

Mill/Ethics

Tutorial Questions and Readings

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Tutorials at the Queen's College

Overview

This course introduces you to general themes in moral philosophy through the lens of J. S. Mill's *On Utilitarianism*. The aims of this course are therefore twofold: to give you a solid grasp of Mill's arguments, and to allow you insights into the general arguments, positions and methods which are prevalent in moral philosophy.

I will presume that you have read *On Utilitarianism* over the vacation break; it's short and accessible. (For further vacation readings, please see below.) Each essay question and tutorial will be focussed around a part of the book, and branch out to a bigger question in ethics. Please study this guide closely; it also contains other advice on how to prepare adequately for this course. For all matters relating to this course, you can contact me at all times via email.

Structure

There will be four tutorial sessions, and we will meet in the first four weeks of Trinity. You will have to write an essay for each session.

Deadlines

I have set topics and questions for each tutorial (see below). You will be required to send your essay to me at **10 am** the day before the tutorial. For example, if your tutorial is on Monday, send your essay to me Sunday, 10 am, *at the latest*.

Please raise all difficulties and problems you have with your essay as soon as possible. If I do not receive your essay on time, I might not read it. If your essays reach me repeatedly late or not at all, I will raise the essay with your college tutor.

Please send all essays by email, in a Word-compatible format (.doc, .docx, .rtf), to matthias.brinkmann@magd.ox.ac.uk. Please do *not* send me PDF documents, as I can not annotate them easily. Note that if you present your essay, you also need to send it to your tutorial partner.

Tutorials

I will not ask you to read out your essay. However, in each session one of you will be required to *present the central argument* of her or his paper. Try to be precise, focussed and succinct in your presentation: the aim is for you to show that you can not only write about an academic topic, but talk efficiently and convincingly about it.

As a second step, your tutorial partner will be required to give a *critical response* to the presented essay. (I will assume that you have read her/his essay in advance.) Giving good academic criticism is itself a valuable skill. Your response should be charitable to the other person's work, engage with its central points in a critical but constructive manner, and raise points for discussion.

On the basis of the presentation and its response, we will then discuss the central issues raised by the essay, and the topic more generally conceived. It can be helpful if you send me questions about the essay, topic or readings in advance of the tutorial.

Written Comments

I will provide written feedback for the essay of the student not presenting. Time permitting, I will also give written feedback for the presenting student's essay. I will not give tentative grades for your papers, though I will aim to provide you with clear and helpful feedback on your progress.

I tend to write lots of comments, but the quantity of my comments says nothing about the quality of your essay: even excellent essays will receive a lot. Furthermore, my main aim is to help you improve your essays. So more than 90% of my comments will be criticisms, questions or suggestions. This will be especially the case for the first essays we discuss together. So don't get discouraged by either of this.

The aim of these tutorials is for you to learn—so please raise any concerns you have with my teaching or the topics we are dealing with immediately.

Writing Philosophy Essays

We will discuss how to write a good philosophy during the tutorials, of course. But here are some brief remarks you might find helpful in advance.

General

In the words of Jim Pryor, "a philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defence of some claim" (see below). This excludes two kinds of papers from being acceptable: First, papers which do not defend any substantive claim, but are primarily summaries of the literature, or a collection of observations and unconnected musings. It is not enough for your paper to merely summarise or endorse the secondary literature. You must make your own argument.

Second, a good philosophical essay tries to make a reasoned *argument*: it offers the reader reasons to believe what the author proposes. An argument starts from premises, and reaches a conclusion through a number of clear and logical steps. Thus, a good paper is not merely a retelling of one's opinion, or a rhetorical appeal to some authority or authoritative principle.

Focus

A good essay answers the question it is addressed to, not more and not less. (The questions you can find in the next section.) At the same time, of course, you should read and think widely about the topics on the reading list.

Every finitely long essay, and every exam answer in particular, must strike a balance between breadth—the amount of material covered—and depth—the detail at which the material is covered. In my experience, most students tend to over-emphasise breadth. Be picky. In your reading, you will come across many different interesting points and arguments. Do not try to cover all of them, but highlight the ones you think most interesting and convincing, and structure your essay around these.

Lastly, do not try to reach for the stars. It is tempting to try in a philosophical essay to solve the underlying philosophical issue once and for all. This will overwhelm you, as it would most professional philosophers. Try to find a manageable, “bite-sized” aspect of the overall question, and aim to make some progress there.

