

# *Utilitarianism*

## John Stuart Mill

[Mill's text has been edited for easier reading with additional notes enclosed in green brackets for an *Introduction to Philosophy* class by R.A. Baker, Ph.D. The following are excerpts taken from pages 8-11. The full copy of Mill's work can be made available by request.]

### •Happiness as an Aim•

According to the greatest happiness principle as I have explained it, the ultimate end. . . .for the sake of which all other things are desirable, whether for our own good or that of other people, is:

*"an existence as free as possible from pain  
and as rich as possible in enjoyments."*

[ This does not sound like a bad axiom to me...what do you think?]

If the greatest happiness of all is (as the utilitarian opinion says it is)...: the rules and precepts for human conduct [which ensures that] the observance of them would provide the best possible guarantee of an existence such as has been described—for all mankind and, so far

as the nature of things allows, for the whole sentient creation.

Against this doctrine, however, another class of objectors [would say] that the rational purpose of human life and action cannot be happiness in any form.

[They would say] it is unattainable; and they contemptuously ask:

*‘What right do you have to be happy?’ ...*

*‘What right [do you have] even to exist?’.*

They also say that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and couldn't have become noble except by learning the lesson of...[the] renunciation [of happiness]. They say that thoroughly learning and submitting to that lesson is the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

[IF there is no Supreme Being, and IF humans are only another form of life, just a higher form of mammal, why do we value "happiness" anyway? Millions of animals live fearfully in the wild and die brutal deaths...every single day. Why should humans expect anything more than their fellow life forms?]

....

If 'happiness' is taken to mean a continuous state of highly pleasurable excitement, it is obvious enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or—in some cases and with some interruptions—hours or days. Such an experience is the occasional •brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its •permanent and steady flame. The philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware of this as those who taunt them. The 'happiness' that they meant was not a life of rapture; but a life containing some moments of rapture, a few brief pains, and many and various pleasures; a life that is much more active than passive; a life based on not expecting more from life than it is capable of providing. A life made up of those components has always appeared worthy of the name of 'happiness' to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it. And even now many people have such an existence during a considerable part of their lives. The

present wretched education [how children are taught *or not taught* by parents, playmates and in school] and the wretched [state of society] are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost everyone.

....

There seem to be two main constituents of a satisfied life, and each of them has often been found to be, on its own, sufficient for the purpose. They are tranquility and excitement. Many people find that when they have much tranquility they can be content with very little pleasure; and many find that when they have much excitement they can put up with a considerable quantity of pain. It is certainly possible that a man—and even the mass of mankind—should have both tranquility and excitement. So far from being incompatible with one another, they are natural allies: prolonging either of them is a preparation for the other, and creates a wish for it. **The only people who don't desire excitement after a restful period are those in whom laziness amounts to a vice; and the only ones who dislike the tranquility that follows**

excitement—finding it •dull and bland rather than •pleasurable in proportion to the excitement that preceded it—are those whose need for excitement is a disease. [Wow, that sounds rather harsh and opinionated to me. Some personality types need FAR less excitement than others and some just like to be active "all the time." Does this make them a hedonist?]

When people who are fairly fortunate in their material circumstances don't find sufficient enjoyment to make life valuable to them, this is usually because they care for nobody but themselves. If someone has neither public nor private affections, that will greatly reduce the amount of excitement his life can contain, and any excitements that he does have will sink in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be cut off by death.

[Don't we ALL tend to think of ourselves first? Our own happiness first?

"If someone has neither public nor private affections, that will greatly reduce the amount of

excitement his life can contain..." (quoted from above)

This sounds like a person without empathy or much emotion at all. How does such a person find happiness?]

On the other hand...

[Here Mill seeks to defend the person who might tend to be more "internally" driven...one who prefers to be alone. He says that mental development can be the "excitement" for some.]

Next to selfishness, the principal cause that makes life unsatisfactory is lack of mental cultivation [= 'mental development']...simply minds that have been open to the fountains of knowledge and have been given a reasonable amount of help in using their faculties. A mind that is cultivated in that sense will find inexhaustible sources of interest in everything that surrounds it...[nature, art, poetry, history.

[Mill then argues that...

There is absolutely no reason...why an amount of  
•mental culture...should not be the inheritance of everyone born in a civilized country; any more

than there's any inherent necessity that any human being should be a •selfish egotist whose only feelings and cares are ones that centre on his own miserable individuality.

...it seems like utopia to me. Sure, everyone CAN be a good, solid citizen of the world and live for the prosperity of *the whole*...BUT why don't they?]

In a world containing so much to interest us, so much for us to enjoy, and so much needing to be corrected and improved, everyone who has a moderate amount of these moral and intellectual requirements—•unselfishness and cultivation—•is •capable of an existence that may be called enviable; and such a person will certainly •have this enviable existence as long as •he isn't, because of bad laws or conditions of servitude, prevented from using the sources of happiness that are within his reach...

[This seems like "pie in the sky" to me...an overly optimistic view of humanity.]

...the great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as poverty, disease, and bad luck with friends and lovers (turning against him, proving to be worthless, or dying young). So the main thrust of the problem lies in the battle against these calamities. In the present state of things, poverty and disease etc. can't be eliminated, and often can't even be lessened much; and it is a rare good fortune to escape such troubles entirely. Yet no-one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will (if human affairs continue to improve) eventually be reduced to something quite small.

Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, could be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society combined with the good sense and generosity of individuals. Even that most stubborn of enemies, •disease, could be indefinitely reduced in scope by good physical and moral education and proper control of noxious influences [= 'air- and water-pollution'];



while the progress of science holds out a promise of still more direct conquests over •this detestable foe.

In short, all the large sources of human suffering are to a large extent —and many of them almost entirely— conquerable by human care and effort. Their removal is grievously slow, and a long succession of generations will perish in the battle before the conquest is completed and this world becomes what it easily could be if we had the will and the knowledge to make it so.

....

It is certainly possible to do without happiness; [95%] of mankind are compelled to do without it, even in those parts of our present world that are least deep in barbarism. And it often happens that a hero or martyr forgoes it for the sake of something that he values more than his individual happiness. But what is this ‘something’ if it isn’t the happiness of others or something required for •their• happiness?

It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely

one's own share of happiness, or the chances of it; but no-one engages in self-sacrifice just so as to engage in self-sacrifice! He must have some end or purpose. You may say: "The end he aims at in his self-sacrifice is not anyone's happiness; it is virtue, which is better than happiness."

In response to this I ask: Would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr didn't think it would spare others from having to make similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no result for any of his fellow creatures except to make their situation like his, putting them also in the position of persons who have renounced happiness? Everyone can honor those who give up for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by doing this they contribute to increasing the amount of happiness in the world; but someone who does it, or claims to do it, for any other purpose doesn't deserve admiration any more than does the ascetic living on top of his pillar. He may be a

rousing proof of what men can do, but surely not an example of what they should do.

[What if the pillar saint experienced *happiness* living atop his pole?

Mill has a very optimistic view of humanity as he lives his upperclass life in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. What would he think if he could have seen into the future:

- the death of perhaps 100 million people during the Communist takeovers of China and Russia
- WWI and WWII
- development of the atomic bomb and then nuclear weapons

This reading is an introduction to morality and ethics.

How did Mill do in this quest?]