

## **CHAPTER III**

# **IN THE QUEST OF A MORAL STANDARD : UTILITARIANISM**

### III

When we look at this world of chaos and cruelty, of wars and worries, of rapes and reptiles, we curse men for their immorality. What, then, is it to be moral? How it can be explained? A minimal characterisation that suffices for the present is that to be moral is to be rational. If morality is not a rational enterprise, we could expect very little from it. It could even cease to exist for us. A rational conception of morality as we understand it, should be distinguished from the theory of ethical rationalists. For our purpose it is rather a teleological conception which says that the end of morality is to serve human interest in a rational manner. This, in a way, brings law and morality closer. It also opposes the view that "... whether it (morality) is thought of as an instrument of society or as a personal code, morality must be contrasted with prudence."<sup>1</sup> This way of looking at morality's link with reason is not something novel. The Greeks had viewed reason as the source of practical wisdom—the virtuous life was, for them, inseparable from the life of reason. The modern version of rational morality is associated with forms of utilitarianism. J. S. Mill holds that our faculty of morality is a branch of our reason<sup>2</sup> and in order to accept or reject the utilitarian standard, rational grounds have to be produced.<sup>3</sup> Even, contemporary thinkers, like Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams have said that "... utilitarianism has appeared to be the 'rational' moral theory per excellence."<sup>4</sup>

We will examine the utilitarian theory as a rational vision of morality, that morality has to do with fulfilling some end through some principles. The famous book *Utilitarianism* of John Stuart Mill has been

described by many as an intellectual link between the eighteenth and twentieth century.

The utilitarian theory has actually been initiated by Hutcheson as early as 1725 who stated that the objective or material end of good conduct is 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'.<sup>5</sup> That phrase became the slogan of British utilitarianism in the modified form as 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.<sup>6</sup> It is Jeremy Bentham (1748–1833) who worked out a complete system of utilitarian ethics. For Bentham, determinism in psychology is important, because he wishes to establish a code of law or a social system which would automatically make man virtuous. Bentham holds that the end of our actions is happiness. "Bentham held not only that the good is happiness in general, but also that each individual always pursues what he believes to be his own happiness."<sup>7</sup> Bentham uses the words 'pleasure' and 'happiness' as also 'pain' and 'unhappiness', as synonyms. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), the most influential of the utilitarians continued and considerably modified the tradition in the mid-Victorian period. According to him, "... utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness".<sup>8</sup> Very next, Mill equates happiness with pleasure. "By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, ...".<sup>9</sup> But on the nature of pleasure as the end of our actions, Mill differs from Bentham.

The utilitarian principle as it has been stated by Mill may be summarised as follows :

1. "All actions are for the sake of some end ...".<sup>10</sup>

2. "...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness ...”<sup>11</sup>
3. By happiness is meant pleasure.
4. "... the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned.”<sup>12</sup>
5. Not every kind of pleasure is good or right to desire but "... some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and valuable than others.”<sup>13</sup>  
That is, Mill introduces a difference of quality among pleasures and there are accordingly higher and lower pleasures.
6. Which one of two pleasures is more desirable or higher? Mill answers, "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure.”<sup>14</sup>
7. Mill offers a proof for the principle of utility in two parts :
  - A. "The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it ... In the like manner, I apprehend the sole evidence it is possible to produce that any thing is desirable, is that people actually desire it.”<sup>15</sup>
  - B. "...each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”<sup>16</sup>

As to the first point stated above, Mill takes it for granted from the very definition of action that every action must have some end. Action is

the process of doing things.<sup>17</sup> Doing things implies a conscious agent behind an action. Nature does not perform actions. Natural events just happen. Thus human actions are different from natural events. An unconscious human activity may also be called an event. A conscious agent always acts for some end – this is self evident. “Actions are explained by invoking the agent’s reasons for performing them. Characteristically, a reason may be understood to consist in a positive attitude of the agent toward one or another outcome, and a belief to the effect that the outcome may be achieved by performing the action in question”.<sup>18</sup> Again, “Of human actions, in the stricter sense, which are expressive of consciousness or which, to use the technical term of psychology, are ‘conations’ – the most obvious type is the purposed action, in which the performance of action is preceded by an idea of the thing to be done.”<sup>19</sup> By the word ‘stricter sense’, actions are differentiated from unconscious human activities. But, some actions, e.g., reflex actions, which though unconscious, are not without purpose.

