

JUSTICE, Fall 2002, Handout 2: Mill's Utilitarianism

1. How does Mill understand *utility*?

- The main idea in Mill's account of Higher Quality Pleasures (HQP's): a life comprising activities that develop and exercise our distinctively human powers is a better, happier life than one that does not.
- In particular, the life with higher quality pleasures is better, even if it includes dissatisfaction: the life of Socrates dissatisfied is better than the life of a fool satisfied.

2. Why is life of Socrates dissatisfied a better, happier life?

- Pleasures— not inner feelings but states and activities that are the objects of preference—are the only things desirable as ends (or parts of happiness), not means.
- *The value* of a pleasure is determined not by intensity/duration, but by *competent judges'* preferences.
- *Competent judges* are agents who meet conditions of acquaintance, susceptibility, and opportunity.
- Pleasures are higher quality if and only if they are *decidedly preferred* by competent judges.
- Decided preference is a matter of unwillingness to trade off.
- Competent judges show decided preference for modes of existence involving exercise of *distinctively human powers*, so development/exercise of those powers is higher quality good.
- Decided preference for exercising human powers is a *general* feature of human nature. Apparent counter-examples reflect limited acquaintance, lost susceptibility, restricted opportunity.
- Sense of dignity explains the decided preference for higher quality.

3. How does Mill's account of the human good lead to his defense of liberty?

- Value of liberty is explained by its contribution to happiness.
- Liberty is good because it fosters self-government, which is a higher quality pleasure; limiting liberty is bad not just because it causes pain/discontentment, but because it limits self-government.
- Mill's liberalism is based not on skepticism or pragmatism, but on an account of the best way to live.