

Ethics of Leadership

Eudaimonistic Utilitarianism

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- John Stuart Mill, "What Utilitarianism Is" (PDF on webpage).
- Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", pp. 161–167.

Background

Like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill is a utilitarian who argues that happiness alone has intrinsic value, and that the fundamental moral obligation of a leader is to produce as much happiness as he or she can. Unlike Bentham, however, Mill maintains that the *quality* of the happiness produced is of far more importance than its simple *quantity*. Indeed, Mill's conception of pleasure and happiness is radically different from that defended by Bentham, leading Mill's theory (now known as **eudaimonistic utilitarianism**) to diverge in some radical ways from classical utilitarianism. Even so, the short story from Ursula Le Guin raises some serious concerns for any system of morality predicated on the need to increase the overall happiness of a group.

Questions

1. How would you describe John Stuart Mill's conception of happiness? Is happiness a subjective mental state or something else? Is this notion of happiness vulnerable to Nozick's "experience machine" criticism?
2. In his discussion of pleasure, Mill repeatedly claims that pleasures can be distinguished by quality and well as quantity. What justifies the qualitative distinction of higher and lower pleasures? How does this distinction explain his claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied?
3. Mill also gives a test appealing to "competent judges" by which pleasures can be separated into higher and lower kinds. How does this test work? Why should we think that this is a reliable test?
4. Based on your answers to these questions, how is Mill's formulation of utilitarianism different from the classical version of Jeremy Bentham?
5. Ursula Le Guin's story presents a fictional society in which its overall happiness and flourishing comes at great cost. What is that cost? What problems with utilitarianism does this suggest?
6. In the last paragraph of her story, Le Guin presents a group of people whose actions are supposed to be thought "quite incredible" (p. 166). What do these people do, and why is this supposed to be incredible?
7. Do you believe that it is a leader's responsibility to promote the type of happiness that Mill endorses? Or does Le Guin's story convince you that the utilitarian approach to leadership is flawed?