Regarding the proof offered by J. S. Mill, Bertrand Russell, of whom ‘Mill was the godfather’<sup>20</sup> writes, “John Stuart Mill, in his utilitarianism, offers an argument which is so fallacious that it is hard to understand how he can have thought it valid”.<sup>21</sup> This is undoubtedly very harsh but not unexpected from Russell. The criticism of Mill’s proof to which Russell refers to was actually made by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*. “Moore’s criticism of Mill’s argument ... has had a considerable effect upon the subsequent history of ethics ...”.<sup>22</sup> If Moore’s argument is valid, it not only prevents one to define good as pleasure but one would have no other way but to accept Moore’s non-hedonistic utilitarian ethical theory. It states the following :

- I. Things which ought to exist for their own sake are things that are intrinsically good. Moreover, it is impossible to define 'good' since it denotes a simple unanalysable property known by intuition. In Moore's own language, "If I am asked 'what is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter".<sup>23</sup> And,
- II. We ought to perform actions that will cause most good to exist as a consequence.<sup>24</sup>

Moore's teleology is not easy to understand. It seems to me a sheer contradiction to speak both of intrinsic, simple, unanalysable 'good' and of degrees of 'good'. 'Good' is as simple and unanalysable as 'yellow' is.<sup>25</sup> But can we speak of degrees of yellow? Can we speak of 'more yellow' or 'less yellow'? What we can speak of is only different shades of yellows (or simply different yellows) but not of most yellow or least yellow. However, let us concentrate on Moore's critique of Mill. Moore calls the attempt to define 'good', in terms of natural properties the 'naturalistic fallacy'. He writes "... philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were simply not 'other', but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the naturalistic fallacy ...".<sup>26</sup> (It is not only a fallacy to define non-natural into natural, the fallacy is also involved in the confusion between two natural objects. The term naturalistic fallacy is somewhat unfortunate). He rejected all attempts to derive the notion of good from natural objects, the attainment of which might be felt to be desirable, such as honour or aesthetic enjoyment of a glorious sunset but also from reasoning or metaphysics or *apriori* insights into the essence of good. By definition, Moore means analysis. This is the analysis of a

complex thing into its simple components. Moore's concept of definition, Mary Warnock states, is very obscure.<sup>27</sup> We will come to this point later. Only a complex thing like a horse is definable but not a simple thing like yellow is.<sup>28</sup> His argument that good is indefinable (or unanalysable) rests on the analogy between 'good' and 'yellow'. 'Good' is indefinable as 'yellow' is. If one tries to define 'good', say, as 'self-realisation', Moore would say that it is still significant to ask whether self-realisation is good. And if the definition were a correct one, it would have to be the same as asking whether self-realisation is self-realisation. In the like manner, 'good' cannot also be defined as pleasure. Because "when they say 'pleasure is good', we cannot believe that they merely mean to say 'pleasure is pleasure' and nothing more than that."<sup>29</sup> He also says "... there is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure."<sup>30</sup> Thus, Moore seems to maintain that to define 'A' as 'B' is to identify 'A' and 'B'.

The problem, as it seems to me, is a linguistic one. The confusion that "whether we are supposed to be discussing a word or some object denoted by a word" may be of less importance to Mrs. Warnock,<sup>31</sup> but to me it is not less important. From the manner in which Moore speaks of 'definition' and 'analysability', it seems that Moore understands definition as analysability. But then, it is still significant and legitimate to ask 'what is the definition of analysability'.

