

Phil. DS
KDR 4/4/23: Mill

Consequentialism, Utilitarianism (esp. slide 9?) Rule vs. act, actual vs. expected

Bentham vs. Mill: happiness, pleasure, high vs. low pleasures

What is happiness?

A problem with utilitarianism as a moral theory without psychological egoism?

Using David Brink's SEP "Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy":

Utilitarianism assesses actions and institutions in terms of their effects on human happiness and enjoins us to perform actions and design institutions so that they promote—in one formulation, maximize—human happiness

Utilitarianism was a progressive doctrine historically, principally because of its universal scope—its insistence that everyone's happiness matters—and its egalitarian conception of impartiality—its insistence that everyone's happiness matters equally.

Psychological egoism: an agent's own happiness is and can be the only ultimate object of their desires

Bentham: "On the occasion of every act he exercises, every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness."

Bentham is a **hedonist** about utility or happiness, treating happiness as consisting in pleasure....So the version of psychological egoism to which he is attracted is psychological hedonism

Is Mill a psychological egoist? It can seem so at U IV,2 (p. 35)

But Brink: "It may appear that Mill endorses psychological egoism in his so-called "proof" of the principle of utility in Chapter IV of Utilitarianism. There, Mill aims to show that happiness is the one and only thing desirable in itself (U IV 2).... But the proof does not reveal Mill to be a psychological egoist. While Mill does say that each person has an ultimate desire for her own happiness, he does not say that this is each person's only ultimate desire. Indeed, in the second half of the proof he allows that some agents have a disinterested concern for virtue and that they care about virtue for its own sake (IV 4–5). And what is true of virtue is no less true of less grand objects of desire, such as money or power (IV 6). These too it is possible to desire for their own sakes. If psychological egoism claims that one's own happiness is the only thing that is desired for its own sake, then this shows that Mill is not a psychological egoist."

Jennifer Frey on Laurie Santos:

: “Santos, like most social and cognitive scientists, thinks of happiness within an entirely subjective frame. Happiness is about feeling good, which means experiencing more positive than negative psychological states over a period of time. This suggests, of course, that a life is nothing more than a series of moments we might call good or bad depending on how they made us feel, and the good life one with more good than bad in the final tally. What Santos calls “life hacks” and “science-based tips”—in this case, to enhance students’ time-management skills—are mere techniques for ensuring, as much as one can, that one’s psychological perspective has a net gain on the positive side. As Santos herself admits, it makes no difference whether the objects that make you feel happy are even real, let alone tethered in some way to the demands of morality.

[<https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-universe-and-the-university/>]: Laurie Santos, a cognitive scientist, is a star psychology professor at Yale. She is world-renowned for a course she taught in 2018 titled “Psychology and the Good Life,” which made headlines when over a quarter of Yale’s undergrads enrolled. Santos assures young Yalies—and now, through online coursework and a popular podcast, the rest of us—that we can all live happier lives with the scientific, “evidence-based tricks” she teaches. This is critical since—as Santos is quick to inform us—students at Yale, despite being poised to take over the levers of wealth and power in this country, turn out to be anxious, depressed, lonely and adrift. With good-hearted cheer and solid technique, Santos aims to change this—indeed, she claims to have transformed thousands of lives through her lectures. . . .

I came to know of Santos by way of an invitation to participate in a dialogue with her, which was extended to me by some Christian student organizations at Yale. I am a philosopher who works at the flagship university of the state of South Carolina, where we were, at the time, at the tail end of a multimillion-dollar grant project bringing together philosophers, theologians and psychologists to explore how virtue, happiness and meaning in life might be plausibly related. I am also a Roman Catholic reasonably well-versed in my own intellectual tradition. Presumably, I had been summoned to remind students that Christian philosophers and theologians have concerned themselves with the question of happiness for over two millennia now, and this too is worthy of our attention.

Santos made this commitment plain during a dialogue that night with me in front of about six hundred Yale students. To test how wedded she was to the idea that happiness was fundamentally a subjective state, I posed the following hypothetical: if we could design a virtual-reality machine that was sophisticated enough to guarantee that we could no longer tell the difference between real goods and their simulacra, would she choose a “happy life” plugged into a machine over the complicated mess of a real human life? Without skipping a beat, Santos replied that she would certainly choose the solipsistic “happiness” the machine offers. This was when I realized that Santos’s vision was much darker than the gimmicky self-help she had offered earlier that afternoon.

In the limited time given to me, I tried to present a different vision of the good life, one grounded in philosophy rather than science. On what I call the classical view, to think about happiness (what the Greeks called eudaimonia) is first and foremost to think about how we should aspire to live and what sort of person we most wish to become. And there is no way to bring our thought and imagination to bear on this topic without serious and disciplined reflection on the good: more specifically, what human excellence is and what it would take to realize it in one’s own life.