

UTILITARIANISM (J. S. MILL)

Mill's theory offers the following responses to the challenges we have seen to moral philosophy:

To the Challenge from Prudence: The end that we should have in mind when making our moral decisions is the cultivation of happiness for the greatest possible number of people. It's good to focus on happiness, but we must remember that the goal is the *maximization of happiness for as many people as possible*, and not necessarily our own. Hopefully we'll be able to benefit ourselves by acting rightly. Even if I spend all of my efforts helping others, however, in the ideal scenario I will be benefited by the efforts of others.

To Nietzsche's Challenge: When we think about it, pleasure and the freedom from pain (specified carefully) are the only things that are desirable as ends in themselves. The only reason I would want anything would be for its contribution to my pleasure or freedom from pain. This is the basis of the utilitarian moral system, and it is something that we observe in all sorts of animals, not just in humans. It's conceivable, then, that our propensity toward maximizing pleasure is innate, and not handed down to us arbitrarily.

To Cultural/Moral Relativism: There is a fact of the matter about what is the best possible state of affairs (best possible distribution of happiness) for the world. It may involve different practices in different parts of the globe, but notice that *any* practice is right which promotes the maximum possible happiness. Using the utilitarian criteria for determining the rightness of an act, it is conceivable that the same type of act could be right in one part of the world and wrong in another. We can explain this away by appealing the states of affairs resulting from the two acts.

Mill's theory faces the following potential problems:

1. The imperative to maximize happiness whenever possible is too strict. There are many instances where I could create more happiness by doing act *a* rather than act *b*, but where act *b* is still morally permissible. For instance, I could buy milk for two families in Africa with the ten dollars I spend on a movie ticket. But it's crazy to think that I'm doing something *wrong* every time I go to the movies.
2. Sometimes maximizing happiness seems more than just *right*. Suppose I jump on a hand grenade to save four of my fellow soldiers in battle, and get killed in the process. What I did wasn't just *right*, but was *above the call of duty*. But since utilitarianism says that the only right acts are the ones that maximize happiness, Mill can't acknowledge the heroism of my act. He has to say that it was the only right thing to do, and that sounds strange.
3. How are we supposed to calculate the utility for any given situation? We can't predict the future, and even if we could, there are so many factors to most situations that it seems impossible for us to ever have a good idea of what the best possible consequence will be.
4. Utilitarianism seems to require us to do things that are not obviously morally permissible. I can sometimes increase the overall happiness in the world by doing awful things (stealing, murdering, lying, etc.) Moral theories should not condone this sort of behavior.