Style

There is a common misunderstanding that complicated intellectual thought is (or only can be) expressed in complicated language. However, the primary function of an academic essay is to communicate an argument to your reader. Thus, almost the opposite is true: you should follow the maxim to make things *as simple as possible* (but not simpler). Aim for clear and direct language. You will get no bonuses for style, and being overly ornamental will actually count against your essay.

You will come across many specialist terms during your reading (“deontology”, “intrinsic value”, etc.), or words which philosophers use in uncommon ways. Be cautious with using such concepts: only use them if you are certain you know their precise meaning. If you can express your claim without them, see whether you can avoid them. You should also not presume that your reader necessarily knows or shares your understanding of a specific term.

The pronoun “I” can and should be used freely in philosophy essays. Avoid awkward passive phrases such as “It can be argued that ...”. Instead write, “I will argue that ...” or “Williams objects that ...” or “Williams argues that ... and I disagree because ...”.

Structure

Similarly, make your essay structure as transparent as you can. Tell your reader explicitly how your argument works, and how its parts hang together. Use connective phrases such as

I will first argue that ... and then argue that ...

I will outline Mill’s position ... and then criticise it by arguing ...

On the basis of these points, I conclude that ...

I will now consider the objection that ...

One standard essay structure is the following:

1. Introductory paragraph—summarising in a few sentences the main claims and argumentative structure of the essay;
2. Clarifications and definitions—clarifying any ambiguities and defining central terms, insofar as necessary;
3. Central argument(s)—the major body of the text, giving the central argument;
4. Possible objections and replies—objections which could be made against the central argument, and rebuttals of those arguments;
5. Summary—brief, usually paragraph-long summary of the main argument, and noting any open questions.

This is not a structure you have to stick to, but it might be helpful for guidance.

Academic Referencing

It is essential that you use proper academic referencing. Adequately referencing one's source materials is one of the basics of academic technique, and you should get into the habit of adhering to it early on. Plagiarism will under no circumstances be accepted. Talk to me if you are in doubt about how to reference properly.

Further Advice

The majority of the preceding advice, and much more, is also contained in Jim Pryor's excellent guide on how to write a philosophy paper. You can find it at

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Another good guide comes from Douglas Portmore, available at

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/14740340/tips.pdf>

For all other question you have about writing a philosophical essay, talk to me directly, or raise them during our tutorials.

Questions and Readings

There is a faculty reading list on this option which you should consult in addition to the following suggested readings. It is available on WebLearn: browse to the Faculty of Philosophy, and there to "Undergraduates > Reading Lists > Mods and Prelims".

In the following, readings marked with an asterisk ("*") are **mandatory**, and in tutorials I will presume that you have read them. Other readings are recommended, and will help you to improve your understanding of the topics. Read them if you have the time.

General Readings

The faculty reading list offers good advice on which general readings to have a look at. Two books in particular I will make heavy use of,

Crisp, Roger. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*. London: Routledge, 1997.

West, Henry (ed.). *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

Crisp's book in particular is a valuable introductory source. To each of the tutorial sessions, there is one or more corresponding chapter(s) in his guide. Thus, it can be very helpful to start your preparation by reading the relevant material in Crisp. Other general literature I recommend:

Smart, J. J. C., and Bernard Williams. *Utilitarianism: For and against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. (Smart argues for, Williams against utilitarianism. Despite its age still of enormous value. Smart's essay is very accessible, and Williams' "integrity objection" has spawned an enormous literature.)

Mulgan, Tim. *Understanding Utilitarianism*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007. (More recent, general introductory work.)

Donner, Wendy. "Mill's Utilitarianism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, edited by John Skorupski, 255–292. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. (A benign overview of Mill's moral philosophy, with a focus on recent secondary literature.)

Kagan, Shelly. *Normative Ethics*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998. (General introduction to the field.)

Vacation Readings

Over the vacation break, I **expect you to read** (1) *On Utilitarianism*, (2) the Smart/Williams book or Mulgan's introduction (your choice), and (3) Pryor's guide on how to write philosophy essays (link above).

In addition, it can be helpful to have a look at Kagan's *Normative Ethics*, Griffin's *Well-Being* (tutorial 1), or Hooker's *Ideal Code, Real World* (tutorial 2). Reading philosophy can be difficult and slow in the beginning, but the more you read, the easier it will become—so starting now will save you lots of time later.

Tutorial 1: Well-Being

Essay Question

Does Nozick's experience machine show hedonism to be implausible?

OR Does the best form of hedonism make a distinction between "higher" and "lower" pleasures? How is that distinction to be made?

