

Ethical Theory

Utilitarianism & Justice

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 5 (pp. 216–235 in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*).

Questions

1. At the beginning of chapter 5 (in paragraphs 1–3), Mill lays out “one of the strongest obstacles” for utilitarianism, which involves justice. What is it, and what is his strategy for addressing it? By the end of the chapter, what is Mill’s considered definition of justice and how has he attempted to hurdle this initial obstacle? Is his argument convincing? (You may need to first answer question 5.)
2. Mill presents (in chapter 5, paragraphs 4–10) a survey of different things commonly labeled as just or unjust. What six things does Mill consider?
3. Mill also wants to explain (in chapter 5, paragraph 14 and 15) how justice is distinguished from morality in general. To do this, Mill first explains how considerations of morality are different from those of expediency or prudence. How are these considerations different? After that, Mill then makes a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. How are these types of duties different? Finally, how does this distinction of duties explain the difference between justice and morality in general?
4. Mill lays out the three major components of justice (in chapter 5, paragraphs 16–23), two of which are based in our sentiments and one of which is based in our intellectual capacities. What are these components and how do they together come to compose justice?
5. Finally, Mill attempts (in chapter 5, paragraphs 24–38) to resolve tensions between justice and utilitarianism. How does Mill define a person’s “right” to something? Why do considerations of security and liberty involve such rights? How does all this allow Mill to finally connect utilitarianism to justice?