

DOES MILL DEMAND TOO MUCH MORALITY FROM A MORAL AGENT?

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One of the most common criticisms raised against the utilitarian moral philosophy is that utilitarianism demands too much morality from a moral agent. The objection has been advanced by the critics arguing that the theory ignores the “separateness of persons”. John Rawls has been considered a precursor of this criticism. In *A Theory of Justice*, he has criticized utilitarianism for not taking into serious consideration the distinctness of persons and thereby acting as an impartial spectator.¹ David Gauthier, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick have also raised similar objection arguing that in the utilitarian process of aggregation not only the interest of the distinct individuals are sacrificed and mingled into one but there remains also the possibility that well-being of one or few have been represented as the well-being of the rest of the concerned group. The “separateness of persons”, as follows from critics’ claims, is ignored in two ways: by undermining the individualities of an individual and by ignoring an individual’s special commitments and relations.

Critics think that utilitarian philosophers in their eagerness to promote the greatest possible amount of good have always neglected the special obligations of an individual that are incumbent upon him on account of his special relationships, commitments and attachment as a social being. The criticism raised here, therefore, has a direct bearing upon the question who should be beneficiary of the good? In response to the question, we come across two different approaches: rigorous and moderate. Those who have adopted a rigorous approach think that the beneficiary can be “everyone else” irrespective of having an intimate or distant relationship with the agent. In their opinion, no one should accord priority to one’s own interest over the interest of others. Thinkers who adopt such an approach expect an individual moral agent to behave like a moral saint. On the other hand, the thinkers who adopt a moderate approach urge that the agent need not sacrifice his own interest for maximizing utility. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine Mill’s utilitarian stance against this objection.

¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 27.

The contribution has been divided into three sections. In the first section, we have briefly reflected upon the objective of Mill's utilitarian morality. In the second section, we have reflected upon the importance that Mill has assigned to an individual agent him or herself as the beneficiary of the good. In the third section, we have reflected upon the sphere of beneficence that Mill has focused upon to examine whether Mill's stance can be defended against the above objection remaining within the scheme of his utilitarian morality.

I

As a utilitarian philosopher, Mill's chief objective has been to secure the greatest social well-being of the human community at large. To fulfil this objective, Mill has tried to establish his "Greatest happiness principle" based on the principle of justice and equality. At the end of chapter V of *Utilitarianism*, accepting "perfect impartiality between persons" as part of the very meaning of the "Greatest Happiness Principle", Mill writes, "That principle is a mere form of words without rational signification unless one person's happiness supposed equal in degree... is counted for exactly as much as another's."² The standard of utilitarian morality, as Mill has distinctly asserted "is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether."³ But Mill's attempt to establish the principle of utility based on the spirit of justice and equality cannot be successful unless the individual members of society have acquired nobility of character through the cultivation of the feeling of sympathy and imagination. That may be the reason Mill has explicitly asserted that the greatest amount of happiness can be obtained by the general cultivation of the nobleness of character. In chapter II of *Utilitarianism*, Mill has stated that a perfect explanation of the utilitarian morality can be seen in the life and teachings of the Jesus of Nazareth. As he writes,

In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.⁴

Mill's noble individual cannot realise his own happiness in abstraction from the happiness of others. He makes not only other people happier, but "the world in

² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 257.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴ *Ibid.*

general is immensely a gainer by it [his nobility].”⁵ In *Utilitarianism*, while making a distinction between pleasures of higher and lower faculties, Mill has asserted that pleasures “of the feelings and imaginations” have “greater permanency, safety, uncostliness” than the pleasures of the senses because the exercise of the faculties of intellect, imagination and moral sentiments would be more conducive to the greater good of the human community by developing the social aspect of human nature. Mill has noted that psychological proof the Utilitarian goal of morality consists in our social psychology i.e. social feeling. Such feeling though considered as a natural feeling of mankind, is not innate. Rather it is acquired through education of our moral sentiments and favourable surroundings in which we are brought up with our fellow members. Mill writes,

The good of others becomes to him [each individual] a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence. . . . Consequently, the smallest germs of the feeling are laid hold of and nourished by the contagion of sympathy and the influences of education; and a complete web of corroborative association is woven round it, by the powerful agency of the external sanctions. This mode of conceiving ourselves and human life, as civilization goes on, is felt to be more and more natural. . . . In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which feeling, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included.⁶

However, though Mill has acknowledged that the goal of utilitarian morality is to obtain the general happiness and the goal can be obtained through the cultivation of the nobility of character, unlike Altruism Mill has not considered the self-less pursuit of general happiness as the general rule, but merely as admirable. While altruism supports the sacrifice of an agent’s own benefit at the cost of other’s benefit, Mill refrains from recommending so. In this context, Mill’s criticism of Comte’s ideal of sainthood is worth noting. Mill notes that Comte’s ideal of sainthood prohibits an individual from pursuing his own special projects, interests and relationships and thus destroying all opportunities to shape and direct one’s life in his own way, obstructs him to grow up as a distinctive personality. In calling for “altruism” he has not only asked an individual to repress the satisfaction of all his personal desires in favour of the general good but has also considered following personal inclinations as inherently