Remarks

Utilitarians claim that well-being is the only thing that ultimately matters, morally speaking. But what *is* well-being? One answer is given by (ethical) hedonism, which is usually taken to be Mill's view. In this tutorial, we will focus on whether this is a plausible position, and possible alternatives. Whichever essay question you choose, you

should first give a clear outline of what hedonism is, what it claims, and how it differs from alternative views.

General Questions

How can different theories of well-being be classified? Is well-being “subjective” or “objective,” and how should we understand these terms? Which theory of well-being is the best, and how can we argue for it? What role does well-being have in our wider moral thinking? Is well-being the only thing that matters, morally speaking? What role does well-being play in moral motivation? Do we always aim to maximise our own well-being? How can we find out what well-being is?

Readings

- *Mill, *On Utilitarianism*, ch. 2. (Other chapters can be relevant, too.)
- *Crisp, *Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, chs. 2 & 3.
- *Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Appendix I, “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best,” pp. 492–501. (A succinct and influential classification of different theories of well-being.)
- *Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974. “The Experience Machine,” pp. 42–45. (A famous objection to hedonistic theories of well-being.)
- *Green, Thomas Hill. *Prolegomena to Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003 (1883). §§162–167. (Short critique of Mill’s distinction between “higher” and “lower” pleasures.)
- Crisp, Roger. *Reasons and the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Chapter 4, “Well-Being,” pp. 98–125. (A contemporary defence of hedonism.)
- Griffin, James. *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Chs. 1–4. (Discusses various theories of well-being at great depth, and argues in favour of a preference theory. Excellent overview.)
- Anderson, Elizabeth. “John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living.” *Ethics* 102, no. 1 (1991): 4–26. (Highlights the “experimental” way in which Mill thinks we find out what is good, and connects it with Mill’s biography.)

Tutorial 2: Act-Utilitarianism and Rule-Utilitarianism

Essay Question

Is rule-utilitarianism superior to act-utilitarianism?

OR What place is there for rules in act-utilitarianism?

Remarks

The two essay questions you can choose from are subtly different, and understanding how they are different is itself important. The first question asks you straightforwardly which of two views is the better. The second makes no mention of comparison. It rather asks you whether act-utilitarians can find a derivative or indirect role for rules in their framework. It is thus essential to your essay that you outline clearly in which ways “rules” might be important in a utilitarian view. In the tutorial, we will also focus on the broader question on what forms of consequentialism can be distinguished.

General Questions. Are there general rules in morality? What is the best way to defend such rules? What is the connection between impartiality and rules? If a moral view is true, do we also need to be motivated by it? Should utilitarianism be formulated in terms of actual, or in terms of expected consequences? Is “scalar” utilitarianism the best form of utilitarianism? What is the difference between utilitarianism and consequentialism?

Readings

- *Mill, *On Utilitarianism*, ch. 2&3. (Other chapters can be relevant, too.)
- *Crisp, *Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, ch. 5.
- *Rawls, John. “Two Concepts of Rules.” *Philosophical Review* 64, no. 1 (1955): 3–32. (A discussion of how utilitarians might account for the importance of promising and other practices by distinguishing two kinds of rules.)
- *Hooker, Brad. “Right, Wrong, and Rule-Consequentialism” in West, *Blackwell Guide to Mill’s Utilitarianism*, pp. 233–248. (Discusses two possible arguments for rule-consequentialism, and defends a modern form of it. For more detail, see also Hooker’s book (below).)
- *Bales, Eugene. “Act-Utilitarianism: Account of Right-Making Characteristics or Decision-Making Procedure?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1971): 257–65. (Important distinction between two ways of interpreting utilitarianism.)
- Hare, Richard Mervyn. *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. Chs. 1–3. (An influential account of a “two-level” utilitarianism.)
- Urmson, J. O. “The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J. S. Mill.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 3, no. 10 (1953): 33–39. (Argues that Mill is a rule-utilitarian.)
- Hooker, Brad. *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. Oxford University Press, 2000. (Hooker revives rule-consequentialism in this influential book. The best current theory of rule-consequentialism on offer.)
- Arneson, Richard. “Sophisticated Rule Consequentialism: Some Simple Objections.” *Philosophical Issues* 15, no. 1 (2005): 235–51. (Criticises Hooker’s rule-consequentialism.)

Tutorial 3: Justice and Utilitarianism

Essay Question

“Utilitarianism has no place for the idea that individuals have rights. This is why it fails.” Discuss.

Remarks

The obvious first question you ought to ask yourself in preparing this question is what a right *is*. Don't rely on some intuitive ideas here, but rather attend to what philosophers have to say about it. (If in doubt, check the *Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy* article on rights.) Try to give a clear definition of what a right is, or what a “right-based” morality might look like. On that basis, you can then explain whether and how utilitarianism might be able to explain rights.

