

Questions on Mill's *Utilitarianism**

Chapter II:

1. At the beginning of Chapter II, Mill mentions an "ignorant blunder" -- what is the blunder?
2. What, according to the 'greatest happiness principle', is the connection between right and wrong on the one hand, and good and bad on the other?
3. What, according to the 'greatest happiness principle', is the connection between good and bad, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain on the other?
4. Whose happiness is relevant, according to Mill, when it comes to whether your actions are right?
5. What is the Epicurean response to those who charge that utilitarianism is "...a doctrine worthy only of swine"?
6. Mill claims that "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." Many people think he is wrong about this. What might the problem be? Think of this question as posing a challenge: show that utilitarianism cannot consistently acknowledge that pleasures vary in quality as well as quantity.
7. Why and under what conditions should we think the fact that competent judges prefer one pleasure to another shows the two pleasures differ in quality? Who count as competent judges?
8. According to Mill, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Is he right? Why does he bring it up?
9. What is Mill's estimation of the hero and the martyr?
10. Mill warns that one should not "confound the rule of action with the motive of it." What is the distinction and why is it important?
11. Is Mill right that the moral quality of an action does not depend on the motive for which it is done?
12. KEY QUESTION -- What is Mill's response to the charge that utilitarianism is a godless doctrine?
13. KEY QUESTION -- What, according to Mill, is the connection between the 'greatest happiness principle' and other moral principles?

Chapter IV:

1. Why is the 'greatest happiness principle' not susceptible of ordinary proof?
2. What, if anything, is wrong with the argument Mill offers for thinking the general happiness is desirable?
3. Suppose it is true that each person desires his or her own happiness -- why would that be evidence that the general happiness is desirable?
4. Pay attention to the link between happiness and the desirability of virtue in and of itself.
5. What proof does Mill offer for desirability of happiness?
6. What's the point of Mill's discussion of money?
7. Is everything desired for its own sake desired as part of happiness?
8. How does Mill argue against the view that happiness is not the only thing desirable? 9. What role, according to Mill, does habit play in separating the will from desire?
10. KEY QUESTION -- According to Mill, "happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end." This claim breaks neatly into two that are importantly different: (i) happiness is desirable as an end and (ii) happiness is the only thing desirable as an end. Mill offers arguments for each of these claims. His argument for the first claim is notorious (perhaps unjustifiably) as a bad argument. What is the argument and what is suspicious about it? Notice, by the way, that the conclusion Mill hopes to establish with this first argument is fairly uncontroversial -- how many people, after all, doubt that happiness is at least among the things that are good? His argument for the second claim, in contrast, is mobilized to defend a far more controversial claim. What is the argument for the second claim? (Be careful to identify in detail its structure).

* Gratefully adapted from materials from Geoff Sayre-McCord.