As we’ve discussed, John Stuart Mill is a consequentialist; specifically, he is committed to that particular brand of consequentialism called act utilitarianism (hereafter AU). Moreover, we saw that AU is not merely based in part on the principle of utility, that is, the claim that

\[ \text{PU**}. \quad \text{An action } A_1 \text{ is morally right iff there is no other action } A_2 \text{ that the agent could have done instead that has higher net utility than } A_1, \]

but that AU takes (PU**) to be the basis of all morality. Argues Mill, (PU**) is the first principle of morality. Mill does not defend the claim that (PU**) is true or that it is the first principle of morality, however, until he has first explained how exactly we are to understand (PU**) and what practical reason(s) we humans have for following the demands of (PU**) (in Utilitarianism, Chapters 2 and 3, respectively). In Chapter 4, Mill turns his attention to prove that (PU**) is true. We will call that argument “Mill’s Proof.”

On two important distinctions. Before we can discuss the details of “Mill’s Proof,” we need to make two important distinctions: an epistemological distinction and argument-type distinction.

An epistemological distinction: a priori vs. a posteriori (epistemic) justification

Epistemology is that field of philosophical inquiry that is concerned with the nature and scope of human knowledge. As such, epistemologists seek to answer such questions as Is (human) knowledge possible? and If that knowledge is possible, what is required to have that knowledge and what kinds of things can be known? To answer such questions, we must inquire into the necessary conditions for a human being to have knowledge. One such condition is the epistemic justification condition (where a belief \( b \) is epistemically justified if there is some condition \( c \) such that: \( b \) satisfies \( c \)). What is the requisite epistemic justification condition? Although philosophers disagree about the details of that condition, they agree that condition recognizes two broad types of epistemic justification: a priori epistemic justification and a posteriori epistemic justification. What’s the difference? Simply put, if a belief is a priori justified, it is justified via rational evidence (i.e., evidence that comes from reason itself) whereas if a belief is a posteriori justified, it is justified via sensory evidence (i.e., evidence that comes from one or more sensations of the relevant type). Let us state the difference more precisely as follows:

- A priori epistemic justification: a person \( S \) is epistemically justified a priori in believing that a statement \( p \) is true only if (i) \( S \) has some evidence \( E \) for believing that \( p \) is true and (ii) \( S \)'s having \( E \) does not require that \( S \) be able to appeal to a particular sensory experience \( e \).

- A posteriori epistemic justification: a person \( S \) is epistemically justified a posteriori in believing that a statement \( p \) is true only if (i) \( S \) has some evidence \( E \) for believing that \( p \) is true and (ii) \( S \)'s having \( E \) does require that \( S \) be able to appeal to a particular sensory experience \( e \).

The following are putative examples of statements that we are epistemically justified a priori to believe: that \( a^2 + b^2 = c^2 \), that all red things are red, etc. Putative examples of propositions that we are epistemically justified a posteriori to believe are that there are more than two people in the room, that at least some apples are red, etc. It is arguably the case that the former does not require an appeal to a particular
sensory experience to be an epistemically justified belief, but that the latter does require such an appeal to be an epistemically justified belief.

An argument-type distinction: a priori vs. a posteriori arguments/proofs

- A priori argument: an argument A is an a priori argument/proof if every premise of A is epistemically justified a priori.
- A posteriori argument: an argument A is an a posteriori argument/proof if at least one premise of A is epistemically justified a posteriori.

An overview of “Mill’s Proof.” “Mill’s Proof” is an a posteriori metaethical argument that utilitarianism is true. That is, he argues that The Principle of Utility is not only true; it is the fundamental criterion of morality. To show this, he must show that happiness is the only intrinsic good and that is so irrespective of what creature is the recipient of that happiness.

It is important to note, however, that his argument is actually made up of three ordered sub-arguments. These are:

- The Analogical Argument. This sub-argument consists of statements 1-5 of “Mill’s Proof.” The all-important underlying principle of The Analogical Argument is this: in the same way that the only proof that an object \( O \) is visible to sight is that people see \( O \), the only proof that happiness is desirable for people is that people desire it.
- The Aggregation Argument. This sub-argument consists of statements 6-8 of “Mill’s Proof.” The all-important underlying principle of The Aggregation Argument is this: if happiness is good for each member of a group, then happiness is good for the group itself.
- The Parts/Means Argument. This sub-argument consists of statements 9-13 of “Mill’s Proof.” The all-important underlying principle of The Parts/Means Argument is this: since it is impossible that a person desire something other than happiness itself or a means to happiness, it follows that happiness is the only possible criterion of morality.

“Mill’s Proof”

(1) Each person desires her own happiness. [premise]
(2) If each person desires her own happiness, then each person can desire her own happiness. [premise]
(3) If each person can desire her own happiness, then each person’s happiness is desirable for that person. [premise]
(4) If each person’s happiness is desirable for that person, then each person’s happiness is a good for that person. [premise]

Therefore,

(5) Each person’s happiness is a good for that person. [from 1-4]
(6) If each person’s happiness is a good for that person, then general happiness is a good for the aggregate of people. [premise]
(7) If general happiness is a good for the aggregate of people, then general happiness is a criterion of morality. [premise]

Therefore,

(8) General happiness is a criterion of morality. [from 5-7]
People can desire nothing other than parts of or means to their own happiness. [premise]

If people can desire nothing other than parts of or means to their own happiness, then nothing other than happiness is a criterion of morality. [premise]

Hence,

Nothing other than happiness is a criterion of morality. [from 9,10]

If nothing other than happiness is a criterion of morality, then happiness is the sole criterion of morality.

Therefore,

Happiness is the sole criterion of morality. (Alternatively: our fundamental moral responsibility is to maximize happiness for members of set s.¹) [from 11,12]²

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¹ Of course, we know that Mill believes that all sentient creatures are members of set s.

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