

Aristotle and Mill on Moral Teleology

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## INTRODUCTION

It could be plausibly maintained that the main ethical theory in the West until recent times has been Aristotleianism, and that today its position has been taken over by Utilitarianism, at least in the English speaking world. That this is at least roughly true will be assured in this paper, which addresses the question which of these two theories is the more adequate. This paper has three chapters. In the first I will examine the basic theory of utilitarianism according to J.S. Mill. In the second I will discuss certain elements of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. Finally, in the third chapter, I will compare the two theories as competing attempts to characterize the best sort of life for man, or, in other words, as competing versions of the ultimate end or telos of a meaningful human life.

### I.

In this chapter I will examine the Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill. The main focus will be first principle, "The Greatest Happiness Principle". This principle simply holds that our actions ought to be such that they tend to promote happiness not only for ourself but more importantly, for the greatest number of others in society as well.<sup>1</sup> This principle is of course based on the assumption that man's actions have a direct causal connection with the happiness of others. Thus, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, this first principle is the Utilitarian ethic, and if everyone had the same idea of what happiness is, there would be nothing left to say about Utilitarian ethics. Unfortunately, this is not the case for there are several possible goods which can be thought to constitute happiness, and the identity and credibility of an ethic depends upon which good it identifies with happiness. Mill identifies happiness with pleasure (and the absence of pain).<sup>3</sup> We can see then that the greatest happiness principle is that our actions ought to be such that they tend to promote maximum pleasure and freedom from pain for the greatest number of people. According to Mill, pleasure and freedom from pain are "the only things desireable as ends, and all desireable things are desireable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain."<sup>4</sup>

It must be emphasized that Utilitarianism is not egoistic. The Utilitarian standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the collective greatest happiness of society. This becomes evident in Mill's discussion of Utilitarian virtue; he fully acknowledges that one's readiness to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of others happiness is the highest virtue found in man.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Mill admits that Utilitarianism can only attain its end by the general cultivation of this nobleness of character. "...even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit."<sup>6 7</sup>

Mill must deal at once with the objection that surely man has higher ends than pleasure. The assumption behind this objection may be that pleasure is limited to sensual pleasure only. Mill replies to the objection so understood along the same lines as Epicurus, as he points out that this protest supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which beasts are capable. "---there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasure of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensations."<sup>8</sup>

Mill thus distinguishes between the quality and quantity of pleasures. In a choice between two pleasures, if one of them is preferred by people who have experience both, apart from any moral obligation to prefer it, then it is the higher pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the estimation of pleasure according to Mill involves two considerations: (1) higher value attaches to the non-sensual pleasures, and (2) pleasures may qualitatively as well as quantitatively higher in value. After all, "Few human creature would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures;---".<sup>10</sup> Why? "A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy--- and in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please for this unwillingness;--- but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity which all human beings possess in one form or other---".<sup>11</sup>

Mill recognizes two sources of sanction for his ethic, an external and internal one. The external sanction, Mill claim, is no different from that on any other moral philosophy. It is simply the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain; "the hope of favor and the fear of displeasure from our fellow creatures or from the Ruler of the universe---".<sup>12</sup> This sort of sanction tends to reinforce one to act morally whether it is within the context of Utilitarian ethics or not.

The internal sanction is our sense of duty, or conscience. Somehow, all our feelings of sympathy, love, fear, religious sentiment, childhood and past recollections and experiences etc., go into forming our ideas of duty and moral sensitivity. To violate these feelings or ideas in a conscious manner, causes in us some sort of remorse. Thus, the ultimate sanction of this, and all morality for that matter, is "the conscientious feelings of mankind."<sup>13</sup> And for those on whom this sanction, or any form of morality at all, has no hold, the external sanctions will keep them within the bounds of Utilitarian morality.<sup>14</sup>

## II.

At the onset of this chapter it will be necessary to make an important distinction between Aristotle's and Mill's terminology. In the Nichomachean ethic there is no "highest good" in the same sense as pleasure is for Utilitarianism. In this respect pleasure was the highest good which was most sure to result in happiness, and Aristotle speaks more in terms of the total good of man making for a happy life through activity of the soul in

in accordance with virtue. Aristotle admits of a highest good in ethics, that being contemplation; however, contemplation is not a major consideration in the Nichomachean ethic.

