Kristen Davis

Professor Louis Sanchez

Philosophy

28 April, 2023

"Exploring John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian Theory: Arguments, Key Terms, and Practical Example for Promoting General Happiness"

Utilitarian theory aims to promote the general happiness and well-being of society. A key advocate of this theory was John Stuart Mill, who offered many arguments supporting his theory. The utility principle states that actions are morally right if they will increase overall happiness and minimize suffering. Throughout this essay, I will discuss Mill's views on utilitarianism, explore his key arguments, discuss his key terms, provide a practical example to explain his views, reflect on the suitability of Mill's theory for moral reasoning, as well as include references from *Western Philosophy: An Anthology* by John Cottingham that support my position.

In Mill's view, pleasure promotes happiness and well-being, which are fundamental to utilitarianism. However, he emphasized that not all treats are equal. The satisfaction that we can find in some forms of entertainment, such as reading literature or engaging in intellectual debates, is superior to others, such as eating food or engaging in physical exercise. We see that Mill's approach distinguishes "higher from lower pleasures, which means some types of pleasure (those involving our more elevated intellectual faculties) are more valuable than others "(Cottingham 546). This is why he criticizes Bentham's theory of utilitarianism, arguing that it advocates gross physical indulgence and instead presents a more refined form of utilitarianism,

which prioritizes certain types of pleasure over others, resulting in a more refined approach to utilitarianism. Due to this distinction, he could argue that higher pleasures were more valuable than lower pleasures.

According to Mill, harm prevention is another significant aspect of utilitarianism that plays a crucial role in its interpretation. His belief was that people should be free to do whatever they want as long as their actions do not harm others or infringe on their rights. Therefore, laws should only exist if they prevent harm. As a result, he had to distinguish between self-regarding (those affecting only oneself) and other-regarding (those affecting others). It is preferable that the first not be regulated by law, whereas the second must be closely monitored. There is a term that is one of the most essential terms in Mill's philosophy "utility." This term refers to how useful or valuable a particular action or behavior promotes happiness. According to utilitarianism, the goal of one's actions should be to maximize the utility such that as many people as possible will benefit from them. As part of Mill's philosophy, he also used the term "greatest happiness principle," which means that actions are morally right if they promote the greatest happiness for many people. As a result, we must consider our actions' impact on others and not just on ourselves. Put another way; we should strive for a society where everyone's happiness is equally valued.

The comparison Mill makes between the fool and the pig is another crucial aspect of Mill's morals, exemplified by the comparison of the fool and the pig. Fools are people who do not understand what is valuable in life and live for immediate gratification without understanding what is truly valuable. The pig represents those seeking only physical pleasure without regard for

anything else. Mill states, "And if the fool or pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question" (Cottingham 548). The result is that if someone holds an opposing view or opinion, it will likely be because they did not fully consider all the aspects of the topic or issue at hand prior to forming their opinion. Mill suggests that individuals who lack knowledge or understanding may be more likely to hold narrow-minded views and opinions. According to Mill, both individuals cannot understand higher pleasures and, therefore, cannot make moral decisions. Although he believes they would prefer these higher pleasures if they understood them, he also believes they would choose them if they could understand them.

The donation of organs is an example that illustrates Mill's views on utilitarianism most clearly in a practical sense. For example, a healthy person with two kidneys but can survive with just one would be morally justified in donating his or her kidney to another person who needs it to survive. As this act would save another person's life, it would promote overall happiness. However, individuals should also be respected as they have the right to decide whether to donate their organs. Another example can illustrate a utilitarian approach to public policy. Let us say the government is considering whether or not to build a new highway. According to utilitarians, the decision should be based on how much overall happiness it will produce. In addition to transportation efficiency benefits, they would also consider pollution costs and eminent domain seizures that could result in the loss of homes and farmland. Building the highway would undoubtedly be morally justified if its benefits outweighed its costs.

When considering the application of utilitarianism to moral reasoning, this theory is limited since it is challenging to quantify subjective experiences like pleasure and pain. The

long-term consequences of actions based on utilitarian principles may also take time to predict. As an example, the sacrifice of individual rights for the sake of the greater good may, in turn, produce unintended adverse outcomes in the future. There are also some drawbacks to Mill's utilitarianism; even though it has many strengths, it is also subject to some criticisms. Often, people object that it is too demanding - doing everything in a way that maximizes overall happiness is difficult or even impossible. It has also been argued that utilitarianism can justify immoral actions if they lead to overall happiness. For example, suppose we were to apply utilitarian principles to torturing someone to acquire information that could save thousands of lives. In that case, it is morally right to do so.

In summary, John Stuart Mill's contributions to utilitarianism have had a lasting impact on the way we approach ethical decision-making. He has provided us with a framework that remains relevant today by highlighting the importance of higher pleasures, harm prevention, and individual liberty within society. However, it is essential to acknowledge that there are limitations to this theory that should be taken into account when applying its principles in different fields. Despite these limitations, Mill's legacy continues to shape our understanding of ethics and guide us toward making informed decisions that benefit society.

Works Cited

Cottingham, John. *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*. 3rd ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2021.