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Introduction to Philosophy

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John Stuart Mill – Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant British philosopher from the nineteenth century. He has many different works, such as: *A System of Logic*, *Utilitarianism*, *On Liberty*, and *the Subjection of Women*. He wrote one of his most important works in the mid-1800's called *Utilitarianism*. Mill makes many great points in his writing, but he does have a few flaws. John Stuart Mill doesn't take into account that what could be categorized as short term happiness could be completely different in the long term. Also Mill thinks that we must systematically rank different pleasures and pains in this world, even when there is no true way to do so. Lastly, he argues that there are no rights and morals in Utilitarianism, the way that he thinks the world should operate. In this paper I will show that short term happiness doesn't always lead to long term happiness, that there is no possible way that we can rank in values pleasures and pains, and that no matter what we do in this life our rights and morals will always prove to prevail.

Utilitarianism is "The creed which accepts as the foundation of Morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Lewis Vaughn, and Louis P. Pojman). John Stuart Mill writes that the foundation of morals is not based on justice and just thinking but more upon what can generate happiness. Utility is Mill's way of ranking the

values of benefits and harms of certain actions. The Greatest Happiness Principle is the basis upon which Utilitarianism is founded. It is, in its most basic form, the greatest amount of good or happiness for the greatest number of people. The simplest way to describe The Greatest Happiness Principle is a community based philosophy. In this life, Mill says that we must make every decision in accordance to others; because a decision is never just your own, it will affect the people around you indefinitely. He says that if there is a choice between creating happiness for two people instead of just one, always choose two, because that is always worth doing. He defines happiness as intended pleasure and/or the absence of pain; whereas unhappiness is pain and the privation of pleasure.

What is perceived as short term happiness could always lead to something entirely different, such as long term pain. An example of this could be cheating on your spouse, in the short term it is very pleasurable for two people, but in the long run it is a terrible thing that could and probably would cause much pain for the two possibly three parties. Therefore, momentary happiness is definitely a flaw of Utilitarianism. Although Utilitarians do take into account the flaw of short term pleasure, they can never completely rule out this flaw because some situations do arise in our everyday lives. These situations could have overwhelming short term happiness that outweighs the long term, even if the long term is ultimately more important. Our human brains can be persuaded very easily in these situations. This being said John Stuart Mill would almost instantly counter with the value ranking argument. The immediate, face value problem, is that the value ranking system is designed for momentary pleasures and pains. It does not take into account long term effects.

The Utilitarianism way of life requires its people to assign values to both the pains and pleasure to every action that they are going to take. With these values they determine whether or

not an action is worth doing according to their ideology. They also compare and contrast these values with the values of other actions to determine which will aid them to get to the greatest amount of happiness possible. But how exactly do we determine what values everything gets? For one, values will differ from person to person because of desires and personal preferences in this life. The only certain way to analyze a value of something is to have a certain class of person with both experiences determine the values. An example of this would be which hurts worse: passing a kidney stone or having a baby. To have accuracy in values you must find a human female that has experienced both passing a stone and bearing a child, and then ask them how they felt during each and then to rank them. This would be the only scientifically accurate way to judge these pains. Otherwise it is only perception and preferences talking. Some people may argue that we should look at this system at a societal level, and do the thing that benefits the most people. But this still begs the question of who gets to assign these values and how can we accurately assign them.

The way John Stuart Mill might come back and attack this one is stating that it is the utilitarian way of life and thinking that makes it so you act according to your rankings and value system. This is a very weak way to comeback, but it is about the only logical position he can take. The reason why this is so weak is because everyone has different ideas of what to rank things and there is really no set value system to base everything on. So how can we say what is worth more to me should be worth more to you? You can't, and therefore his counterargument is also flawed.

Do anything for the greatest amount of good; this simple phrase sums up The Greatest Happiness Principle. The problem with this is that it completely disregards justice, morals, and values. Mill says that if you must be unjust to benefit someone or something, you must do it for

Utilitarianism. Every person ever to live has a certain set of morals and values; with John Stuart Mill you use Utilitarianism as your guiding light and your principle behind your decisions. A normal person's morals will keep them from doing unjust things such as robbing a bank; even though you plan on giving each and every dollar to the less fortunate, your morals will not let you do this because it is genuinely wrong. Even if the act has a very positive outcome humans are set in their ways to listen to the little voice inside their heads that say this is wrong or unjust.

John Stuart Mill would come back at this and say that Utilitarianism gives people new morals and those morals are simply benefiting the most people possible. You must make a decision to do whatever necessary to have the most happiness, even if this means sacrificing a person to save two. This is your new set of morals, this is how the world should operate, and this is what would make the world better. My only question to this is what if I can't sacrifice someone to save two? What if I, or someone, is too kind hearted to ever do this? What then, the whole principle falls apart and so does the system of Utilitarianism.

Even though Utilitarianism is flawed, it has very good intentions of improving this world. I agree with the way that we need to weigh possible outcomes against each other, and the way we should generate as much happiness as possible. It's just very hard for me and many others to go along with such moral infringements. I think that if this philosophy is critiqued sometime in the future, it can be a very vital part of our society and it could and should be taught to younger generations. If they have the need to generate as much happiness as John Stuart Mill does then this world will be a great place.

Works Cited

Lewis Vaughn, and Louis P. Pojman. *Philosophy The Quest For Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.