Another clarification is in order due to the fact that Aristotle's first principle evades being put into a maxim such as Mill's "Greatest happiness for the greatest amount" principle. The closest one could come to maximizing Aristotle's first principle would be: "Activity of the soul in conformity with virtue", or "Eudiamonea". By the nature of this ethic it would be impractical to begin with Aristotle's first principle and reflect back upon it with everything consequent to it, as much prefatory information is necessary before any definition of it will become clear. Hence, the first principle will not become evident until the end of this chapter.

We will begin this chapter with a brief description of Aristotle's physics. Here we will begin an analogy of the knife which will become useful throughout the first few pages in clarifying the good, happiness, the function of man as man, and how man can be good in terms of his function. Therein we will also see why the ultimate good is happiness, why men will seek a happy life, whether or not happiness is possible for man, and how happiness is the result of virtuous actions. Following this we will look at how different views of happiness coincide with and support Aristotle's notion of a happy life. This will include discussion of pleasure, external goods, and whether happiness could be dependant upon good fortune rather than virtuous actions. At this point there will be a brief tentative summary bringing to

surface the main points of the Nichomachean ethic. Finally we will describe the doctrine of the mean and end the chapter with the sanctioning principle for this ethic.

The presupposition of the Nichomachean ethics is Aristotle's teleological physics, which maintains that all things act in accord with their nature by seeking their own natural end. Thus Aristotle begins his ethic by declaring that the good is "that at which all things aim.",<sup>15</sup> conversly then, all actions, inquiry, and choice will aim at some good. Some activities are an end in themselves and others are the means to some product beyond the activity, and since the result or product of an activity is the good for which the activity was initiated, it is always superior to the activity in itself. But there are a great number of activities and corresponding ends, such as health being the end of medicine, a vessel being the end of shipbuilding, and victory, the end of strategy. Moreover, all of these ends can be used as even further ends such as sailing vessels being used in strategy, and victory having a further end of peace, and so on. Thus, Aristotle seeks for the final or ultimate end, the good, a good which is sought for its own sake and is never a means to anything else.<sup>16</sup>

Aristotle argues that anything that "is always chosen as an end in itself and never for the sake of anything else is called final in an unqualified sense."<sup>17</sup> Now in the case of happiness it appears that all good things are done for its sake, since matters such as virtue, pleasure, intelligence, even material or external goods are sought partly for the sake of happiness, and

never is happiness sought for the sake of these goods nor as a means to anything at all. Thus happiness is the most desireable of all good things and is not just one good thing among all other good things. Moreover, due to its finality and self-sufficiency in this respect, it is the ultimate end of our every action, choice and inquiry.<sup>18</sup>

Aristotle shows that if a man can know his function as a man, he will naturally seek a happy life and that in-so-much as he actively seeks the happy life in these terms of fulfilling his function, he will naturally live a happy life. The difference in the nature of a knife which distinguishes it from all other things is that it has a blade and that its end is to cut; thus, a good knife is one that fulfills its function of cutting well--the better it cuts, the better the knife. Thus, an object is a good knife only to the degree that it does or does not fulfill its function of cutting things well. Furthermore, we would say that a good knife is a 'happy' knife because it complies with and fulfills its ultimate function or end of cutting well. Now it is the same vein that Aristotle wants to find the function of man as man. If man cannot know his function as man, then his strivings for happiness will be misdirected and uncertain. "Should we not assume that just as the eye, the hand, the foot, and in general each part of the body clearly has its own proper function, so man too has some function over and above his parts?"<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle points to the one element in human nature that distinguishes us from all other forms of life: the rational element. The rational element in us has two parts: one, that we have



possession of reason; the other, that we are able to act in conformity with our reasoning. Moreover, since our lives are determined by the "activity in accordance with", as opposed to the mere "possession of" reason, it is safe to conclude that "The proper function of man,---consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least not without it."<sup>20</sup> Now at this point, our analogy of the knife becomes inadequate, for the knife itself has no control over its sharpness or dullness. Unlike the knife, Man, because of his rational element, has control over his own "sharpness" or "dullness". He is able to set high standards for himself, and act accordingly, whereas the knife, being non-rational and non-active in itself, can only be what it is. Thus, man should seek a happy life because it is his ultimate function to be rational, and a happy life is possible for him by becoming a good man i.e., fulfilling his ultimate function of being rational by actively living in accordance with high standards or standards of excellence, nobility or virtue. Furthermore we must add "in a complete life.", for just as one swallow or one sunny day do not make it spring, one day or a short time lived well does not make for a happy and blessed life.<sup>21</sup>

