

Arguing for Utilitarianism: lecture slides 50-51 (/75). The lowering of expectations is certainly an important part of Mill's case, and ultimately something like the argument on slide 51 is the general shape of Mill's appeal to us, but Mill's more direct case in the first three paragraphs of Chapter IV (pp. 35-36.1), and then carrying on, especially in the next two paragraphs (so through p. 37.2), seems important to his case for utilitarianism. But that direct argument gets tangled up with Mill's brush with psychological egoism

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

Psychological egoism: an agent's own happiness is and can be the only ultimate object of their desires. So, 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, **albeit one with a wider notions of happiness (than Bentham)**? It can seem so at U IV,2 (p. 35)

But Brink (SEP): "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.">

As part of Mill's case for utilitarianism, a teacher at Pomona College [at <http://carneades.pomona.edu/2019-Ethics/06.Mill.html>] construes Mill as arguing for happiness being a good in this way:

1. People desire happiness
2. The best proof that something is desirable is that people desire it. By analogy, the best proof that something is visible is that people see it.
3. So the best proof available shows that happiness is desirable.

And then our teacher remarks: "This appears to commit the fallacy of equivocation. Equivocation involves using a term with two different meanings. In this case, "desirable" means "capable of being desired" in the second premise but in the conclusion (3) "desirable" means "good" or "worth being desired." So the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The most that follows is that happiness can be desired, not that it is good or worth being desired." I think Mill can be exonerated on this charge of equivocation and his argument can be understood in a way that makes it sensible.

But to make sense of Mill's views on what are and should be our ultimate (in some sense) ends, we may need more than the two-place distinction on slide 16 (/75): Mill's utilitarianism says that only happiness is in some sense ultimately good, but he can't mean by that that it's the only thing that's non-instrumentally good ("finally" good, in Dan's term), since, at paragraphs 4-5 of Chapter IV (pp. 36-37), he says that other things, including virtue, are (and apparently should be) desired "in themselves," and not merely as means to something else.

slide 50:

Arguing for Utilitarianism

First, he lowers expectations:

"I shall...attempt to contribute something towards the understanding and appreciation of the "utilitarian" or "happiness" theory, and toward such proof as it is susceptible of. It is evident that this cannot be proof in the ordinary and popular meaning of the term. Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good must be so by being shown to be a means to something else admitted to be good without proof."

Slide 51:

Arguing for Utilitarianism

1. Utilitarianism is a simple, elegant theory that offers systematic and compelling explanations of a wide range of claims we ordinarily take to be moral truths.
2. Utilitarianism is highly resistant to objections—the most natural objections can be accommodated within the utilitarian framework.
3. Approaches to morality that *seem* to be non-utilitarian ultimately have to appeal to something very much like utilitarianism anyway, in order to resolve internal conflicts.
4. So utilitarianism looks pretty good.

Slide 16:

Utilitarianism

A distinction in goodness:

1. Instrumentally good = good only because and insofar as it leads to other things which are good.
2. Finally good = good in itself, not because it leads to some other good.

Utilitarianism says that only happiness is finally good. But other things may be instrumentally good, insofar as they lead to happiness (e.g., health, wisdom, wealth, beauty etc.)