⁵ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 262

⁶ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp.285-6.

wicked. Like extreme Calvinists, Comte has condemned all who are not saints.⁷ In his “Later Speculations of M. Comte”, Mill has criticized Comte for his moral extremism and has described him as “a morally intoxicated man.” Mill though acknowledges that individual members of the society are required to cultivate a feeling of sympathy to promote general well being, he is not ready to accept Comte’s wish i.e. “to deaden the personal passion and propensities”, and to condemn and mortify all personal wishes.⁸

But Critics would argue: if obtaining the goal of utilitarian morality necessarily requires the cultivation of noble character and sympathy then the value of individual liberty must be considered as subordinate to the utility. That means the value of individual liberty must be accepted as conditional upon its contribution to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But in *On Liberty*, Mill has tried to harmonize his thesis of individual liberty with the utilitarian goal of greater social good on the basis of his conception of “man as a progressive being.” He has firmly asserted that the progressive development of society would not be possible unless its individual members are given opportunities to acquire a progressive outlook through the exercise of their individuality. This indicates that Mill’s scheme of utilitarian morality necessarily takes into account the good of the individual. In *On Liberty*, while considering “utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions”, Mill has clarified his notion of utility immediately stating that “it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of a man as a progressive being.”⁹ In the next section, we shall reflect upon the value that Mill has assigned to individual members of a society as the beneficiary of the good.

II

In chapter-III of *On Liberty*, Mill has acknowledged cultivation and development of individuality as an essential element of social well-being. By the exercise of individuality Mill has meant employing distinctive human endowments in whatever we do i.e. using “observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee,

⁷ Mill, “August Comte and Positivism,” *CW X*, p.337.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.335-336.

⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*, p.136.

activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and...firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.”⁹ He has also meant by individuality, acting with spontaneity according to one’s own character. Mill firmly believes that good for an individual consists in enabling him to take the decision and perform the action by exercising individuality in the above-mentioned senses. Mill’s emphasis upon protection and preservation of individuality has found expression through both his positive and negative concept of liberty. According to the positive concept, freedom consists in self-development or self-determination and hence, “It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself” shunning any oppression. According to the negative concept of freedom, individual autonomy demands non-interference with the legitimate interest of an individual. Mill has condemned crushing individuality in any form whether “by enforcing the will of God or the Injunctions men” as a form of oppression in the name of despotism.¹⁰ There are several passages in Mill’s *On Liberty*, where he has strongly emphasized upon the importance of protecting the diversity of character, creating “variety of situations” arguing that preserving and nourishing diversity of individual character can protect society from harmful influences of uniformity, authoritarianism, the tyranny of the majority and blind adherence to customs and traditions. Individual well-being, according to Mill, is so intimately connected with social well-being that the latter can be obtained only when each individual is allowed to develop their own inner well-being. As Mill writes,

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation...In proportion to the development of individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them.¹¹

According to Mill, since different individuals have been brought up in different circumstances, they may not be able to take pleasure in the same thing. Therefore, keeping in view differences in their capacities as well as sources of

⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*., p.187.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.193.

¹¹ Ibid., p.192

pleasures, “variety of situations” must be created for the growth and improvement of each individual.¹² Growth of civilization, according to Mill, is not possible unless diversity of individual character and cultivation of individuality is encouraged. In this context, referring to Europe’s “progressive and many-sided development” Mill has argued that Europe’s “remarkable diversity of character and culture” and “plurality of path” have been responsible for this, whereas China could not progress because of its authoritarian and conformist approach which resulted into lack of technological progress as well as cultural stagnation. Mill feared that English society would also move towards a similar direction if they fail to encourage diversity. Mill has valued diversity as a means to the self-development and self-development of each individual as an essential ingredient of society’s development. According to him, since people vary greatly in respect of their potentialities, interests, needs and skills caused by different circumstantial antecedent conditions, improvement in any sphere – politics, morals and education- would be impossible if all people are persuaded to be alike. Mill’s assertion of individuality against the criticism of ignoring “the separateness of persons” can be distinctly noted when he writes to Thomas Carlyle that “the good of the species” as “the ultimate end” can be achieved only when “each taking for his exclusive aim the development of what is best in himself.”¹³

In response to the question concerning “Beneficiary” of the good, Mill has, therefore, adopted a moderate line of approach. According to him, the beneficiary must include the agent himself along with others. In this respect, he has been influenced by his radical mentor Bentham. Adopting the Benthamite dictum that “everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one,”¹⁴ Mill has asserted that in calculating the rightness or wrongness of an action which affects others including the agent himself, happiness of the agent should neither be valued more nor less than that of others.

¹² Mill, *On Liberty*., p.197

¹³ Mill, *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848*, pp 207-8.

¹⁴ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p.319.