There are many popular views of what happiness consists of. Some say it is virtue, some pleasure, others health, wealth or honor; and still others say it is just a kind of well being. Furthermore, the same person may have different estimations of happiness at different times such as when ill, health is happiness; in time of want, wealth may be regarded as happiness, and so on.

Aristotle sets out to show that these views confirm his position. First of all, Aristotle certainly agrees with all of these views in the sense that a certain amount of all these goods and all other goods will go into the living of a happy life. He is in particular agreement with the notion that happiness is virtue since, as we have just seen, a happy life is one that is lived actively in conformity with standards of excellence (virtue). Aristotle recognizes three kinds of goods of which happiness consists: (1) goods of the soul; (2) goods of the body; and (3) external goods. The first of these goods is what we have defined as activities of the soul in accordance with virtue. Goods of the body are things such as health, beauty, pleasure, good, etc., and external goods are wealth, friends, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

There is one important distinction between the first and remainder of the three kinds of goods. This is that the goods of the soul are naturally superior to the rest. The reason being that both goods of the body and external goods are dependant upon good fortune. Many changes and unexpected events come to a man in the course of a lifetime. It is always "possible that even the most prosperous man will encounter great misfortune in his old age."<sup>23</sup> Even in the everyday run of life, everyone suffers pitfalls and bad luck from time to time. Thus, if our happiness depended upon good fortune, no man could be called happy as long as he were alive. Fortune therefore, can have no determination whether we fare well or ill, it is merely an accessory to human life and cannot be a superior constituent of happiness. Nevertheless, even though these goods are not superior, they are still

needed in some degree. Many actions cannot be performed without the aid of friends, wealth, health and etc.. Similarly one's happiness may be spoiled from being ugly in appearance, or from having to live all alone with no family or children and so on. Thus, happiness does require a certain amount of external and bodily goods but these goods are not superior to the goods of the soul, for we have all known cases of those who have beauty, wealth, health, and are surrounded by good family and friends etc, yet are not happy.<sup>24</sup>

Now we shall look at why goods of the soul are superior and more specifically, how it is that activity in accordance with virtue constitutes happiness. First of all, the life of one who is active in accord with virtue, is a life that is pleasant in itself. For just as a lover of horses derives pleasure from horses, and a lover of beauty derives his pleasure from beautiful things, and so on, so too does a lover of virtue in general find pleasure in noble acts. Further, some goods in themselves are not pleasant by nature, for example, health and wealth are not necessarily in themselves pleasant, for a lover of these goods may only derive pleasure from the things that the money will buy, or from the activities they can perform as long as they are healthy. However, men who love what is noble derive pleasure from what is naturally pleasant. In the same way we would not call a man virtuous if he did not find virtuous acts pleasant, for a man would not be considered generous if he did not enjoy generous acts. Thus, many activities will lead to happiness but it is in the best of them that happiness consists.<sup>25</sup>

So far, it is possible to see that Aristotle's view of happiness is absorbing several other views that were mentioned earlier. The views that happiness is just a kind of well being are all perfectly complementary to Aristotles view, for even "well being" implies a kind of pleasant existence. However, this view as described above may appear as only theoretical for it is still the case that bad fortune can crush a mans happiness. Yet Aristotle persits:

"---When a man bears many great misfortunes with good grace it is not because he is insensitive to pain but because he is noble and high-minded.

