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John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a British philosopher, economist, moral and political theorist, and administrator. Being one of the most influential English-speaking ethicists of the nineteenth century, Mill had views that are not entirely original, as his father, James Mill incorporated Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism into his son's education. However, even if Mill's essay on utilitarianism was not the first, it is "today the most widely read exposition of its subject" (Mill). Although people hold different opinions about reasons for the popularity of Mill's work *Utilitarianism*, its popularity must be based on its combination of brevity and breadth. As Fred Wilson puts it, "he gave a new depth, and his formulations were sufficiently articulate to gain for them a continuing influence among a broad public", in order to "develop a positive view of the universe and the place of humans in it, one which contributes to the progress of human knowledge, individual freedom and human well-being"(Wilson).

John Stuart Mill was the eldest son of James Mill, a Scotsman who aimed to further the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. Under Bentham's influence from James Mill, the young Mill began his study of Greek at the age of three, Latin at eight, and subsequently did extensive work in many areas, including philosophy, logic, mathematics, history and the classics. As Mill himself put it in *Utilitarianism*,

A cultivated mind – I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been

taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties – finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it: in the objects of nature, the achievements of arts, the imaginations of poetry, and their prospects in the future. (page)

Naturally, one would expect his writings to cover impressive variety of diverse areas. His works are still studied for their insight into various fields, including ethical theory.

According to utilitarianism, we should always act in order to maximize the overall happiness of everybody. However, it seems practically difficult to know what will maximize the overall happiness. This is because to decide what will maximize the overall happiness, we need to have enough information, which includes the following: who will be affected by our action; what effects of our action will be on those people; how happy or unhappy will those people be because of our action. Although we tend to gather as much information as possible before we evaluate the overall happiness, it is usually impossible to have enough detailed information to judge which action will maximize the overall happiness in the real world.

In addition to practical difficulties, human beings also encounter moral difficulties. Different people may have different opinions about the moral rightness of the same action, and the same action might be judged differently under different situations. For instance, lying seems to be wrong most of the time, but lying can sometimes bring more overall happiness than its alternative.

In response to those two objections of practical and moral difficulties, Mill creates a new connection to join these two seemingly distinct subjects. Mill claims that when we are trying to gather information for judging what maximizes the overall happiness, it is

possible for us to refer to past experiences and thus dramatically reduce time and effort in gathering information. Once we regard our past experiences as a reliable guide to gather information in new situations, we realize that our past experiences can help us solve the moral difficulties as well, especially when we have situations which are similar to past experiences.

Though Mill's response is inspiring, it might still seem unconvincing to the moral objection. For instance, from past experiences, we agree that the avoidance of lying usually does maximize overall happiness. However, there still exist some cases that, at least seemingly, lying brings more overall happiness than avoiding lying. As a result, it seems that there will be some cases where the utility principle of overall happiness will lead to something essentially wrong.

In this situation, Mill replies that although those cases seem to have some beneficial consequences, they are also likely to have some hidden but harmful features. For instance, in response to lying,

“it would often be expedient...to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth does that much toward weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion...we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule such transcendent expediency, is not expedient.”(Mill)

In this sense, it is clear that lying itself is not morally desirable since it weakens the trust between human beings.

Although Mill's response to the above objections seems to be plausible, there still remain some issues that may be hard for his works to address. For instance, with the above arguments, it seems that people should always act to maximize the overall happiness. Meanwhile, these arguments also imply that those whose actions do not bring the maximum of overall happiness should be blamed. To avoid this extreme, it is important for utilitarians to distinguish among rightness, wrongness, and obligations. Besides, people always tend to divide happiness into different levels with different qualities, whereas it seems that utilitarianism only deals with the amount of happiness. In response to these questions, we need to examine Mill's definition of right and wrong.

Mill argues that right and wrong are not equivalent to what does and what does not maximize happiness. An act is called wrong only if "we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it", not merely because the act fails to maximize overall happiness (Mill). To be more specific, acts that are wrong only form a subset of all that fail to maximize the overall happiness (not all actions that fail to maximize overall happiness are wrong). In regard to the quality of happiness, Mill agrees that there is happiness of different qualities. However, he argues that the difference is because of kind, not of degree. Mental/Moral pleasures are higher compared to physical/sensual pleasures by kind, even if the former is of little degree compared to the latter. Therefore, the utility principle must be used to calculate a weighted sum of happiness. With the weighted sum of happiness, it is possible to be content with life even though dissatisfied: "As [Mill] himself suggested, better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig

satisfied. The pig may be satisfied, but Socrates' life, even with its dissatisfaction, is preferable”(Wilson).

As a follower of the early utilitarians, Mill had effectively given utilitarianism a deeper definition, as well as presented a briefer utilitarianism to the public. However, as Wilson puts it, utilitarianism is not a simplistic moral principle to be mechanically applied, it is a long term social project. The more human beings discover about this ethical topic, the more contributions it will bring to society.

Works Cited

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O	11	
C	15	
R	10	
P	9	
Total	45	very good