John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill    (1806-1873) ...  more theoretical in his writings and efforts... more philosophical... noted for his great works in the sciences and moral and social philosophy...  On Liberty,  and Utilitarianism are his most famous books.  Harriet Taylor, his wife and inspiration.  He credits her with producing the best in his writings.

Chapter I

p. 248:

Our backward state (of human knowledge):  “the little progress which has been made in the decision of the controversy respecting the criterion of right and wrong.”

“...the question concerning the summum bonum, ... the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought” ... for more than two thousand years... without agreement.

p. 249:     “All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and colour from the end to which they are subservient.  When we engage in a pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem to be the first thing we need, instead of the last we are to look forward to.  (as opposed to the sciences, where facts come first, and general principles later).

In this paragraph Mill is referring to Ethics as opposed to other studies/sciences... where the finding of facts often precedes the development of general laws and principles.

But the idea expressed...that the ends will colour the rules of action... is a good topic for discussion in class.

Mill says that both the intuitionist school and the induction schools of ethics have failed to produce a fundamental first principle from which all other general rules are deducible.

I.e., an intuitionist might say:   we have a moral insight into right and wrong... we can ‘see’ what to do in a given case;  or we can ‘see’ the necessary rightness of telling the truth, of not stealing, etc.

But Mill sets these kinds of rules and instances down as secondary derivations.  What is lacking in Ethics is agreement on one fundamental principle.  Insight and observation (the inductive school of ethics) can not establish the truth of a fundamental first principle.  We do not have an insight, Mill would say, that “the good” is equal to pleasure and absence of pain.

In reference to Kant:  “So act, that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings.”

... he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct.   (Mill)

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 admitted to be good without proof.  The medical art is proved to be good, by its conducing to health;  but how is it possible to prove that health is good?

p. 251:  “There is a larger meaning of the word proof...the subject is within the cognizance of the rational faculty;  and neither does that faculty deal with it solely in the way of intuition.  Considerations may be presented ...  this is equivalent to proof.

Chapter II

p. 252

       “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to pormote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.  By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain;  by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.”

This is a “theory of life”  on which the theory of morality is grounded:  “namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends;  and that all desirable things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.”

p. 253:     Quality of pleasures can be distinguished... not simply quantitative differences (as in Bentham’s view).

“It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds  of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.”

How do we judge?  Only those who have experience and intelligence of (competently acquainted with both) competing pleasures are able to judge which is the best.

p. 254:     A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, ...etc. yet he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.

       “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied;  better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.  And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.  The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”

P. 255:

       “From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal.”

       “Neither pains nor pleasures are homo-geneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure.”

The utilitarian principle is a standard of not just the agent’s own happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether.

p. 256:     The end of human action is necessarily also the standard of morality...the rules and precepts for human conduct...

p. 259:  self-sacrifice, martyrs, etc., are doing good only if their sacrifices are producing the greater happiness of others.  Otherwise their sacrifice is of no value.

p. 260:  distinction between will (or intention)  and motive (or feelings) .....  An act can be morally right if the intention is the greatest happiness, etc., even if the motive (the feeling prompting the act or the will at a given moment is selfish...)

I may will that Manson is not executed, though my motive may be in disaccord with this... my feelings of disgust for him, wish for vengeance, etc.

Chapter IV

p. 266:

The proof othe principle of utility:

“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 do actually hear it;  and so of the other sources of our experience.  In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.”

Then, discussion of music, health, virtue, money, power, and fame as “desired things.”