If as we said, the activities determine a man's life, no supremely happy man can ever become miserable, for he will never do what is hateful and base. For in our opinion, the man who is truly good and wise will bear with dignity what ever fortune may bring, and will always act as nobly as circumstances permit, just as a good general makes the most strategic use of the troops at his disposal, and a good shoe maker makes the best shoe he can from the leather available,---<sup>26</sup>

This basically describes the Nicomachean ethic, happiness is the end for which all people seek for its own sake, yet it is not something that is achieved or gained in a single moment or a day or after four years of college or on a wedding day and so on. It is rather something that accompanies our activities; it is a way of doing things, its a way of life: a whole life of activity of the soul in conformity with high standards, or virtue. As we said in the previous chapter, ethics provides us with both an end to human action, and a means for measuring our actions as good or bad, virtue or vice, etc.. Having just dealt with the first of these we will now move on to some discussion of the

latter in terms of Aristotle's "doctrine of the Mean".

Aristotle recognized that men are different from one another and that each is endowed with their own capabilities for being good. Unlike Plato, who strictly held that a man was either good or not good, and that there was only one proper way to behave, Aristotle felt that there are perhaps as many different ways of being good as there are differences between men. He arrives at this conclusion by simply taking a look at people in general. What is good for one person may not be good for another; for example, while ten pounds of food per day may be just the right amount for a big man, it would certainly bring discomfort to a small man. Similarly, if six pounds of food were too much for me and brought me discomfort, and four pounds left me unsatisfied, then the proper amount would lie in the mean, that is, somewhere between four and six pounds of food. The mean for me would have to be found by experimenting until I found the amount that was just right. Again whatever I find to be the mean for myself may not be the mean for others.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way that one may find the mean amount of food to eat, one also may find the mean in their actions. The mean of our actions is always virtue, conversely, the life of virtue is a life of moderation. For example, courage is the mean between fear and confidence. Thus, the mean is always that which stands between the extreme, and the deficiency. Hence, another example of the mean in our actions could be that of gentleness as the mean between the excess of short-temperedness and the deficiency of apathy; moreover, it is in this same way that we can find the

mean of our every emotion and action. Every man must find the mean for himself through trial and error, and in an action of the same intensity one man may find he is able to be courageous while another man may find that he is boardering into overconfidence. This does not make one man more happy than the other, nor one man less good than the other, rather they are both acting in accord with perfect virtue, the mean for them.<sup>28</sup>

Not every action or emotion has a mean, such as spite, shamelessness, envy, or adultery, theft, and murder. These and other such emotions and actions imply wrongness and badness just by their very word. It is not in the excess or the deficiency that these are bad as they are wrong from the very start, and it is impossible to even do right by performing them. In the same way, there can never be a mean excess or a mean defeciency. In other words there cannot be a position between excessiveness and excessiveness because it nevertheless implies that the action would be excessive and therefore not the mean. Thus in order for men to be happy, they must act moderately by striving for the mean between extremes and deficiencies as they see them pertaining to their particular life, and must never try to make a right out of those actions or emotions that are absolutely wrong and bad.<sup>29</sup>

As for the sanction of this ethic, it has already been evident from the start. In-so-much as one is a member of the human species; and in-so-much as one has knowledge of what the good is, he will naturally begin acting in such a way as to live a happy life, and he will naturally find the opposite if he resists.

Evil is due to the lack of this knowledge of the good, for no one with full knowledge that an act would be evil could even voluntarily fulfill that act. Man naturally acts toward some good, and the more he learns of the good, the more he will act on it and live a happy life. The truly virtuous man will naturally live Eudamonea.

### III.

In this chapter I will compare the theories of Mill and Aristotle and answer the question which of them is superior by determining which has the more adequate conception of the human end or telos. This will require a brief preliminary discussion of the concept teleology.

Teleology is a relationship between an activity and the end of that activity. A teleological relationship is the condition whereby a person can find his existence to be meaningful in terms of those activities and the ends or end at which they are aimed. A teleological relationship in which the end is ultimate or final is considered superior to one in which the end is only intermediate (an end which is a means to a further end). Hence, a teleological relationship will be more meaningful to one's existence as it tends to be superior and less meaningful as it tends to be less than superior. For example, a man starts feeling weak and rundown and notices he has gained too much weight. He decides that this is an unhealthy situation and plans to eat balanced meals and exercise in order to permanently regain his health. He has set up a teleological relationship between

balanced eating and exercising (the activities, or the means, by which he will attain his goal) and health (the goal). The teleology of this arrangement makes the functions of eating balanced meals and exercising more meaningful to this man's existence than the same functions would be for a man who only wanted to be sure his best suit would fit correctly on a certain day in the near future. Furthermore, if the latter man sought meaningfulness in his existence only through such short term teleological relationships as the one just described, he would find little if any meaning. Moreover, we would all agree that the experience of meaninglessness in our existence is undesirable. Therefore, in ethics we will find that only a superior teleological ethic will be desirable. That is, an ethic which has an ultimate end which has an ultimate end which is never a means to a further end.

