

The Schadenfreude Objection to Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's Defense of Mill's Principle of Utility

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Abstract

In *Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility: A More than Half-Hearted Defense*, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord provides a brilliant analysis of Mill's "Proof", which turns it from what many saw as a fallacy ridden embarrassment into what appears to be a persuasive argument. I will propose a Schadenfreude Objection to Sayre-McCord's interpretation of Mill's argument and argue that unless it is deflected the Schadenfreude Objection will be devastating to Mill's argument. I will argue that the only way to deflect the Schadenfreude Objection is to deny the transitivity of goodness. I will conclude that by denying the transitivity of goodness we are no longer able to use Mill's theory to morally prescribe actions, although we can still use it to prove that happiness is a good.

Introduction

In Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility: A More than Half-Hearted Defense, Sayre-McCord defends Mill's argument for the Principle of Utility from *Utilitarianism*, arguing that the common criticisms leveled against it, such as that it commits the fallacy of composition and the naturalistic fallacy, are a result of misunderstanding Mill's argument. The argument which Sayre-McCord defends is in the fourth chapter of *Utilitarianism*, where Mill says:

*"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: 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. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as one of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality."*¹

Sayre-McCord concludes that his interpretation of the argument is compelling:

*"In fact, I maintain, the actual argument Mill offers contains not a single fallacy and, if only the initial premises were true, would be compelling."*²

However, he has his reservations about the soundness of the argument because he doubts Mill's premise that everyone is committed to desiring only happiness:

"My own hunch -- and a source of my half-heartedness in defending Mill's "proof" -- is that Moore is right that in valuing things, people are inevitably committed to the significance of some generic feature or other, but that Mill and Kant are both wrong in thinking that there is one single such commitment. Perhaps some people are committed to thinking of happiness per se as valuable in itself, and other people are committed to thinking of rational nature, considered in itself, as an end. I suspect, however, that plenty of other people have significantly different commitments -- each of which would invite application of the sort of argument Mill

¹ John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), IV, 3.

² Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. *Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility: A More than Half-Hearted Defense*. *Social Philosophy & Policy* volume 18, number 2 Spring 2001, 330-360.

and Kant offer, but not in a way that would lead everyone to a shared commitment.”³

I will argue that, even if we grant Mill’s premises that everyone desires only happiness and that a person’s desiring something is evidence that the thing is good and we conclude that the general happiness is good, we still do not have an argument that actions which *cause* the general happiness are good. This means that it would follow from Mill’s argument that it is morally good to be happy, but not that it is morally good to cause happiness- our own or anyone else’s. I will argue that the reason we cannot say that it is good to cause something good is that it would allow for a devastating Schadenfreude Objection to Mill’s argument. In order to avoid the Schadenfreude Objection, we must hold that goodness is not transitive.

Resurrecting Mill’s Argument

Sayre-McCord responds to the charge that Mill’s type of argument commits the naturalistic fallacy when it compares something such as seeing red being evidence that something is red to desiring happiness as being evidence that happiness is desirable. It has seemed to some, such as G.E. Moore, that Mill was equivocating on the use of “desirable” by proving happiness was desirable in the sense that it was “capable of being desired” and then going on to conclude that happiness was therefore desirable in the sense of being objectively good. Sayre-McCord argues that Mill never meant to say that people desiring happiness was evidence that happiness was “capable of being desired”, but rather that the fact that people desire happiness is direct evidence for the view that happiness is objectively desirable or good. In fact, this fits much better with the analogy of seeing something as red being evidence for its being red. In the comparison drawn between seeing something as red and desiring happiness, seeing something as red isn’t meant as evidence that the thing is “capable of being seen as red” - it is meant as evidence that the thing is objectively red. In the same way that desiring happiness is meant as evidence that happiness is objectively desirable, which Mill and Sayre-McCord take to mean that something is good.

If we take the argument that someone seeing something as red counts as evidence that the thing is objectively red and compare it to the argument that someone desiring something counts as evidence that the thing is objectively desirable, then it appears that they line up quite nicely. Since most people will accept the argument about objective redness, the argument about objective desirableness should seem plausible to most people as well.

Argument that x is objectively red:

1.) Someone sees x as red.

Conclusion: There is evidence that x is objectively red.

³ Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. *Mill’s “Proof” of the Principle of Utility: A More than Half-Hearted Defense*. *Social Philosophy & Policy* volume 18, number 2 Spring 2001, 330-360.

Argument that x is objectively desirable:

1.) Someone sees x as desirable.

Conclusion: There is evidence that x is objectively desirable.

If we now add Mill's other premises that everyone sees happiness and only happiness as desirable, then we end up with enormous evidence for and zero evidence against the view that happiness is objectively desirable.

Argument that x is objectively red:

1.) Everyone sees x as red.

2.) Nobody sees x as anything other than red.

3.) Nobody sees anything other than x as red.

Conclusion: There is enormous evidence for and zero evidence against the view that x is objectively red.

Argument that x is objectively desirable:

1.) Everyone sees x as desirable.

2.) Nobody sees x as anything other than desirable.

3.) Nobody sees anything other than x as desirable.

Conclusion: There is enormous evidence for and zero evidence against the view that x is objectively desirable.

Once again, most people will probably agree with the argument for objective redness and this will make the argument for objective desirability appear plausible. Of course, someone could argue that objective redness just is the sort of thing that can be supported by individual instances of seeing something as red, but that objective desirability just isn't the sort of thing that can be supported by individual instances of desiring something. However, I think that the burden of proof would shift to the person making the distinction and until they can explain why the two cases are so different, Mill's argument should be seen as plausible by those who see the objective redness argument as plausible.

The Schadenfreude Objection

I will propose and then respond to what I call the Schadenfreude Objection to Mill's argument as it is formulated above. I believe the Schadenfreude Objection can be effectively deflected, but that it comes at the price of denying the transitivity of goodness from which it follows that although happiness is good, causing happiness is not good.⁴

The Schadenfreude Objection is that if desiring x counts as evidence that x is objectively

⁴ Causing happiness isn't bad either on this view; it just has no moral status one way or the other. The only thing with moral status would be happiness itself.

desirable, then it should also follow that the causes of x are objectively desirable and that this would lead to contradictory results. This argument assumes that there is such a thing as Schadenfreude or receiving happiness from seeing someone else's unhappiness. I don't think this is too much of an assumption to make. It seems undeniable that this happens at least sometimes. Once it is admitted that unhappiness in one person sometimes causes happiness in another person, then it would seem to follow that there is evidence that unhappiness is objectively desirable.

The Schadenfreude Objection to the argument that happiness is objectively desirable:

- (1) Everyone sees happiness as desirable.
- (2) Nobody sees happiness as anything other than desirable.
- (3) Nobody sees anything other than happiness as desirable.
- (4) If someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that happiness is objectively desirable, then someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that the causes of happiness are objectively desirable.
- (5) Someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that happiness is objectively desirable.
- (6) Someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that the causes of happiness are objectively desirable. [*Modus Ponens (4) & (5)*]
- (7) Unhappiness for some people is sometimes a cause of happiness for other people.
- (8) Someone seeing happiness as desirable sometimes counts as evidence that unhappiness is objectively desirable.

Conclusion: There is evidence for the view that happiness is objectively desirable and there is evidence for the view that unhappiness is objectively desirable.

We could try to save Mill's argument by saying that Schadenfreude is such a rare occurrence that there is still much more evidence for the view that happiness is objectively desirable than the view that unhappiness is objectively desirable. However, this is hard to support empirically since seeking vengeance and wishing misfortune upon others seem to be nearly universal human traits. It certainly significantly weakens Mill's argument to include the fact that there appears to also be substantial evidence that unhappiness is objectively desirable. Therefore, I conclude that the Schadenfreude objection is too significant of a bullet to bite and it must be deflected if Mill's argument is to remain plausible.

Denying the Transitivity of Goodness

The only way I can see of deflecting the argument is to deny the transitivity of goodness. This would allow us to say that happiness is good but that the unhappiness which causes happiness is not good.⁵ If we allow the transitivity of goodness, then I don't see how we can avoid the conclusion that there is significant evidence that unhappiness is an objective good and since

⁵ This is not to say that it is bad, only that it has no moral status one way or the other.

that conclusion is devastating to Mill's argument we must avoid it if possible.

