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UTILITARIANISM AND "SECONDARY PRINCIPLES"

BY JOHN M. BAKER

One of the difficulties recent critics have had with *Utilitarianism* concerns the discrepancy between the orthodox interpretation of Mill as an "act-utilitarian" and the strong emphasis he gives to "secondary principles". Considerable light can be shed on this problem by relating Mill's ethics to his logic.

Utilitarianism holds that the desirability of an action is linked to its consequences. The nature of this link is discussed by Mill in *A System of Logic* (VI. xii) as the more general link between Art and Science. An art "speaks in rules, or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact" (VI. xii. 1). But to every art corresponds a science :

The relation in which rules of art stand to doctrines of science may be thus characterized. The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combination [*sic*] of circumstances by which it could be produced. Art then examines these combinations of circumstances, and [if] any of them are . . . in human power, . . . converts the theorem into a rule or precept. (VI. xii. 2)

The only one of the premises, therefore, which Art supplies, is the original major premise, which asserts that the attainment of the given end is desirable. (VII. xii. 2)

Now according to utilitarianism, the desirable end of the art of ethics is happiness. "The sciences of human nature and society" (VI. xii. 1) tell ethics what actions will promote happiness, and ethics converts this information into rules of conduct. Orthodox interpreters of course realized that Mill's utilitarianism attempts to relate ethics to facts, but they overlooked the *scientific* nature of these facts. Behind every moral precept there stands a causal law discovered in a manner important to understanding *Utilitarianism*.

The area of human affairs is so complex that Mill's experimental methods can have only limited application. The laws of human nature to which they lead are logically very simple, but are too general to be immediately useful. The Deductive Method is applied to produce useful laws; it combines the higher laws of human nature deductively, and verifies the results by experience (III. xi; VI. iii, ix).

Mill's *Logic*, then, sets out the method to be used in ethics. The same point of view is present, although less explicitly, in *Utilitarianism*; recognizing its presence is essential to the interpretation of both Mill's vocabulary and his position on secondary principles. The distinction between a "science" and "a practical art, such as morals or legislation" (p. 2 of the *Everyman* edition, to which all references are made) is found in the second paragraph of *Utilitarianism*. "The detailed doctrines of a science are not usually

deduced from, nor depend for their evidence upon, what are called its first principles" (p. 1), but the doctrines of an art *are*, presumably in the standard art-science relation outlined in *Logic* :

Major premise, a first principle of Art

Minor premises, theorems from Science

Therefore Conclusions, doctrines of Art.

Mill has various terms for these doctrines. Apart from simply "rules", "laws", "maxims", and "precepts", he often calls them "secondary" or "subordinate" principles, stressing their dependence on the major premise, the Greatest Happiness Principle. Twice (pp. 22, 25) he calls them "corollaries", the second time in conjunction with the term "the original theorem", again emphasizing their deductive character. He also speaks of "intermediate generalisations" :

But to consider the rules of morality as improvable, is one thing ; to pass over the intermediate generalisations entirely, and endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. (p. 22)

It seems at first as if this term also refers to moral rules. But such a reading requires a liberal stretching of the term "generalisations", which seems especially unlikely in light of Mill's distinction in *Logic* between rules and assertions. (And see his discussion of philosophical language, especially *Logic* IV. v. 3.) A more plausible view is to take "intermediate generalisations" to refer to the grounds for various secondary principles ; that is, to the minor premises in the art-science deductions. Mill is arguing that these premises need not be of the form 'This particular action will cause happiness', but 'This class of actions will cause happiness'.

The use of the term "intermediate generalisations" has further implications, however. For Mill also speaks of them in *Logic*, although there he calls them "middle principles" after Bacon's *axiomata media* :

Bacon has judiciously observed that the *axiomata media* of every science principally constitute its value. The lowest generalizations, until explained by and resolved into the middle principles of which they are the consequences, have only the imperfect accuracy of empirical laws ; while the most general laws are too general, and include too few circumstances, to give sufficient indication of what happens in individual cases, where the circumstances are almost always immensely numerous. . . . But I conceive [Bacon] to have been radically wrong in his doctrine respecting the mode in which these *axiomata media* should be arrived at. . . . He enunciates as an universal rule, that induction should proceed from the lowest to the middle principles, and from those to the highest, never reversing that order, and consequently, leaving no room for the discovery of new principles by way of deduction at all. (*Logic*, VI. v. 5)

This deficiency is remedied, Mill goes on to argue, by the Deductive Method. The use of the term "intermediate generalisations", then, supports the view that the secondary principles of *Utilitarianism* are grounded on scientific laws discovered by that method. And the last footnote of *Utilitarianism* contains additional evidence supporting this view :

Mr. Herbert Spencer . . . regards happiness as the ultimate end of morality ; but deems that end only partially attainable by empirical generalisations from the observed results of conduct, and completely attainable only by deducing, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness.

With the exception of the word 'necessarily', I have no dissent to express from this doctrine . . . [for my] own opinion . . . is, that in ethics, as in all other branches of scientific study, the consilience of the results of both these processes, each corroborating and verifying the other, is requisite to give to any general proposition the kind and degree of evidence which constitutes scientific proof. (p. 58)

But if the rules of morality have so strong a scientific backing, how is it possible for them to conflict or to have exceptions? Another link between *Logic* and *Utilitarianism* points towards the answer to this important question (and that is as far as the present discussion can extend). In the footnote about Spencer, in his formulation of the Greatest Happiness Principle (p. 6), and in various other discussions (pp. 16, 19, 22), Mill uses the concept of "tendency". This concept is introduced in *Logic* (III. x. 5) and used there many times (see, e.g., III. x. 6-8; VI. v. 4):

All laws of causation, in consequence of their liability to be counteracted, require to be stated in words affirmative of tendencies only, and not of actual results. . . Thus if it were stated to be a law of nature that all heavy bodies fall to the ground, it would probably be said that . . . [a] balloon [is] an exception to that pretended law of nature. But the real law is, that all heavy bodies *tend* to fall. (III. x. 5)

Moral rules, then, are based on causal laws discovered by the scientifically rigorous Deductive Method; these laws affirm tendencies of actions. This account is clearly evidenced in *Logic* and *Utilitarianism*. Although it is ultimately compatible with forms of both "act-utilitarianism" and "rule-utilitarianism", it at least partly supports the attack launched by Mr. Urmson (this journal, January 1953) against the orthodox view. For to take Mill's secondary principles as mere "rules of thumb" is unjustly unsympathetic and uncommonly superficial.

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