In the ethics of Utilitarianism we recall that the first principle was "the greatest pleasure of the greatest number". Here we have a teleological relationship between man's desire for pleasure (the means) and pleasure for the greatest amount of others (the end). If we stop and look at this however, we notice that pleasure is not a means. Pleasure is the resulting sensation of an action; moreover, we often times do not know in advance if an action will bring ourselves pleasure, much less whether or not it will give pleasure to anyone else. Furthermore we cannot predict the total effects of an action, and thus an action that brings pleasant results at first may have undesirable effects in the long run. For example, a marriage of convenience may be immediately gratifying to all involved, yet in time they may all



suffer regret if the marriage fails; the developement of a nuclear weapon brought an immediate end to the war with Japan, yet the long range consequences to the development of such weaponry has become highly undesirable. In practice Utilitarianism is liable to collapse into an ethic of personal self-interest. That is, since a man cannot predict the total effects of an action, he acts on those inclinations which are most likely to result in pleasure for himself. Furthermore, since he cannot predict the total effects of an action, he will only act on those inclinations which will bring fairly immediate gratification unless it is absolutely certain that an action will bring long range gratification such as putting money in a savings account knowing it will accrue interest. Anything beyond that is considered a risk, and even here a man will only act on that which appears either least risky or worth some risk because it may bring him intense gratification. Thus in practice the teleology of utilitarianism comes down to a relationship between man's acting on the desire for pleasure (the means) and the fairly immediate gratification thereof (the end). In short ethic is inadequate.

My point here is that Mill is caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, Mill wishes to make pleasure the unifying and integrating principle of practical activity. But the concept of pleasure is not itself a unity. To the extent to which Mill attempts to convert pleasure into a unity (by treating it, say, as the satisfaction of conscious desire, his appeal to this principle alone is inconsistent with the metaphysical integrity of the person. For the notion of conscious desire is

the notion of "wanting something now" and to simply pursue what one wants now is to reduce the practical continuity of the person to a mere sequence of momentary satisfactions. If, on the other hand, Mill treats pleasure as the complex concept we ordinarily believe it to be, it cannot serve the purpose of providing an intersubjectively acceptable standard for the assessment of conduct. For it is quite possible that there are ultimate disagreements about what is pleasurable. And if Mill tries to circumvent this problem by appeals to competent judges and their sense of the qualitatively higher pleasures, his view comes very close to the Aristotleanism he proposes to improve upon.

Utilitarianism may at first seem to be on the right track with its first principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. However pleasure simply does not hold up as an ultimate end.

Utilitarianism in practice becomes an ethic of enlightened self-interest which tends toward calculated self-gratification. As we saw, this entails a loss of ultimate meaning in one's existence, thereby making man's quest for happiness an aimless and undirected search.

In Aristotlean ethics a man has a teleological relationship between his natural tendency to seek the good and to act in accordance with virtue (the means) and a happy life over all (the ultimate end). This ethic is far more adequate than utilitarianism. Its ultimate end always remains firmly in place, as it were, since by its very definition it can only pertain to a life completely lived. All activities of a man's life can be measured and found meaningful in terms of this ultimate goal, and thus they can never

becomes a series of actions with ends of immediate gratifications. For, as we saw in Chapter Two, activity in accordance with virtue will always have pleasant and good consequences, just as the opposite activities will always have the opposite consequences, and despite the changing fortunes of ones life a virtuous man will always make the best of it because his ultimate end remains the same: a happy life over all.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Oskar Piest ed. UTILITARIANISM; John Sturat Mill.  
(Indianapolis: The Bobbs - Merrill company, Inc.; 1976.) p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Ostwald. trans. Aristotle; Nichomachean Ethics.  
(Indianapolis: The Bobbs - Merrill Educational Publishing;  
1977.) p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp. 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. pp. 22-23.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. pp. 25-26.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. pp. 42-46.

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