

JS Mill

Mill starts in the same place as Bentham - The principle of utility:

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. (1)

Mill defines happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, and makes it clear that happiness is the only good in the world that has intrinsic value.

So far, Mill is just like Bentham

In paragraph 2, Mill turns to the critique of Bentham - That reducing all right and wrong to pleasure reduces people to the level of animals and ultimately leads to a “dumbing down” of society as people will seek to maximize base pleasures.

To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened (2)

Epicurus was a greek philosopher that maintained humans were motivate only by pleasure - he was a psychological hedonist.

The Epicureans have long been criticized for reducing men to the level of animals, because they maintain we, like animals are driven only by pleasure.

Mill's response is also his break with Bentham. While Bentham maintained that a unit of pleasure was a unit of pleasure, regardless of the source, Mill maintains that pleasures differ not simply in quantitative terms, but in qualitative terms as well.

This leads Mill to observe that animals and people have different standards of pleasure:

If the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification (3).

Thus Mill argues that the principle of utility must be modified to “recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.” (3)

Unlike Bentham, who saw pleasure purely in quantitative terms — a unit of pleasure rolling in the mud would be equal to a unit of pleasure from reading a book — Mill argues that there is a non quantifiable divide between higher and lower pleasures

It is upon this distinction that much of Mill’s argument — including his assertion of human dignity — rests.