

Reading Guide #4

Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1-34)

1. Ayn Rand says that every moral theory must answer two questions:

a) what things count as good?

B) how should the good things be distributed?

According to Mill, how does utilitarianism answer each of these questions? (Please note that answering happiness for (a) is correct but not specific enough. In what, according to Mill does happiness consist? For (b), please find text to back up your assertion.)

2. Utility tables. Some utilitarians like to use "cost-benefit" tables to help figure out what to do. If a utilitarian is choosing between option A and option B, she puts option A in one column and option B in another. The Utilitarian then makes a row for each person whose happiness is affected by either decision and puts values down for the happiness of each person under each decision. She then sums up the total happiness of each column and chooses the option which has the most happiness.

For example: Suppose that I am deciding whether to indulge my desire to yell at the top of my lungs in the library (when it only has 4 patrons and a librarian in earshot). Option A = yell at top of lungs, Option B = refrain from yelling.

	Happiness of Person if I do A	Happiness of Person if I do B
Me	10	2
Library Patron #1	-1	1
Library Patron #2	-1	1
Library Patron #3	-1	1
Librarian	-5	1
Total	2	6

***Note that the numbers are just reasonable approximations of how happy each person would be under each option.

Complete a utility table for the following scenario: Megan is considering whether to come home for Christmas or go skiing with friends in Aspen. Although she has already promised her family to come home, she would prefer going with her friends. Use utilitarianism to help resolve Megan's problem. (Note: be sure to explain your answer. There is no one right answer here, and we will be mainly looking to see what sorts of considerations you use to support your point.)

3. Mill seems to think that all good things are pleasant and all pleasant things are good. Can you think of something that although its short term and long term consequences are pleasant, it is not good or something that is good but its short and long term consequences

are bad? (**Note:** 3 sorts of examples will NOT work here: 1) examples where the short term consequences are unpleasant but its goodness consists of long term pleasant consequences, eg getting a flu shot. Even though the shot is unpleasant, its goodness can still be spelled out in terms of long-term pleasure. I am looking for something that even though all of the consequences are unpleasant, it is still good. 2) examples where the short term consequences are pleasant but its badness consists in long term unpleasantness, eg, eating lots of cupcakes. Again, I am looking for something whose overall consequences are unpleasant but it is still good. 3) examples where the consequences are pleasant *for me* but unpleasant *for others* (or unpleasant for me but pleasant for others), e.g. stealing someone's computer. We want something whose goodness or badness can't be understood in terms of pleasures at all, either short term, long-term or the pleasures of others).

4. On page 8, Mill takes up the question of how we are to judge between different kinds of pleasures. Clearly, some people take skiing to be the highest kind of pleasure, some people take yoga to be the most pleasant thing in the world, and others take reading romance novels to be the pinnacle of fun. How have Mill's utilitarian predecessors (i.e. "Utilitarian writers in general") compared these different types of pleasures?

5. Use the distinctions from 4 to compare the pleasures of extreme skiing to the pleasures of playing bridge.

6. Mill departs slightly from his predecessors by saying that pleasure can be compared *qualitatively* as well as quantitatively. Suppose that pleasure of type X is qualitatively better than pleasure of type Y. How much of Y would it take to outweigh a small amount of X? Who, according to Mill, decides which types of pleasures are qualitatively superior to other kinds of pleasures?

7. One objection to utilitarianism (page 7-8) is that it places too much emphasis on pleasure. After all, if we lived for pleasure we would just spend all of our time eating and getting massages. Such a life, according to these objectors is fit only for swine. Mill says that it is not utilitarianism but these objectors who represent human nature in a degraded light. Explain Mill's point here.

8. In chapter 3, Mill considers a moral skeptic who says something like the following to herself: "I understand what utilitarianism is, but I don't understand why I should care about the pleasures of other people, especially when it means sacrificing my own pleasure." Mill says that there are two kinds of "sanctions" which can be used to answer such a skeptic: "internal sanctions" and "external sanctions". Give examples of each and explain how they are different.

9. If someone finds that she has no sympathy for her fellow human beings and will have no pangs of conscience when she commits a heinous act of murder, does Mill think that utilitarianism can be used to persuade her to do the right thing? (Page 29) Why, according to Mill, is utilitarianism unconcerned by this result?