Denying the transitivity of goodness actually fits quite well with our original objective redness analogy, seeing as objective redness clearly isn't transitive. We wouldn't say that the causes of a red object are also red merely because they caused a red object. For example, we wouldn't say that the action of levying a tax to pay for a new red fire truck is seen as an objectively red action just because it caused a fire truck which is seen as objectively red. Now it is important to note that I don't mean this as a proof that goodness isn't transitive, but merely to demonstrate that if we are sticking with Mill's comparison of desiring to seeing, then it fits better to say that neither desiring nor seeing is transitive. This allows us to avoid the Schadenfreude Objection by denying premise (4) which makes premises (5) and (7) irrelevant and negates premises (6) and (8) so that we are left with:

The Schadenfreude Objection to the argument that happiness is objectively desirable when transitivity of goodness is denied:

- (1) Everyone sees happiness as desirable.
- (2) Nobody sees happiness as anything other than desirable.
- (3) Nobody sees anything other than happiness as desirable.
- (4) If someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that happiness is objectively desirable, then *it is not the case that* someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that the causes of happiness are objectively desirable.
- (5) Someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that happiness is objectively desirable.
- (6) *It is not the case that* someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that the causes of happiness are objectively desirable. [*Modus Ponens (4) & (5)*]
- (7) Unhappiness for some people is sometimes a cause of happiness for other people.
- (8) *It is not the case that* someone seeing happiness as desirable counts as evidence that unhappiness is objectively desirable.

Conclusion: There is evidence for the view that happiness is objectively desirable and *it is not the case that* there is evidence for the view that unhappiness is objectively desirable.

Mill's argument now appears quite persuasive again. If we also grant Mill the premise that something is objectively good if and only if it is objectively desirable, then we have a very persuasive argument for the view that happiness is good in itself:

Argument that happiness is objectively desirable:

- 1.) Everyone sees happiness as desirable.
- 2.) Nobody sees happiness as anything other than desirable.
- 3.) Nobody sees anything other than happiness as desirable.
- 4.) There is enormous evidence for and zero evidence against the view that happiness is objectively desirable.

5.) Something is objectively desirable if and only if it is objectively good.

Conclusion: There is enormous evidence for and zero evidence against the view that happiness is objectively good.

We have saved Mill's argument by deflecting the Schadenfreude Objection, but at what cost? Is it important that goodness be transitive? In fact, it turns out to be very important when prescribing actions based on a moral theory, as we shall see.

Some Consequences of Denying the Transitivity of Goodness

The most important consequence of denying the transitivity of goodness is that we cannot say that actions which cause good things are good themselves. This means we cannot say "it is good to do that which causes the most happiness for the most people" or even "it is good to do that which causes happiness". In fact, the only action which can be morally prescribed is "being happy".⁶ So commands such as "don't murder", "don't rape", and "don't steal" would not be moral commands but "be happy" would be. If I told you "don't murder" and you went ahead and murdered someone you would not be doing anything immoral. On the other hand, if I told you "be happy" and you didn't become happy, then you would be doing something immoral.

Someone might point out that we can still say "if you don't murder you will be causing something which is objectively good"⁷. This might seem sufficient to some people, but I think it is a very serious problem that we can't actually say that the action of murder is wrong. It seems so obviously true to most people who believe in objective morality that it is the action which causes happiness which is morally good and not just the happiness itself. The fact that this revised version of Mill's theory fails to capture that greatly weakens the theory. It also straight out negates the central thesis of Utilitarianism which is that "we ought to do that which creates the most happiness for the most people". It is not true that we ought to do that which creates the most happiness; it is only true that we ought to be happy.

Conclusion

Sayre-McCord's insightful analysis of Mill appeared to resurrect Mill's Utilitarian argument for the objective goodness of the general happiness. The Schadenfreude Objection combined with the transitivity of goodness neutralizes the argument. Denying the transitivity of goodness deflects the Schadenfreude Objection and fits better with Mill's vision analogy, but it comes at the price of restricting moral goodness to the experience of happiness itself and denying that actions which cause happiness are themselves morally good. This means that it is not the case that we ought to do those actions which Utilitarian moral theory prescribes, but only that we ought to have the experience of happiness. I think this is ultimately too much of a blow and

⁶ Being happy is something that we do whether or not we have the choice to decide to be happy.

⁷ Assuming that not murdering causes happiness in this situation.

renders Mill's argument effectively useless for providing a basis for Utilitarian ethics.