Secondly, Moore's notion of analysis also does not hold good. "an analysis of a complex notion never sets out to give an identity, nor is the statement in which the analysis is given an identity statement."<sup>32</sup> If one defines man as a rational animal, one is not identifying humanity and rationality; it does not prevent one to say that besides rationality, man has

other properties. Rationality is only an essential characteristic of human beings that differentiates them from other creatures of the world.

Mill's proof and his analogy between visible and desirable have also been vehemently criticized by Moore. Mill gives a proof, which, Moore thinks consists of a fallacious confusion of 'desirable' with 'desired'.<sup>33</sup> And the fallacy is so obvious that it is quite wonderful how Mill failed to see it, Moore says, there is after all, no analogy between 'visible' and non-visible'. Moore argues that 'visible' means 'able to be seen' but 'desirable' does not mean 'able to be desired'. The analogy is rather to be sought between 'desirable' and 'damnable', which does not mean what is damned but what should be damned. Bertrand Russell also writing on Mill's proof says that "He does not notice that a thing is 'visible' if it can be seen, but 'desirable' if it ought to be desired. ... We cannot infer what is desirable from what is desired."<sup>34</sup> These criticisms remind us of what Hume said before : We cannot validly derive a moral conclusion from factual premises; the 'is' bird cannot lay an 'ought' egg.<sup>35</sup> And Moore rejects utilitarianism simply because Mill commits the naturalistic fallacy in identifying 'desirable' with 'desired'.<sup>36</sup>

But Moore's critique is not as wonderful as it seems. Being a consistent empiricist, Mill is not offering a deductive proof of matters of fact. As 'visible' does not mean 'ought to be seen'. We know that there are philosophers of the empiricist tradition who hold that values fall neither into analytic nor into empirical or synthetic categories. Wittgenstein writes at the end of the *Tractatus*:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world, everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value and if there were it would be of no

value. If there is any value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being so. For all happening and being so is accidental”.<sup>37</sup>

Ayer says that ethical concepts are ‘pseudo-concepts’ and they do not stand for qualities of things which can be picked up by senses. But I would like to state some points here. True, values are not in things, but they are about things. They may represent our emotions, but emotions about matters of fact. Values are imposed by us on matters of fact; they are ends of our actions. It can be said that values are interpretations of matters of fact on the basis of consequences. Thus, if really Mill would have been passing from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, he would have done not much harm as it had been said. But Mill is not doing any such thing. Mill is not passing from ‘is’ to ‘ought’. Visibility is not a quality of the object we see. An object is visible because we see it; light is a condition which makes it possible. Similarly, a thing is desirable because we desire it. Chapter IV of Mill’s *Utilitarianism* has the subtitle – “Of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible”. And when he says that “The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it”<sup>38</sup> etc. he is simply pointing to an empirical fact by the word ‘proof’. Similarly, the statement “... the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it”<sup>39</sup> points to an empirical fact. Mary Warnock says, “The sole evidence is not evidence in the sense of proof that something is good, but it is evidence simply that people already know, without waiting for proof that it is good.”<sup>40</sup> Secondly, Moore’s criticism of Mill is not justified because their approaches towards ethical problems are not same. Mill is trying to discover the principles of ethical conduct whereas Moore’s problem is to

find out the reference of ethical terms and this moves him to an intuitionist epistemology. Thus, Mill cannot be a legitimate opponent of Moore.

Mill, we have seen, says that the end of our actions is pleasure. We have also seen that Moore is not successful in his attempt to show that Mill commits a naturalistic fallacy by reducing 'good' to pleasure. But Moore is not saying that our actions do not have any end. In fact, though an intuitionist, Moore is not a deontologist like such intuitionists as Prichard and Ross. Moore is a teleologist. The ultimate value, the good by itself cannot be derived from anything beyond itself. About the values that occur in our experience Moore says that it is by anticipating and judging the consequences of any action which we intend that we do or do not find the good in the world of experience. Since we desire the good, we shape our action in accordance with the good. We do not derive the good from an anticipated future reality. This teleological argument is rather a complex one. "... by aiming at the good we cause it to happen" rather than extracting the good from an anticipated future reality and hence avoiding the naturalistic fallacy. Do all these allow us to accept Mill's "pleasure as an end" theory? We do not think so for there are other difficulties in accepting 'pleasure as an end' theory of Mill. Controversy arises when Mill poses himself to make his distinction of higher and lower pleasures consistent with his version of utilitarianism. From his arguments, it seems that there is a psychological dilemma within him. After this distinction is stated by him, Mill writes about the distinction made that "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and valuable than others."<sup>41</sup> But we find none other than Mill himself to doubt the compatibility of the distinction. He cannot bear the objection against the utility theory having pleasure as end to be a

