

Reading Guide Utilitarianism and its Critics

Readings for 17 February 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

- [A] “Introduction: Moral Philosophy.” From Tamar Gendler, Susanna Siegel & Steven M. Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present*, pp. 71-75.
- [B] John Stuart Mill, Selections from *Utilitarianism*, (reprinted in Gendler et al, *Elements of Philosophy*), pp. 77-85 (especially 77-82.)
- [C] Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism, Integrity and Responsibility,” (reprinted in Gendler et al, *Elements of Philosophy*), pp. 96-105 (especially 96-101.)
- [D] Ursula LeGuin, “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas: Variations on a Theme by William James” *New Directions*, 1973; reprinted in *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*, 1975 (V*2)

[A] “Introduction: Moral Philosophy.” From Tamar Gendler, Susanna Siegel & Steve Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present*, pp. 71-75.

Background

This 4-page selection comes from the introductory material in an anthology that I edited. It is written as an introduction to the section that follows it in that anthology, but it is useful for us in that provides an overview of the issues that we will be addressing in this unit of the course.

[Note: The next two paragraphs will make sense if you look at them as you go through the reading.]

[In this unit, we will be reading selections from John Stuart Mill (discussed under “Utilitarianism”) and Immanuel Kant (discussed under “Deontology.”) We have already read the relevant selections from Aristotle in the first unit of the course (discussed here under “Virtue Ethics.”)]

[Note continued: In this course, we are also reading four of the selections that appear under “Puzzles and Challenges”(pp. 74-75) – Judith Jarvis Thomson’s “Trolley Problem” and Thomas Nagel’s “Moral Luck” (discussed here under “Puzzles and Challenges: Puzzling Cases”); “Glaucon’s Challenge” (discussed here under “Puzzles and Challenges: The Value of Morality”); and Cass Sunstein’s “Heuristics and Morality” (discussed here under “Puzzles and Challenges: Morality and Social Science.)

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read pages 71-73, up to the end of the first paragraph of the section entitled “Virtue Ethics.” (You may skim the second paragraph of each of the subsections.)

You may skip or skim the rest, though it would be good if you read the four paragraphs directly related to our future readings:

- the first full paragraph under “Puzzles and Challenges: Puzzling Cases” on page 74 (Thomson)
- the first full paragraph under “Puzzles and Challenges: The Value of Morality” on page 74 (Glaucon’s Challenge)
- the final paragraph under “Puzzles and Challenges: Morality and Social Science” on page 75 (Sunstein)

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts:

Terms and Concepts: moral philosophy/ethics; moral behavior; moral explanation; utilitarianism/deontology/virtue theory; consequentialism; categorical imperative

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does a systematic moral theory try to offer?
- (2) What are the main features of each of the three major ethical theories described in this introduction: utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics?

[B] John Stuart Mill, Selections from *Utilitarianism*, (reprinted in Gendler et al, *Elements of Philosophy*), pp. 77-85 (especially 77-82.)

Background

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) was a British philosopher, economist, and social reformer. He wrote in many areas of philosophy including logic, philosophy of science, metaphysics, and ethics, where he was strongly influenced by Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism. His most influential works in ethics are *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *On Liberty* (1859). The selections we will be reading are taken from Chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism*

You can read more about both Mill at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/> and more about his moral and political philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill-moral-political/>

Remember that the text we are reading was written in 1861, and some of the phrasings may strike you as archaic. Read slowly and carefully, and you should find that things are comprehensible.

