distinguish between people in position of power (political, financial etc.) and ordinary people. Only the first group of people should obey the impartiality principle. Thus a government official who is not impartial is exactly the one who is corrupt. We rightly blame him for corruption. But ordinary people are exempt from being strictly impartial.

Question 2. How convincing is it to exempt ordinary people from being impartial? What implications does Mill's concession have for utilitarianism?

Coldness of dispositions. Suppose that Frank visits his sick grandmother. He brings her a cake. The grandmother is touched. She praises Frank for being so considerate. Frank is bemused: he replies that he does not care about *her* specifically. Being a good utilitarian, he cares about the overall happiness in the world. Bringing a cake was merely a small step in increasing happiness. The grandmother begins to weep…

The objection is that utilitarianism does not cultivate feelings of love and compassion, making agents mere instruments in promoting a grand project of overall happiness. Mill's response about private/public sphere should be applicable here. His other response is also straightforward: the objection is related to the estimation of character. Utilitarianism is all about the estimation of actions. Character is important only to the extent it increases the chances of a good action. Nothing, then, was wrong with Frank's action, save for his candid explanation (he should have lied!). And the third response is that this sort of problem is a small nuisance. After all, the grandmother did get her cake, while so many other grandmothers did not.

Computational complexity. Morality is a practical enterprise. A moral theory must produce a rule of action possible to follow. Consequentialism (an ingredient of utilitarianism—see our earlier discussion) places the value of action in its consequences. Suppose I wish to be moral. Then, in performing an action, I am supposed to calculate its consequences. But those consequences will be far too complex to calculate. How am I supposed to reach a decision? Of course, *after* the fact I may be able to evaluate the action, though even then it may be 'too early to tell' whether it were good or bad. In any event, from the point of view of the agent *before* the action the consequences are opaque. Then the agent will be unable to act, locked in an endless calculation.

A variation on this objection: consequences are influenced by accidental circumstances beyond our control. I help an old lady to cross the street. A meteorite comes down and kills her. Did I do something good? Remember that we can have no recourse to my motives. And if we look at the net results of my action, they are not so good. Had I not tried to help her, she would have survived.

Question 3. Would I be held responsible for the old lady's death? Why?

Subordinate principles. Mill's response is highly significant. He argues that 'tendencies of actions' have been known to us in the long experience of history. We do not begin to calculate them anew with each action. Those tendencies now emerge as 'subordinate principles', while the principle of utility becomes the 'fundamental principle of morality'. In our daily life we are supposed to be guided by subordinate principles, and thus *not* to engage in utilitarian calculations.

Question 4. Does the theory of subordinate principles signify a major pullback from the doctrine of utilitarianism?

Question 5. What is the role of common sense in moral thinking if the theory of subordinate principles is taken on board?

The following footnote occurs in the paragraph beginning "The objectors to utilitarianism…" after the sentence "He who saves…" (497):

> An opponent, whose intellectual and moral fairness it is a pleasure to acknowledge (the Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies), has objected to this passsage, saying, 'Surely the Tightness or wrongness of saving a man from drowning does depend very much upon the motive with which it is done. Suppose that a tyrant, when his enemy jumped into the sea to escape from him, saved him from drowning simply in order that he might inflict upon him more exquisite tortures, would it tend to clearness to speak of that rescue as "a morally right action?" Or suppose again, according to one of the stock illustrations of ethical inquiries, that a man betrayed a trust received from a friend, because the discharge of it would fatally injure that friend himself or some one belonging to him, would utilitarianism compel one to call the betrayal 'a crime' as much as if it had been done from the meanest motive?'
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> (1) I submit, that he who saves another from drowning in order to kill him by torture afterwards, does not differ only in motive from him who does the same thing from duty or benevolence; the act itself is different. (2) The rescue of the man is, in the case supposed, only the necessary first step of an act far more atrocious than leaving him to drown would have been. (3) Had Mr. Davies said, 'The rightness or wrongness of saving a man from drowning does depend very much'—not upon the motive, but—'upon the *intention*', no utilitarian would have differed from him. (4) Mr. Davies, by an oversight too common not to be quite venial, has in this case confounded the very different ideas of Motive and Intention. (5) There is no point

which utilitarian thinkers (and Bentham pre-eminently) have taken more pains to illustrate than this. (6) The morality of the action depends entirely upon the intention—that is, upon what the agent *wills to do*. (7) But the motive, that is, the feeling that makes him will so to do, when it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality: though it makes a great difference in our moral estimation of the agent, especially if it indicates a good or bad habitual *disposition*—a bent of character from which useful, or from which hurtful actions are likely to arise.

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