

## *Study Guide: John Stuart Mill's Ethics*

Mill's ethical theory Hedonic Utilitarianism, which is a form of consequentialism: The permissibility of actions is determined by examining their outcomes and comparing those outcomes with what would have happened if some other action had been performed.

Mill responds to Kant's criticism of consequentialist moral theories by saying that Kant confuses act evaluation and agent evaluation. (Kant argued that consequences should not be used in evaluating actions because we have inadequate control over consequences, and our moral obligations extend only so far as our abilities. Instead, Kant examines our motives to determine the permissibility of our actions.) Mill says that the examination of motives is appropriate for agent evaluation, but not act evaluation. Mill also points out that a morally good person could – with the best of motives – perform an impermissible action.

**Principle of Utility:** An action is permissible if and only if the consequences of that action are at least as good as those of any other action available to the agent.

- Alternative formulation: An action is permissible if and only if there is no other action available to the agent that would have had better consequences. (These two formulations are equivalent.)
- Moral theories that employ the Principle of Utility are called Utilitarian theories.
- Note that, according to the Principle of Utility, an action could have good consequences but still not be permissible (because some other action was available to the agent that would have had better consequences).
- Also, an action with bad consequences could still be permissible (if no other available action had better consequences).

**Hedonic Utilitarianism:** Mill's theory begins with the Principle of Utility, and then adds that the consequences that are of importance are happiness and unhappiness.

- Everyone's happiness is taken into account, and given equal weight.
- There is no time limit on consequences. *All* the happiness and unhappiness that result from an action must be taken into account, no matter how long it takes for these consequences to arise.
- Mill also says that it is better for happiness to be distributed among many people. The moral goal of our actions, he says, is to create "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."
- Note that when using this principle it is impossible to determine whether an action is permissible unless one compares the consequences of that action with the consequences of all the other actions the agent could have performed.

**Contrast with Jeremy Bentham:** Bentham, Mill's teacher, held a similar moral theory, but said that the consequences we should examine are pleasure and pain. Mill says that by examining happiness and unhappiness he is including a new factor: the intellectual component.

- For Bentham, the only things that could make one pleasure better than another (or one pain worse than another) were its intensity and its duration. Mill adds a new

dimension: the intellectual component. This has the result of making the pleasures and pains of animals count for much less.

**Comparison with Satisficing Consequentialism:** Mill says that for an action to be permissible it must have the *best* consequences. Satisficing consequentialism says that to be permissible its consequences have to be good enough.

- Satisficing consequentialism allows for more than one permissible action in many situations. Mill, by contrast, implies that there is usually only one permissible action available.
- Satisficing consequentialism allows for a distinction between permissible actions and supererogatory actions.
- Satisficing consequentialism allows for moral dilemmas (situations in which only two actions are available, and neither is morally permissible).

**Act vs. Rule Consequentialism:** Act consequentialist theories (e.g., the theories of Bentham and J.S. Mill) evaluate actions on a case-by-case basis. Rule consequentialist theories say that an action is permissible only if it is in accord with the relevant rules. Rules are selected so that following them will yield better consequences overall than would result from following any other rules.

### **Objections to Mill's Theory, and Replies to those Objections**

1. Mill's theory is impossible to use. In order to perform the calculations this theory requires, one would have to be able to make detailed predictions about the consequences of actions (and of alternatives to those actions). We are unable to do this, so we are unable to use Mill's theory to tell whether our actions are permissible. Any theory that is unusable is incorrect.
  - a. RESPONSE: These predictions are not as difficult as the objection suggests.
    - i. Problem: The predictions *are* very difficult.
  - b. RESPONSE: A theory can be correct even if it is unusable. It's purpose is to explain what makes actions permissible, and Mill's theory does that. It may be that human beings are not able to apply this theory, but that doesn't show that the theory is false.
2. Mill's theory ignores many morally important factors. Mill's theory, and indeed all forms of consequentialism, is *forward-looking*; that is, it considers only what happens *after* the action that is being evaluated, and pays no direct attention to anything that is part of the history of that action. This leaves out many important factors that an acceptable moral theory would include.
  - a. RESPONSE: These factors are taken into account indirectly, by considering the consequences of the action being evaluated.
    - i. Problem: It's not clear that this indirect approach will cover *all* of the morally relevant factors in an action's history.
    - ii. This indirect approach still seems to be considering the wrong *kind* of factors. E.g., It pays attention to the harmful consequences of not keeping a promise, but not to the fact that the act of promising is itself morally important.
3. Mill's theory allows for injustice. The actions that have the best consequences (and are therefore permissible) will sometimes be unjust. Thus, Mill's theory says

that some unjust actions are permissible, and any theory that says this must be mistaken.

- a. RESPONSE: Our obligation to act justly is defeasible. It is overridden when justice would lead to poorer consequences (for everyone, over the long term) than acting unjustly.

4. Mill's theory requires moral heroism. In insisting that we always do what has the best consequences for everyone, Mill is requiring us to avoid giving preference to ourselves and our loved ones. This might be morally heroic, but surely it is not morally required of us. Thus, Mill's theory is giving us the wrong results, and must be mistaken.

- a. SIDGWICK'S RESPONSE: One can give preference to oneself and one's loved ones, and still be acting in accordance with Mill's theory.

- i. To help someone, one must know about that person's needs, preferences, circumstances, etc. We know this about ourselves and our loved ones, but not about strangers. Therefore, we are best equipped to help ourselves and those we care about.

1. Problem: Aid agencies (e.g., Red Cross, World Vision) provide us with all the information we need to help strangers.

- ii. To help someone, we must have some sort of contact with that person. We have regular contact with our loved ones, but not with strangers. Therefore, we are best equipped to help our loved ones.

1. Problem: Aid agencies provide us with excellent opportunities to help strangers.

- iii. When we are working to help someone, it is human nature that we will work harder if we're working to help someone we know and care about. Therefore, our efforts will produce the best results when we work to help ourselves and our loved ones.

1. Problem: Many strangers can be helped greatly by aid agencies. Writing a check for these aid projects is easy to do, and produces better results than spending the money on ourselves and our families.

- iv. Human relationships are a central source of life's pleasure. If we neglect our loved ones in order to help strangers, we will damage these relationships and thus be left with poorer outcomes.

Therefore, we ought to focus our attention on our loved ones.

1. Problem: Sidgwick seems to be assuming that one must either devote *all* of one's time to one's family, or *all* of one's time to helping strangers. This is false; one can do some of each. Thus, we still have a strong obligation to help strangers.

5. Mill's theory refuses to prohibit anything. No type of action can be said always to be impermissible because there might be some circumstance in which acting in that way would yield the best consequences. But some types of actions are always wrong; Mill's theory gives us the wrong results and so must be false.

- a. RESPONSE: The reason we regard some types of action as wrong is because they generally have such terrible results. If the circumstances are such that this sort of action has better results than anything else one could do, then it should be regarded as permissible.