

# Mill on liberty

GV100 Class Slides: LT week 3

London School of Economics and Political Science



Questions/comments to start the class

# Utilitarianism

**CONSEQUENTIALISM:** Consequentialist moral theories are theories according to which it is the consequences of one's action that matter morally (rather than, say, one's intentions or maxims).

**UTILITARIANISM:** Utilitarian moral theories are consequentialist theories according to which the relevant consequences concern the amount of overall good brought about by an action.

**MILL'S UTILITARIANISM:** Mill's utilitarianism understands the overall good in terms of happiness (or pleasure).

So, for Mill the right action is the one that produces the greatest overall pleasure.

# What would a utilitarian do?

- 1 **TROLLEY CASE:** There is a runaway trolley that going to hit and kill five innocent people. You could divert it to another track, but that would cause it to kill one innocent person. There is no way to warn any of the people, and there is no one else around.
- 2 **DOCTOR CASE:** You are an excellent doctor. You have five patients who are going to die due to various organ failures. However, you have a sixth patient (who you know to have no friends or family), whose organs you could harvest to save the other five.

What would a Millian utilitarian do in these cases? What do you think is the right thing to do?

# On Liberty and the harm principle

“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (Book I).

“It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility” (Book I).

“As soon as any part of a person’s conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it, and the question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it, becomes open to discussion” (Book IV).

What is Mill saying in this passage? What is the significance for his views in On Liberty?

# Utilitarianism and liberty

DISCUSS: Does Mill's utilitarianism conflict with the harm principle? Why or why not?

# Mill's arguments for free speech

- ① “If any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.”
- ② “Though the silenced opinion may be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth [...]”
- ③ “Even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice [...]”
- ④ “The meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good [...] and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction [...]”

## A timely example...

“I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard.”



“We’re going to walk down to the Capitol and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we’re probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them.”

Does Trump’s speech before the capital hill riot count as protected speech on Mill’s view?

# Apply the harm principle to a few of these cases. What does it rule out?

- 1 A person shouts obscenities in the street.
- 2 A person shouts racial slurs in the street.
- 3 A person forces you to play Russian roulette with them. (3a. The barrel of the gun holds 6 bullets. 3b. The barrel of the gun holds 100 bullets.)
- 4 A person watches pornography.
- 5 A person willingly becomes addicted to heroin.
- 6 One person forcibly stops another from performing a dangerous action.
- 7 One person willingly becomes the slave of another.
- 8 One person becomes the slave of another in order to provide for their family.
- 9 The state enforces the wearing of seatbelts by adults.
- 10 The state taxes its citizens for the purposes of funding homeless shelters.
- 11 The state forbids non-electric cars on environmental grounds.