

Paper 3, Option 2.2

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A Complete “Proof” of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism fundamentally comes down to the outcomes of actions and their effects on “general happiness.” Mill’s proof outlines the reasons why “general happiness” provides the standard to base the moral worth of any action. Although the reasons given are fairly complete and accurate, several of his arguments contain flaws. Despite these flaws, “general happiness” is what everyone should be striving to increase, not only for the betterment of society as a whole but for their personal happiness as well.

Part 1. Although Mill mentions that there is no proof for utilitarianism, because it is an ethics of ultimate ends, he does give a “proof” consisting of arguments for why utilitarianism should be followed. Mill’s “proof” of utilitarianism consists of six arguments.

1. The evidence that happiness “is desirable is that people do actually desire it” (Mill, pg 347).

By taking this stance, Mill seems to be saying that a good life is a happy life; that happiness is not only desired, but ought to be desired. If this statement is true then what we want to do will coincide exactly with what we ought to do (make ourselves happy). Mill, by acknowledging that people will almost never act out of a perfect sense of moral duty as stated by Kant, founded his moral ethics on something common to everyone, their desire for their own

happiness. This desire for one's own happiness is exactly where argument number two comes into play.

2. Everyone desires their own happiness.

Unlike argument number one, argument number two is supported by vast amounts of evidence from Mill's own life, not to mention our own. Mill then states that "No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person ... desires his own happiness" (Mill, pg 347). This sets the ground work for argument number three which is the conclusion from arguments one and two.

3. Everyone desires the "general happiness."

The term "general happiness" is not specifically defined by Mill but might be interpreted as follows; if we take a group of people (say all of humanity) and call them "everyone" and take the happiness of each person in this group and add them all together and call this the "general happiness" then by each person desiring their own happiness it can be said that *everyone desires the general happiness*. Mill himself alludes to this interpretation by saying that "each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons" (Mill pg 347). This argument seems to logically follow from the previous two. The fourth argument then shows the overwhelming influence that happiness plays in our lives.

4. All things desired are simply means to happiness or are a part of it.

This can also be stated as follows: happiness is the one and only thing desired for its own sake. Mill gives a number of examples to show the accuracy of this statement. The virtues are used as good examples of things which should be desired for their own sake but Mill even shows that virtues are desirable because of the integral part they play in promoting the "general

happiness.” This implies that even virtues should be practiced only so long as they increase the “general happiness.” Using arguments three and four, the fifth argument follows logically.

5. The *only* thing that is desired is happiness.

Through examples Mills shows that happiness, as it is used in argument five, refers to the individual happiness of the person combined with the happiness of other people this action effects i.e. the “general happiness.” The sixth and final argument considers actual moral behavior.

6. The only test for the moral worth of an action is the action’s tendency to promote the “general happiness.”

This statement flows from the previous arguments; one ought to seek happiness, therefore one ought to seek the “general happiness,” therefore one ought to act to increase the “general happiness.” This argument also shows why virtues are usually so valuable to a society; virtues are ideals which promote the “general happiness” very efficiently.

Part 2. Despite the sound footing that Mill gives for utilitarianism, there are two logical fallacies present in two of his arguments. In fact the first flaw is in the very first argument, that happiness is desirable because it is desired. This sort of reasoning is not only circular in nature, but it does not even give a valid reason for why happiness ought to be desired. Mill notes this contradiction by saying that whether or not happiness should be desired is something that cannot be proven and simply assumes it to be the case (Mill, pg 346). In reality though, this argument is assuming an “ought” from an “is,” and should have been stated as follows:

1. Happiness is worth desiring.

By stating the first argument in this way, the naturalistic fallacy is avoided. Individuals can of course reconcile this argument with their daily lives and in general find this form of the

argument to be true (or at least very much hope that it is true). This reformulated argument, as Mill said, cannot be proven true, but at least it is now devoid of logical fallacies.

The next logical fallacy is found in the third argument (everyone desires the “general happiness”). When interpreted literally this statement holds true as seen in the following example. The happiness of one is desired by one, the happiness of three is desired by three, and the happiness of all is desired by all. This literal translation adds nothing to Mill’s argument but just adds more people. Because of this fact, Mill’s third argument seems to really be saying the following: each person *individually* desires the “general happiness.”

Although this reformulation of the third statement adds clarity to what Mill is implying, it is also clearly wrong. People do immoral acts (and do them quite frequently) by valuing their own happiness over the “general happiness.” This is precisely why theft, cheating, and lying are so pervasive; it provides an individual momentary happiness at the cost of the “general happiness.” This is exactly where an “ought” statement should come into play: each person individually *ought* to desire the “general happiness.” This ought statement here is needed because many people don’t do what will bring the most “general happiness,” because they believe it will not make them happy. In other words the “general happiness” and the individual or personal happiness may seem to be at odds with one another. However, this is precisely where education and reform can take place which Mill strongly advocates.

Mill notes that with the proper education and counseling the “general happiness” can be shown to tie into our own individual happiness and this tie can be strengthened. Because our personal happiness is tied to the “general happiness” the third argument should be formed entirely differently.

3. The desire for the “general happiness” brings one the most individual happiness.

This is done as Mill’s states by training a person to feel guilt (an inner pain) when doing wrong and happiness when doing right, where right and wrong are defined in terms of their outcome on the “general happiness.” This version of the third argument almost needs an “ought” in it, but it can be shown that an “ought” is not needed because our happiness as individuals *is* tied to the happiness of others or more generally to the “general happiness.” For example, the happiest times in my life (and the same could be said for almost all parents) are when my children are very happy. The saying “when momma isn’t happy, then nobody’s happy” comes to mind for family dynamics. Even when we are helping others indirectly, such as giving money to the Red Cross, (almost the very essence of increasing the general happiness) we feel a sense of pleasure and happiness ourselves. Although this tying of “general happiness” to personal happiness may be artificially created in part by society, it is also an undeniable fact about our humanity and is part of what makes us human. Whether we like it or not the “general happiness” is inevitably tied to our own, and (as Mill advocates) through the proper education and training we realize this fact. With these two altered arguments the conclusion in argument six still holds true; one ought to seek personal happiness, seeking the “general happiness” brings one the most individual happiness, therefore one should always act to increase the “general happiness.”

Through the reformulation of the first and third arguments, the foundation of moral actions, as the effect these actions have on the “general happiness,” is shown to be without any inherent flaws. The first argument (happiness is worth desiring) still cannot be proven true but it is at least worthy of consideration. The third argument (the desire for the “general happiness” brings one the most individual happiness) can be shown accurate through empirical means.

Although trained in part, the connection between personal happiness and the “general happiness” is a trait inherent to all human beings.

References (MLA 2004 Referencing Standards)

Mill, John Stuart. “Utilitarianism.” Trans. James Ellington. Morality and the Good Life. Ed. Robert Solomon. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004. 346-351.