doctrine worthy only of swine.<sup>42</sup> But the qualitative differentiation between various kinds of pleasure cannot save the 'pleasure as an end' theory.

In the summary of Mill's theory which we have stated earlier this chapter, we can see that for Mill, of two pleasures to which all or almost all give a preference is the higher pleasure. That is, the quantity determines the quality! But is almost all of the people desire the sort of pleasure that is worthy only of a swine? No, this is not possible, says Mill. An 'intelligent' person, a person of 'feeling and conscience' would give "a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties".<sup>43</sup> Here one may sense a fallacy involved. First, it is said that the higher pleasure is that which is desired by 'almost all of the people and the very next moment it is said that an intelligent person could not desire a lower pleasure. (Here a double standard is used). Now, which one is the mark of higher pleasure? 'Intelligence' or the number of people who desire pleasure? It cannot be said that 'number of intelligent people' should determine pleasures to be higher. If it could be so said, then too, the standard would be intelligence, and not the number. First of all, almost all of the people may not be intelligent. Second, if I want almost all people to choose the higher pleasure, I must ensure that almost all of them are intelligent. Once they become intelligent, intelligence alone becomes the mark of higher pleasure. Thus, 'intelligence' and 'quantity' both cannot have the same status. Socrates did not need to say that virtue is that which is desired by most of the people; he only said that virtue is knowledge. And Mill says, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied".<sup>44</sup> Moreover, intelligence certainly is important, but it cannot be a moral standard. One cannot be judged morally in terms of his intelligence. A 'fool' cannot be

said to be 'immoral' simply because he is a fool. Finally, ethical hedonism is based on psychological hedonism. In that case, hedonism does not allow any qualitative distinction between pleasures: How could Mill overlook this point? "He did not notice that these terms 'higher' and 'lower' introduce a non-hedonistic standard of value."<sup>45</sup> Henry Sidgwick also writes "If the pleasures are not compared in respect of mere pleasantness, we have intuitivism in the place of hedonism".<sup>46</sup> I do not intend to say that the distinction between higher and lower pleasures cannot be made. We may legitimately call one higher or superior and the other lower and in that case elements other than pleasantness may contribute to goodness of superior pleasure, "... but it is a distinction that cannot be made by the strict hedonist, for it does imply that there are other elements of value in a good whole besides pleasantness ...".<sup>47</sup>

Thus, if Mill is to fare as a strict hedonist, pleasures cannot be measured qualitatively. A more serious objection is made against this 'pleasure as an end'- theory that do we really pursue our own pleasure? The question aims at the very foundation of psychological hedonism. Let me quote

"When it is said that each man desires his own happiness, the statement is capable of two meanings, of which one is a truism and the other is false. Whatever I may happen to desire, I shall get some pleasure from achieving my wish; in this sense, whatever I desire is a pleasure ... This is the sense of the doctrine which is a truism.

But if what is meant is that, when I desire anything, I desire it because of the pleasure that it will give me, that is usually untrue. When I am hungry I desire food, and so long as my

hunger persists, food will give me pleasure. But the hunger, which is a desire, comes first; the pleasure is a consequence of the desire.<sup>48</sup>

Butler also holds that our basic desires are actually our 'primary appetites' e.g., food, fame, sex etc. Mary Warnock finds this objection against hedonism to be a ingenious one and asserts that a distinction is to be made between a 'pleasant thought' and a 'thought of pleasure'.<sup>49</sup> At this point we may borrow William McDougall's words to expose the mistake made by the hedonists and to point to the complexity of the human mind that often is exploited by a hedonist. Let us quote at length :

Of other theories, the one which has exercised the greatest influence in modern speculation is the theory of psychological hedonism; this is the theory of action which was unfortunately adopted by the founders of utilitarianism as the psychological foundation of all their social and ethical doctrines. It asserts that the motive of all action is the desire to obtain increase of pleasure or diminution of pain.

