

Ethical Theory

Mill's Theory of Well-Being

As you read the material for our 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 reading:

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 about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapter 1, entire & chapter 2, paragraphs 1–17 (pp. 181–194 in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*).

Questions

1. What does Mill mean when he says (in chapter 1, paragraphs 1 and 2) that he is looking for the *summum bonum*? What does he think it is? What objections to this position does he address in the first two chapters of *Utilitarianism*?
2. In his discussion of pleasure (especially in chapter 2, paragraphs 2–17), Mill claims that pleasures can be distinguished by quality and well as quantity. What justifies his qualitative distinction of higher and lower pleasures? What is it exactly that makes a higher pleasure a higher one and a lower pleasure a lower one? How does this distinction explain Mill's claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a satisfied pig?
3. Mill also gives a test (in chapter 2, paragraphs 5–8) for distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures. 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? For instance, is Bentham's conception of happiness the same as Mill's? That is, do they endorse the same theory of well-being (from *Normative Ethics*, section 2.2) and label it as "happiness"? For these, and other issues, be clear which similarities or differences apply at the level of factors, and which apply at the level of foundations.