

Crisp, Roger: *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. xiii + 232.

Riley, Jonathan: *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Mill on Liberty*, London, Routledge, 1998, pp. xiii + 241.

‘You know that I have done my work.’ These were supposedly John Stuart Mill’s last words to his step-daughter Helen, with whom he lived in France the last years of his life. Mill had retired to Avignon in order to pursue his life-long interest in botany. And although he still wrote philosophical essays on political issues, he had left the turmoil of British politics after having been defeated by a Tory candidate in the 1868 election.

In his recent book *Mill on Utilitarianism*, Roger Crisp takes Mill’s last words as indicating that he was satisfied with his achievements in spite of the fact that he had failed to convert the world to utilitarianism (p. 7). But why would a utilitarian want to convert the world to utilitarianism? As we know, many utilitarians argue that whether utilitarianism should win acceptance depends on the consequences, and it is not clear that the consequences would be favorable. Indeed, Sidgwick famously toyed with the idea that utilitarianism should be kept a secret, at least for the majority, a stance Bernard Williams once called ‘Government House’ Consequentialism’ since ‘it treats the majority like the natives in a

colony’, to use Derek Parfit’s entertaining paraphrase of Williams’ view.¹

Nevertheless, the fact that utilitarians are disposed to take the consequences of their writings into consideration means that we face a particular problem of interpretation in dealing with them. Do they really mean what they say or are they just saying what they think best promotes the good? The problem is noted by Crisp. But he thinks that it shouldn’t be exaggerated, at least not in the case of those writings that are most important for our understanding of Mill’s utilitarianism (e.g., *Utilitarianism*). Unlike in the case of, say, *The Subjection of Women*, these essays were not meant for a wide audience.

The purpose of Crisp’s book is to provide an introduction to Mill’s views on utilitarianism and related issues. It gives rich accounts of, among other things, his theory of welfare, his ideas about customary morality and its relationship to utilitarianism, and his views on integrity, social justice and the liberation of women. It is elegantly and clearly written, and Crisp provides sensible interpretations with a careful eye both for difficulties in determining what Mill really believed at various points, as well as for problems with the very ideas he attributes to Mill. In other words, *Mill on Utilitarianism* is likely to serve very well as a guidebook.

¹ Sen, A., and Williams, B. (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982, p. 16. See Parfit, D., *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984, p. 41 for the paraphrase.

One chapter (chapter 4) is devoted to Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism, a piece of reasoning that has been the object of much contempt over the years. Indeed, Russell writes in his *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979) that Mill's 'proof' is 'so fallacious that it is hard to understand how he can have thought it valid' (p. 744).

Mill's argument involves several controversial steps. The step which has attracted most criticism is surely the inference from the claim that happiness is actually desired to the claim that happiness is desirable, an inference that is supposed to make Mill an offender against Hume's law. Another problematic link in the argumentative chain, however, is the step which Mill takes when going from the claim that that each person's happiness is desirable for himself, to the claim that the *general* happiness ought to be pursued.

Crisp wants to rehabilitate both Mill and the proof. As for the first step, he points out that the inference was never intended to be deductively valid. Mill just wanted to present considerations 'capable of determining the intellect [...] to give [...] assent to the doctrine' (p. 70). Indeed, as Crisp emphasizes, accusing Mill of offending Hume's law is uncharitable, since he in many other places pledges allegiance to it.

As for the second step, Crisp suggests that Mill might invoke some principle of impartiality. But he also notes that this principle cannot in turn be grounded by mere appreciation of the fact that everyone desires his own happiness. Rather, it is a fundamental moral belief for which Mill provides no further grounds. Crisp

concludes that the quarrel between Mill and the intuitionists of the time (e.g., Sedgwick) had less to do with whether intuitions have a rôle in the assessment of moral principles *at all* than with which particular intuitions to accept.

But even if these moves may save Mill's proof as a respectable piece of reasoning, they also make it less exciting. After all, Mill wanted to rely on a more exacting view on the justification of moral principles than that of the intuitionists, a view more in line with his general empiricism. Now we are told that they were all basically in the same methodological boat. Moreover, even given Crisp's reconstruction, there are gaps to be filled. For instance, Crisp suggests that Mill thought that the fact that something is desired at least provide *evidence* for thinking that it *ought* to be desired. But why? What is it about our 'faculty of desire' that makes it a reliable guide? Obviously, Mill should be able to tell some story here, and it is unsatisfying that he seems to have none to tell.