... It is, no doubt, possible to show the fallacious nature of the doctrine by careful examination of our own motives and unbiased consideration of the conduct of other men. For such consideration shows that when we desire any object or end, as, for example, food, what we normally desire is the object or end itself, not the pleasure that may attend the attainment of the end. But the complexity of the human mind is so great, its springs of action so obscure, that, in almost every instance of human behaviour, it is possible for

the psychological hedonist to make out a plausible interpretation in terms of his theory.<sup>50</sup>

From what we have discussed so far, we can conclude that Mill is not committing any naturalistic fallacy by reducing good without alteration of meaning to properties of natural objects. But pleasure cannot be the end of our moral conduct. Moreover, morality being a social institution, it cannot take a subjective condition like pleasure as a standard for granted. What could be the standard then? What does prompt us to act morally? Could it be our 'primary appetite'? An unprejudiced investigation reveals the undeniable truth of struggle for existence. It is our instinct of survival that lies behind our moral conduct. Human beings primarily think of protecting themselves from alien, unfriendly situations. And this is at least implicitly contained in the thinking of the utilitarians. "Bentham's ideal, like that of Epicurus, was security ...". When I call something good, it may be because of its pleasantness, but it is pleasant because it is conducive to or at least not a threat to my survival or existence.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> W. Frankena, *Ethics*, New Delhi : Prentice Hall of India, 1982, page 7.
- <sup>2</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, on Liberty, Considerations on Representative Government*, London : Everyman's Library, 1992, page 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism and beyond*, New Delhi : Foundation Books, 1974, page 16.
- <sup>5</sup> W. Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, London : Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1957, page 184.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 184.
- <sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London : Routledge, 1994, page 741.
- <sup>8</sup> *Utilitarianism*, page 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, page 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 14.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 36.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 36.
- <sup>17</sup> *Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (Oxford).

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- <sup>18</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (ed.) Robert Audi, U. K. 1998.
- <sup>19</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (Vol I), Edinburgh : T and T Clark, 1959, page 76.
- <sup>20</sup> Introduction to *Utilitarianism*, page ix.
- <sup>21</sup> F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. VI., London : Search Press, 1976, page 744.
- <sup>22</sup> Mary Warnock, *Ethics since 1900*, London : Oxford University Press, 1976, page 20.
- <sup>23</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, London : Cambridge, 1959, page 6.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Warnock, *Ethics since 1900*: page 12.
- <sup>25</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*: page 10.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, page 10.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ethics since 1900*, page 14.
- <sup>28</sup> *Principia Ethica*, page 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, page 12.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, page 14.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ethics since 1900*, page 17.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>33</sup> *Principia Ethica*, page 66.
- <sup>34</sup> *A History of Philosophy*, page 744.
- <sup>35</sup> J. G. Brennan, *Ethics and Morals*, New York : Harper and Row, 1973, page 24.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ethics since 1900*, page 24.

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- 37 Ibid, page 65.
- 38 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, page 36.
- 39 Ibid, page 36.
- 40 *Ethics since 1900*, page 21.
- 41 *Utilitarianism*, page 8.
- 42 Ibid, page 8.
- 43 Ibid, page 9
- 44 Ibid, page 10.
- 45 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol VIII), London : E. B. Ltd., 1958, page 772.
- 46 H. B. Acton in his introduction to Mill's *Utilitarianism*.
- 47 *Introduction to Ethics*, page 189.
- 48 *A History of Western Philosophy*, page 745.
- 49 *Ethics since 1900*, page 27.
- 50 William Mc Dougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, London : Methuen Co. Ltd. 1950, page 313 – 314.