

MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory on which an action is morally right to the extent that it promotes happiness and morally wrong to the extent that it promotes pain. Utilitarianism has two components:

1. (*What is good?*) Hedonism: Pleasure is the only thing which is intrinsically good, and pain is the only thing which is intrinsically bad.
2. (*What is right?*) Consequentialism: An action is right if it maximizes whatever is intrinsically good for people and minimizes whatever is intrinsically bad for people.

Utilitarianism demands impartiality. Everyone's happiness matters equally.

Mill addresses various objections to his argument:

1. Utilitarianism is an unrealistic demand.
 - Response: Utilitarianism doesn't prescribe a *motive* for acting. You do the right thing if you maximize happiness, but your intention in acting doesn't have to be to maximize happiness. Furthermore, a good utilitarian doesn't have to keep all of society in mind when they act. Most actions can only benefit a few people.
2. We don't have enough time to calculate the consequences of our actions before we act.
 - Response: We don't need to do such calculations before we act because throughout history, we have accumulated principles that guide us toward the right action.
3. People will make exceptions for themselves to moral rules. (E.g. someone might make an exception for themselves to the rule "do not kill" because they think that killing will maximize utility.)
 - Response: this is a problem for every moral theory. If anything, utilitarianism *prevents* people from making exceptions for themselves because it provides a clear principle that people should act on when faced with conflicting obligations.

THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

Recall that Omelas is a utopia whose citizens experience bliss at the expense of a child who is locked away beneath the city to live in isolation and squalor. At some point, everyone learns that this utopia can only exist so long as the child suffers..

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you walk away from Omelas? What would "walking away" from Omelas say about your views on Omelan society?
2. What factors are relevant to your decision to walk or not walk away from Omelas?
3. Are the citizens who choose to stay in Omelas responsible for the child's suffering?