In another chapter (chapter 5), Crisp discusses which particular version of utilitarianism Mill accepted. Was Mill a rule utilitarian, as J.O. Urmson once claimed?² Crisp argues convincingly that it is more appropriate to see him as an act utilitarian. He also makes other reasonable suggestions about the nature of Mill's utilitarianism.

Some questions, however, are not considered. Mill is famous for his views about 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. In the chapter

² 'The Interpretation of the moral philosophy of J.S. Mill', *Philosophical Quarterly* 3, 1953.

dealing with this idea (chapter 2), Crisp suggests that Mill thought that no amount, however great, of a lower pleasure might outbalance any amount, however small, of a higher pleasure, and concludes that ‘Mill drops full cardinality, in the sense that there is for him no single additive cardinal scale for measuring welfare’ (p. 31). One may expect that this view is likely to affect how Mill’s utilitarianism should be formulated. Unfortunately, Crisp leaves the question untouched.

One brief passage in chapter 5 calls for more serious criticism (pp. 97-9). This is a passage where Crisp discusses the focus of Mill’s utilitarianism. Mill focuses, he claims, on actions, since the question he primarily wants to answer is ‘What is the right thing to do?’ Mill’s answer is simply that we should act so as to produce the greatest possible balance of pleasure over pain. In what follows, let us say that if an action meets this condition then it is *optimal*. If not, then it is *suboptimal*.

Now Crisp notes, as many have before him, that it may hold for some people that they produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain by causing themselves to have, or maintain, a character that occasionally leads them to perform suboptimal actions. For instance, remember Parfit’s discussion of Clare, a woman whose otherwise utility-maximizing love for her children sometimes steers her away from the optimal thing to do.

Crisp thinks, correctly in my view, that it is in line with the utilitarian spirit to think that such people *should* cause themselves to have the optimal character, even if it occasionally results in

suboptimal actions. But he also says that by focusing on actions, as Mill does, we might overlook this point.

I must say that I fail to see why. Crisp seems to think that Mill's utilitarianism commits him to holding that one should have the kind of character that results in one's always performing optimal actions (p. 97). But this is strange, at least if the question of which character we should have should be interpreted as follows: 'What sort of character should we cause ourselves to have?'. Obviously, if there is a character such that causing oneself to have it would result in the best consequences overall, then it would be wrong, according to Mill's utilitarianism, *not* to cause oneself to have it. That it is apt to lead to suboptimal actions is irrelevant. Of course, this means that Mill has to concede that it could be right to cause oneself to have a character that results in wrong actions. But surely Mill has never held that we should maximize *rightness*, rather than utility.

Anyway, Crisp offers an alternative way of formulating utilitarianism which is supposed to be preferable. Thus the basic utilitarian's principle is seen to be:

P1 The best possible history of the world is that in which the balance of pleasure over pain is greatest.

This principle is said to have the following analogue for actions:

P3 The best actions are those which feature in the best possible history.

P3 is not entirely easy to understand, and Crisp provides few clues in *Mill on Utilitarianism*. Judging from what he says in one of his earlier papers,³ however, it seems that the alternative way to deal with characters that he wants to offer can be reconstructed along the following lines.

Suppose that A succeeds in bringing about the best possible history by causing himself to have a character C, and suppose that C eventually leads him to perform a suboptimal action α (say, helping his own child rather than some strangers). According to the traditional view, a utilitarian should say that it was right of A to cause himself to have C, but nevertheless hold on to the view that an action is right only if it is optimal and thus concede that α was wrong (albeit, perhaps, blameless). P3, on the contrary, appears to imply that α was *right*, since it ‘features’ in the best history. Thus, P3 seems to conflict with the traditional act utilitarian view that an action is right to the extent that it is optimal.

In my view, the traditional view is preferable to Crisp’s, and it is certainly more congenial with utilitarianism. Judging from his earlier paper, Crisp would possibly respond that by thinking that α is wrong, and that A thus should have acted differently, we engage in what he calls ‘act worship’ (p. 145). For we may assume that if A had performed some alternative to α then he would have had another

³ ‘Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue’, *Philosophical Quarterly* 42, 1992.

character (C*) with worse overall consequences. In other words, if A had performed some alternative to α his life would have instantiated less utility overall.