III

Besides emphasizing upon self-development of an individual as an essential component within the scheme of utilitarian morality, Mill has drawn our attention to the fact that to secure the goal of utilitarian morality, we are required to focus more on limited beneficence instead of extended beneficence. This becomes evident through his attempt to strike a balance between our duties as a public benefactor and a private benefactor. In *Utilitarianism*, distinguishing between public and private utility, Mill has stated that the number of the “beneficiary” of the good, will vary depending on the scale of utility intended for. As he writes,

The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words, to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone he is called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to. Those alone, the influence of whose actions extends to society in general, need concern themselves habitually about so large an object.¹⁵

Mill’s statements imply that the direct beneficiary of all our actions should not be always “unknown all”. It is only when one aims at a public utility then the scope of the action must extend “to the society in general. In all other cases, we are required to act keeping in view private utility which takes into account the benefits of the few concerned persons. However, the latter kind of action must also take into consideration the legitimate interest of everyone else who might be affected by the action and ensure that such interests have not been violated. Arguing against those moralists who prefer to adopt public utility as the rule of life, Mill writes,

Why is it necessary that all human life should point but to one object, and be cultivated into a system of means to a single end? May it not be the fact that mankind; who after all are made up of who after all are made up of single human beings, obtain a greater sum of happiness when each pursues his own [ends], under the rules and conditions required by the good of *the* rest then when each makes the good of the rest his only subject, and allows himself no personal pleasure not indispensable to the preservation of his faculties.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p.270

¹⁶ Mill, “August Comte and Positivism,” *CW X*, p.337.

Mill further adds, “The regimen of a blockaded town should be cheerfully submitted to when high purposes require it. But is it the ideal perfection of human existence?”¹⁷ This is the question that has been raised by Mill against Comte. Having raised this question, as Skorupski has argued, Mill has drawn our attention to certain basic truths about human nature, i.e., human being experience happiness at least as much in their personal sphere of self, family and friends as in the impersonal sphere of ethical and political activism.¹⁸

Standing against the criticism that Utilitarian morality is demanding, Mill has clearly stated in *Utilitarianism* that morality does not require an agent to act always on the motive of “universal benevolence”. To act on such a motive implies that a concerned moral agent must be impartial and objective disregarding his special commitments to family, friends and loved ones. But Mill insists that to act rightly we are not under a moral obligation to maximize happiness in general. As he writes,

“[I]t is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought, to conceive it as implying that people should fix their mind upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large. The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; the thoughts of most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is, the legitimate and authorized expectations, of anyone else.”¹⁹

Mill strongly asserts that people generally produce more happiness when they are motivated by the welfare of relatively few people with whom their lives are intertwined instead of focusing on happiness in general. The justification that he provides is that we have a better knowledge of people with whom we are well connected. As Mill writes, “the good of all can only be pursued with any success by each person’s taking as his particular department the good of the only individual whose requirements he can thoroughly know.”²⁰

Therefore, there are enough textual pieces of evidence that Mill has neither ignored individuality of a moral agent nor has ignored his special relations, commitments and duties. As a utilitarian moral philosopher, his chief objective has

¹⁷ Mill, “August Comte and Positivism,” *CW X*, p.337

¹⁸ Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?* P.16.

¹⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p.270.

²⁰ Mill, *The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill 1849-1873*, p.762.

been not only to pursue individual good but also to strike the balance between individual and social good through the formation of individual character and ensuring a favourable external circumstance. That may be the reason that unlike Bentham, Mill has proposed internal as well as external sanctions of morality. Internal sanction demands developed the conscience of an individual whereas external sanction demands favourable social, political and legal arrangements. It is expected that the conscience of an individual will develop if he receives appropriate education of intellect, imagination and moral sentiments. In chapter-IV of *Utilitarianism*, Mill's argument to arrive at "general happiness" based on an aggregate of individual happiness assumes the presence of developed conscience as well as favourable external circumstances. Mill expects that in this "aggregate", each individual will obtain their "fair share of happiness" without sacrificing their individuality while, at the same time, taking care of the legitimate interests of others as a social being

Conclusion:

In light of the above analysis, therefore, it can be argued that the allegation of upholding a standard too high for humanity cannot be labelled against Mill. However, critics may still express doubt regarding Mill's less demanding approach arguing that Mill has upheld high optimism regarding human nature which is evident in his assertion that in the notion of "general good", the good of each individual would be in harmony with each other. However, in Mill's defence, it can be argued that the ideal of every morality is to evolve from "what is" to "what ought to be". Hence, just as Mill's empiricist orientation led him to acknowledge that such evolution is possible only through the improvement of status quo i.e. improvement of given individual character and a given external circumstance, such orientation also led him to recognize that evolution is not possible disregarding one's factual capacity. Mill has noted that due to limited capacity, an individual moral agent, can maximize utility only remaining minimalist in approach i.e. cultivating and developing his own individuality, taking care of the interests of those individuals who are directly affected by his action and ensuring minimal conditions of other's well-being by at least not harming their legitimate interests.

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