

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 promote 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.²⁸

The *greatest happiness principle* to which Mill refers is actually a slogan of Jeremy Bentham's: "The Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number." According to Bentham (and to both John Stuart Mill and his father James Mill, who was a utilitarian contemporary of Bentham's), utility is not satisfied by purely individual and selfish choices; maximizing one's own pleasure at the expense of everyone else's isn't good at all. The happiness that utility is meant to promote is the general happiness of all, not the narrow pleasures of individuals or small minority segments of a larger population.²⁹ Note that Bentham does *not* talk about the greatest happiness of the *majority*, and in fact explicitly rejects that interpretation of his slogan. Rather, what Bentham appears to mean is that the utilitarian goal is to maximize pleasure across the whole population, not merely the largest number of individual members of the population.³⁰ Further, no one person's happiness is any more or less important than any other person's happiness; as Mill points out, "Bentham's dictum 'everybody to count for one, nobody to count for more than one,' might be written under the principle of utility as an explanatory commentary."³¹

While all individuals are equal to each other, however, the classical utilitarians often argue that not all *pleasures* are equally valuable. Because human beings are complex rational creatures, they are capable of a very wide range of pleasures, some of which are qualitatively better than others. While it is possible for a human being to pursue a life of base pleasures (feeding, fighting, fornicating...), it is better to pursue a life that includes higher-order pleasures that exercise one's capacities as a rational being more fully (a notion the utilitarians share with virtue theorists like Aristotle). "It is

²⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, John Troyer, ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.), 2003, 99.

²⁹ Jeremy Bentham, "The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number [Excerpt on the phrase 'Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number']", in , in *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, John Troyer, ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.), 2003, 92-93.

³⁰ Bentham, "Greatest Good," 92.

³¹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 144.