But this response faces some difficulties. First, if it is really the case that if A had performed some alternative to α then his life would have instantiated less utility overall, isn't the natural conclusion that α was, after all, optimal? In that case, P3's verdict would not conflict with that of the traditional view. Second, given the fact that A actually *has* C, and given the fact that A would have performed some alternative to α only if he would have had C* instead, is it really true that he *could* have performed the alternative? If not, is it really plausible to characterize α as an action at all, right *or* wrong?

In any case, Crisp characterizes P3 by saying that it implies that we should act so as to bring about the best possible history, whether it is brought about directly by our action, 'or through the mediation of character, rule following or whatever' (*Mill on Utilitarianism*, p. 99). But the same holds for the traditional view. So pointing this out that does not show P3 to be preferable. Indeed, the whole passage on the interesting question of the role of characters in act utilitarianism is neither likely to let the reader discern what issues are at stake, nor which the relevant positions are. But I want to emphasize that this is just a quite minor shortcoming in an otherwise excellent introduction to Mill's utilitarianism.

Mill's views on liberty are treated in another recent Routledge Philosophy GuideBook: *Mill on Liberty*, by Jonathan Riley. Riley's aim is to clarify and defend the views and arguments in Mill's classic

On Liberty. These views have, according to Riley, been largely obscured by earlier commentators, and unfairly dismissed as incoherent. Riley, however, tries to show that *On Liberty* encapsulates a philosophical doctrine which is both highly radical and at the same time plausible and coherent.

For the most part he succeeds. The part aimed at clarifying Mill's principle of liberty (which says, roughly, that society may exercise power against a citizen only to prevent harm to others) is highly rewarding. In painstaking detail, Riley covers the principle itself, its implications for issues of liberty of speech, thought and religion, as well as common objections.

There is one section, however, where Riley's sympathy for Mill, and his wish to make Mill's views coherent, seems to have led him astray. This is the section (in chapter 7) in which he discusses whether Mill's principle of liberty is compatible with his utilitarianism. Riley argues that once Mill's view on utility is properly understood, these views are seen to be fully consistent.

But Riley's discussion of this issue suffers from a regrettable lack of sharpness. For instance, what does it mean to say that utilitarianism is compatible with the principle of liberty? That there cannot be cases where utilitarianism justifies the sacrifice of someone's liberty? Or that utilitarianism recommends adopting a legislation along the lines of the principle of liberty? Clearly, the second case may hold even if the first does not. However, Riley never clearly distinguishes between them.

Moreover, Riley seems to suggest that Mill must adopt some form of rule utilitarianism in order to be able to consistently hold on to his principle of liberty. The reason is supposed to be that act utilitarianism implies that we should always try ‘to calculate at perform the particular act that maximizes generally utility’ (p. 154) and cannot therefore acknowledge the value of following rules (such as the principle of charity) in pursuing the good.

But this is a misunderstanding. Numerous act utilitarians (Sidgwick, Hare, Parfit) have pointed out that whether we should try to calculate consequences of each action depends on the consequences, and that it might often be more expedient to apply certain rules of thumb. This, however, is not a concession to rule utilitarianism, since act utilitarians may still hold on to the view that an action is right if and only if it is optimal: Saying that one should develop a disposition to make decisions in accordance with certain rules is not inconsistent with saying that some of the resulting actions may be wrong. No clear headed act utilitarian wants to maximize rightness rather than utility.

Moreover, and for similar reasons, Riley assumes that act utilitarians cannot recommend a legislation protecting private property and market contracting, which is supposed to be devastating for the amount of utility produced in an act utilitarian society, since people will have less incentives to hard work and entrepreneurship (p. 155). But this is simply wrong. If a piece of legislation is optimal, it should be adopted according to act

utilitarianism, even if citizens thereby develop a disposition to perform actions that are suboptimal.

And so on. When reading this section one gets the feeling that it might have been better if Riley had read Crisp's book, where the relevant distinctions are carefully made, before starting on his own. So my advice is: If you can only afford one of the GuideBooks, buy Crisp's. But, by all means, if you're rich, buy both.

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