DEPENDING on how the first two tutorials go, I might broaden this topic to include integrity objections to utilitarianism (sec. 6 on faculty reading list) or alternatives to utilitarianism (sec. 3 on faculty reading list). In that case, I would allow for two weeks of preparation.

General Questions

What is justice? What are rights? Do rights always correspond with duties? What is the difference between “someone having a right to” and “some (action) being right”? What role do rights play in our moral thinking? Are they trumps? Are they necessarily absolute? Do rights exhaust the realm of justice? Does justice (or rights) outweigh all competing values? Can there be a “utilitarianism of rights”? What is the difference between consequentialism and deontological ethics? Does consequentialism fail to take seriously the “separateness of persons”?

Readings

- *Mill, *On Utilitarianism*, ch. 5. (Other chapters can be relevant, too.)
- Crisp, *Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, ch. 7.
- *Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition. Harvard: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. §§5&6, pp. 19–30. (Rawls argues that utilitarianism puts priority of the “good” over the “right,” and therefore fails to take seriously the “separateness of persons.”)
- *Sumner, L. W. “Mill’s Theory of Rights” in West, *Blackwell Guide to Mill’s Utilitarianism*, pp. 184–198.
- *Lyons, David. “Utility and Rights.” In *Rights, Welfare, and Mill’s Moral Theory* (OUP 1994), ch. 6; or in Waldron, Jeremy (ed.), *Theories of Rights* (OUP 1984), ch. 5. (Argues that utilitarianism cannot account for individuals having rights.)
- Brandt, Richard. “Utilitarianism and Moral Rights.” In *Morality, Utilitarianism, and Rights*, 196–214. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. (A utilitarian reply to Lyons’ critique.)

Hart, H. L. A. "Natural Rights: Bentham and John Stuart Mill." In *Essays on Bentham: Jurisprudence and Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. (Argues against Mill's reconstrual of rights inside a utilitarian framework, and compares Mill's approach with Bentham's.)

Kamm, Frances. "Nonconsequentialism." In *Intricate Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. (A dense, excellent outline of the structure of a nonconsequentialist view.)

Tutorial 4: Naturalistic Fallacy and Mill's "Proof"

Essay Question

Is Mill's "proof" of utilitarianism fatally flawed? In particular, does Mill commit the "naturalistic fallacy"?

Remarks

In this tutorial, we will delve into questions of moral methodology: how can we give arguments for a moral view? On what basis can a moral view be shown to be true or false (if at all)? This requires some more general reflection than we have done so far. The first part of the question leaves you a relatively large leeway to comment on Mill's "proof". For the second, more specific part of the question, make sure you clearly understand what the "naturalistic fallacy" is supposed to be. Note that merely calling it a "fallacy" does not make it one: you might think that there is nothing fallacious about it. (If so, what is the meta-ethical view you hold?)

General Questions

Can any moral view or proposition be "proven"? If so, how, and from what basis? Are there any objective moral truths? If so, are they based on natural facts? What is the connection between moral facts and natural facts? What are natural facts? Is the gap between "Is" and "Ought" unbridgeable? If not, how can it be bridged? If there are non-natural moral facts, is intuition the only way how we can know them? Is the idea of objective morality metaphysically strange?

Readings

*Mill, *On Utilitarianism*, ch. 4. (Other chapters can be relevant, too.)

*Crisp, *Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, ch. 4.

Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1903]. In the book:

*Chapter 1, "The Subject Matter of Ethics," pp. 53–88, focus on pp. 53–72. (Moore famously explains what he regards as the "naturalistic fallacy" in ethics.)

*Chapter 3, "Hedonism," pp. 111–160, focus on pp. 111–125. (Moore discusses Mill's "proof" of hedonism, and objects that

it commits the naturalistic fallacy: Mill mistakes “desired” for “desirable.”)

*West, “Mill’s ‘Proof’ of the Principle of Utility,” in West, *Blackwell Guide to Mill’s Utilitarianism*, pp. 174-183.

*STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (plato.stanford.edu), articles “Moral Non-Naturalism” and “Moral Naturalism.” (Consult one or both of these articles on some background about the two meta-ethical views under debate. For greater depth, have a look at Alexander Miller’s *Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Polity 2003).)

Seth, James. “The Alleged Fallacies in Mill’s ‘Utilitarianism.’” *The Philosophical Review* 17, no. 5 (1908): 469–88. (A defence of Mill’s against various objections.)

Mackie, John Leslie. *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977. Chapter 1. (Accessible and influential argument that all values are subjective.)