<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Utilitarianism and Secondary Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
<td>Baker, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>1971-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication information</strong></td>
<td>Philosophical Quarterly, 21 (82): 69-71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Wiley-Blackwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to online version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217572">http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217572</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4287">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4287</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher's statement</strong></td>
<td>This is the author's version of the following article: John M. Baker (1971) &quot;Utilitarianism and Secondary Principles&quot; The Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 21, No. 82 (Jan., 1971) (pp. 69-71) which has been published in final form at <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217572">http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217572</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded 2021-05-10T12:17:44Z

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)

© Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.
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 duties.
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 concurrence 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.

Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

Reprinted from Philosophical Quarterly
vol. 21 no. 82,
January, 1971