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

- Please read the first and second set of selections from Chapter 2 (pp. 77 up to the top of column 2 on p. 80; p. 80 top of column 2 to p. 82 column 2 “deciding such differences”) closely and in full.
- Please read through the remainder of the second set of selections from Chapter 2 (top of second column on 82 “It may not be superfluous” to p. 85, middle of column 1 “itself is recognized”), but don’t worry about the details.
- You may skim or skip the selections from Chapter 4 (85-88)

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: principle of utility or Greatest Happiness Principle; acquaintance with pleasure; higher and lower pleasures; competent judges; rule of action; motivation

Examples: Socrates and the swine

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Mill mean when he says, in the opening sentence: that “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (77)? How does he go on to clarify the Greatest Happiness Principle in the discussion that follows?
- (2) How does he go on to clarify what he means by “happiness” and “unhappiness”? How does he respond on behalf of the Epicureans to the accusation that valuing pleasure as the highest end is “a doctrine worthy only of swine” (77)? Do you think this response adequately addresses the concern that there might be a higher end in life than pleasure?
- (3) What does Mill mean when he claims that it is “better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (79)? How does his discussion on the previous page (78) – in conjunction with the notion of a “competent judge” (79) – give him the resources to support his claim? Do you agree with Mill? Why or why not?
- (4) What is the objection that Mill anticipates and rebuts in the section that begins “I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge...” (80)? Do you think his response is convincing?
- (5) What does Mill mean by saying that those who claim that utilitarianism is too demanding (is “exacting too much” (81)) are “confound[ing] the rule of action with the motive of it” (81)? Do you agree with Mill that “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action” (81)? Why or why not? Would Aristotle agree? Why or why not?
- (6) What are some of the additional “common misapprehensions of utilitarian ethics” (82) that Mill goes on to discuss? How does he respond to these “misapprehensions”?

[C] Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism, Integrity and Responsibility,” (reprinted in Gendler et al, *Elements of Philosophy*), pp. 96-105 (especially 96-101.)

Background

Basic information about Bernard Williams (1929-2003), and about the longer essay from which this selection was excerpted, can be found in the introductory paragraph in *The Elements of Philosophy* (96). You can read more about Williams and his work at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/williams-bernard/>

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

- Please read the opening section (the two examples, 96-97) closely and well. This section should be easy to read and understand.
- Please devote the bulk of your attention to the middle section (“Two Kinds of Remote Effect,” 97-101); try to understand both the general structure and the details of the argument that Williams is making.
- Though it is interesting and important, for the purposes of this class you may skim the third section (“Integrity,” 101-104).

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: remote effect; [integrity]

Examples: George and Jim

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What are the two examples that Williams presents (96-7)? How does Williams think a utilitarian would respond to these cases? What are some of the reasons Williams thinks the utilitarian response is problematic?
- (2) What are the “two kinds of remote effect” that Williams discusses (97-101)? Why does he consider these effects? How does he respond to the utilitarian’s imagined invocation of these sorts of effects? [Note that the discussion of the first effect – the psychological effect on the agent – occupies the bulk of this subsection. (Indeed, most of the subsection is devoted to analyzing and responding to this response.) The second effect – the precedent effect – is discussed more briefly in the closing page of the subsection.]
- (3) [If you read the “Integrity” section] What does Williams mean by “integrity”? Why does he think that utilitarian reasoning does not leave room for this notion? Why does he think a moral theory that cannot account for such a notion is thereby defective?

[D] Ursula LeGuin, “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas: Variations on a Theme by William James” *New Directions*, 1973; reprinted in *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*, 1975 (V*2)

Background

Ursula LeGuin (1929-) is an American science fiction and fantasy writer, noted for her Earthsea and Hainish story cycles. Her official website can be found at: <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/>

The story we are reading – “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” was originally published in 1974. The name “Omelas,” according to LeGuin, was inspired by a sign for Salem, O(regon), though no specific reference to Salem is thereby intended.

The story bears the subtitle “Variations on a Theme by William James.” The “theme” in question is articulated in the following passage from James’ lecture “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” which was originally delivered as an address to the Yale Philosophical Club in 1891.

[I]f the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which... millions [were] kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

William James (1842-1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist (indeed, he was the founder of modern psychology as we know it.) You can read more about James at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/>

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read the story in full.

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) Why do you think we are reading this story in this unit of the course?
- (2) How do you think Mill would respond to LeGuin’s story? How would Williams respond?
- (3) Can you think of contemporary analogues to the Omelas dilemma? How does thinking about those analogues change your perception of LeGuin’s story (if at all)? Of Mill’s and/or Williams’ writings (if at all)?

[Posted 02/12/2011]