

A211 Feedback from Tutorial 2

Maria Kasmirli

You've all done well! You understand what is going on and the difficult implications that follow from the application of Mill's concepts.

I've read your responses and summaries (see my points below). Many of you felt unsure in places. Don't be afraid of this. This is how good philosophy gets done. You tell your reader, 'X says such-and-such, but when I look at the same issue from a different point of view, I find that although he/she is right about some things, he/she is not right about others. Let me explain...'. Making subtle distinctions, seeing alternative points of view and arguing for different positions are all part and parcel of doing philosophy.

Below I have taken some claims from your summaries to generate further discussion. You might like to discuss these further among yourselves.

Exercise 1

1. The Rushdie affair:

MK: Drawing on Mill's theory, you felt that even if Rushdie's literature is offensive to some it does not harm anyone, and so, according to the Harm Principle (HP), he is not to be stopped from producing it. In fact, taking it further, if Rushdie is not harming anyone by what he is doing we should do our best to protect him from those who want to harm him. Does this view reflect your intuitions?

2. Bernard Manning and racist jokes:

"However the Race Relations Act now restricts him on the grounds that people should be protected from racial insults".

MK: Mill would agree with the claim above only if being insulted means being harmed. If all Manning's jokes cause offence, then they might be acceptable. So I'm throwing this back at you. What do you think? How would you draw the distinction between harm and offence? Who decides?

3. Michael Jackson and playing with children

"M. Jackson may well be the childlike person he claims to be but because of the potential for damage to the children other adults should supervise them."

MK: Is showing a person to have the potential to harm, as opposed to actually harming, enough to interfere with their negative freedoms? Over to you guys! Try to find arguments from what you've read to back up what you say.

4. Sado-masochism and privacy

“We should regard this as an experiment of living and allow it in private, even if we find it repulsive.”

MK: For Mill, experiments of living are experiences that enrich our society. If sado-masochistic acts are experiments of living, then why not allow them to be practised in public? The ‘keep it in the home’ response to sadomasochism may be prevalent because some people find sadomasochism repulsive. But the question is, ‘Does it hurt anybody else?’. If the answer is ‘No’, then what right have we got to say where it is to be practised? Mill would probably say ‘None’. What do you think? (You may like to consider your answers to this question in parallel to your answers to question 2, above.)

Exercise 7

You were asked: What do you miss, if anything at all, by going for a life off-the-peg?

One response was “... a life off-the-peg may be what is right for me—in which case fine. The important thing is that I have chosen what lifestyle is best for me and followed whatever is best for me...”

MK Is what is described here really a life off-the-peg? Does a life off-the-peg mean a boring life-style or simply an unreflective one? I don’t think it means the former. When we say, ‘X have lived a life-off-the peg’ we probably mean an unreflective life. We mean they have unreflectively followed others’ norms, played by the rules without ever questioning them, or something like that. Put simply, we mean they have not stopped to think whether the life they lead is the right one for them. With this understanding, the claim about a life off-the-peg being a boring life doesn’t strike me as being right. Stopping to think, making a decision to follow a particular life-style and sticking to it, does not, strictly speaking, qualify as a life off-the-peg. What do you think?

Exercise 10

MK: (Just a thought): On the paternalist theme: you all seem to agree that Mill wanted people to be left alone to do their thing—unless they were incapable of thinking for themselves. But you were not in complete agreement as to whether he was a paternalist. However, your disagreement seems to me to be a semantic one: it is only about what we mean when we call someone a paternalist. Otherwise you all understand what he says and how to apply what he says to individual cases. I’d say that he wasn’t a paternalist, because I take it that paternalists force you to do things for your own good, independently of whether you are capable of thinking for yourself.