

Overlaps and differences between EP and John Stuart Mill's version of utilitarianism

Post by “Martin” of August 20, 2019 at 11:00 AM

The relationship between EP and utilitarianism is touched upon in this quote from John Stuart Mill's book "Utilitarianism", Chapter 2:

"The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to."

This statement seems to indicate that it is fine if the vast majority of people sticks to Epicurus' philosophy, and that utilitarianism provides guidance primarily for those with power/influence/expendable wealth.

However, Mill's interpretation of EP seems to be quite different from the interpretation which we have worked out here and on the related FB pages. Unfortunately, Mill's writing style is often rather hiding than clarifying what he means. So, I might not add a lot to this thread but I look forward to comments of others who read his book.

So far, I could not find sufficient sources within EP on how an Epicurean politician should make difficult decisions. The quote above might suggest that for Epicureans, voting for a utilitarian party might be the best choice in a state with many more people than fit in one Epicurean community.

That is because if an Epicurean candidate from outside my inner circle told me he would just follow his feelings moderated by his private hedonic calculus, I would not vote for her/him but rather a utilitarian competitor.

This is unsatisfactory because it would indicate that a nation with a mix of an Epicurean majority and utilitarian leaders would probably produce greater net pleasure for me than a homogeneous nation of Epicureans with Epicurean leaders.

Post by “Elayne” of August 21, 2019 at 3:13 PM

If I were a politician, my pleasure would probably partly depend on keeping my job and upon accomplishing policy that would bring me pleasure, otherwise I wouldn't have run for office -- and to do that, I would need to consider the pleasure needs of the voters, otherwise they might vote me out. So I don't see those processes as incompatible.

I would likely vote for an Epicurean before a utilitarian (depending on their specific policy positions), because a social utilitarian takes a quasi-religious view towards creating some kind of hypothetical "average happiness", and an Epicurean would be more likely to assess the actual pleasure requirements of real voters and not according to some sort of ideal. A person like that would be interested in what I need for pleasure, because I have friends and could influence the election, possibly. At least at the state level, I have been able to influence an occasional election by public speaking without making any financial contributions.

Plus, I could get to know that Epicurean as a friend, and then her happiness would include mine, lol.