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Original research paper

Оригинальная исследовательская статья

Moral Universality in J.S. Mill's Utilitarianism*

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Abstract

The article sets a goal to clarify the problem of moral universalism in J.S. Mill's philosophy as an important element of his methodology in ethics. The starting point of the study is Mill's requirement: in order to do the right thing, we need to take into account the traditions, values, and moral norms, i.e., universal prescriptive judgments developed in society. The article analyzes Mill's method of finding maximum utility and achieving general happiness. It is shown that, in this method, universality is the property of moral rules and values to be universally addressed, and this property is based on our common experience as a species. The reverse side of this genesis is the impossibility of absoluteness of these norms and values, due to incompleteness of species experience, which always has specific historical character. Therefore, such rules are subject to change and, while they remain standard in man's activity, we also have to take them critically. Effective inclusion of moral norms in our search for maximum utility is indirectly confirmed by (a) the example of methodological difficulties in discourse ethics, similar to utilitarianism in the way it seeks rational explication of moral acts, (b) the history of economics as a discipline largely formed under the influence of utilitarianism. In both cases, researchers come to the conclusion that it is necessary to take into account supra-individual experience in decision-making and its influence on the individual. Since species experience is multilevel communication, we can note similarities between the methodology of Mill's utilitarianism and communicative ethics. It is concluded that the problem of moral universality in Mill's ethical methodology is revealed as a problem of maximizing communication as the basis of maximizing utility.

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Keywords: ethics, morality, universality, communication, utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, act utilitarianism, happiness, utility, J.S. Mill, J. Bentham.

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Моральная универсальность в утилитаризме Дж. С. Милля*

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Аннотация

Цель статьи – раскрыть проблему моральной универсальности в философии Дж.С. Милля и показать, что моральная универсальность является важным элементом его методологии в этике. Отправной точкой исследования становится требование Милля учитывать при определении правильного поступка выработанные обществом традиции, ценности, а также моральные нормы, т.е. универсальные прескриптивные суждения. В статье проводится анализ предложенного Миллем метода поиска максимальной полезности и достижения всеобщего счастья. Показывается, что универсальность в данном методе представляет собой общеадресованность моральных норм и ценностей, которая порождается общностью видового опыта. Обратной стороной такого генезиса является невозможность абсолютности этих норм и ценностей в силу неполноты видового опыта, всегда имеющего конкретно-исторический характер, из чего следует, что они подвержены изменениям и, оставаясь ориентирами в деятельности, требуют критического к себе отношения. Эффективность включения моральных норм и ценностей в поиск максимальной полезности косвенно подтверждается примером методологических затруднений этики

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дискурса, схожей с утилитаризмом в аспекте рациональной экспликации морального поступка, а также историей развития экономики как дисциплины, во многом сформированной под влиянием утилитаризма. В обоих случаях исследователи приходят к выводу о необходимости при принятии решения учитывать надындивидуальный опыт и его влияние на индивида. Поскольку видовой опыт представляется собой многоуровневую коммуникацию, отмечается методологическое сближение утилитаризма Милля с коммуникативной этикой. Делается вывод, что проблема моральной универсальности в этической методологии Милля раскрывается как проблема максимизации коммуникации, лежащая в основе решения задачи максимизации полезности.

Ключевые слова: этика, мораль, универсальность, коммуникация, утилитаризм, утилитаризм правила, утилитаризм действия, счастье, полезность, Дж. С. Милль, И. Бентам.

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Introduction

Since the publication of J.O. Urmson’s famous article “The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J.S. Mill” [Urmson 1953, 33–39], there emerged in the history of utilitarianism a distinction between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism, and also attempts to backdate this distinction to the founding fathers of the philosophical school. While J. Bentham’s philosophy is defined as act utilitarianism, the philosophy of J.S. Mill lies within rule utilitarianism. Although this distinction has been disputed [Brink 2013, 84–85; Crisp 1997, 102; Turner 2015, 171–174], it also has staunch supporters [Brandt 1967, 57; Martin 2011, 31; Mondal 2016, 13-21; Fuchs 2006, 144]. In both cases, the common logic of Bentham’s and Mill’s systems is understood in the same way: it is in man’s nature to strive for happiness, and the measure of correlation of man’s activity to his desire is utility, thus the task of such activity is to maximize the utility.

However, there is a difference observed in the development of what can be called the “moral arithmetic” [Serebryansky 2011, 96], the way of determining the correctness of a specific act in a specific situation. Bentham believes the principle of utility to be all-important

since only this determines a person's understanding of good and evil [Bentham 1843, 25]. Mill introduces an emendation: in his calculations, the individual must also be guided by the norms developed in society (that is, universal prescriptive judgments about the right actions) and, in a broader sense, by the opinion of others and his own conscience [Mill 1864, 73]. Thus, even if we agree that Mill failed to develop a moral theory in which the principle of utility would be consistent with those "secondary rules" [Brink 2013, 98–103], or we agree that applying such rules does not remove the difficulties of moral calculation, as Mill hoped it would [Irwin 2009, 411–415], yet it remains obvious that the solution to the problem of achieving happiness involves the problem of moral universality. Moreover, for some reason, the distinction between the two types of utilitarianism as well as the analysis of the differences between the philosophical systems of Bentham and Mill does not address this problem. As a result, it remains concealed in the depths of utilitarian methodology. Its explication is necessary: first of all, an explanation of what constitutes moral universalism in Mill's philosophy. This will also determine how moral universalism can be taken into account when solving the problem of pursuing happiness, primarily within the framework of Mill's utilitarianism; and it will probably also have heuristic value for rule utilitarianism (however, the latter is beyond the scope of this article).

Universalism and "moral arithmetic"

The problem of universalism in the ethics of utilitarianism is closely related to anthropology. Both Bentham and Mill understood the key concept of "happiness" very broadly [Serebryansky 2011, 92–93], and this pushes us to explore its anthropological basis. Happiness is not equivalent to a specific moral state but consists of all positively assessed parameters of activity – profit, benefit, pleasure, good [Bentham 1843; Mill 1864, 10]. Its achievement is possible in each such parameter, happiness itself is not something alienated from these, and it resembles the ancient concept of perfection as its *τέλος*, that is, the limit and completeness of nature's development. Mill also objects to its vulgarization and simplification, pointing to the standard hierarchy of "mental pleasures" and "bodily pleasures" without denying the significance of either one or the other

¹ Besides, one can consider the question of how much every living being treated as equal, according to one or another interpretation of utilitarianism by one or another author; how much rationality of a person makes him special for Mill among other living beings and it also discards differences within the species, for example, the gender differences. For the topic of the article, these aspects are not fundamental, so we omit them.

[Mill 1864, 14]. Related to this is his famous saying: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied” [Mill 1864, 14]. Even more fundamental to utilitarianism is the belief that all people are equal in their existential status – none of them are subhuman¹. This transforms the task of achieving individual happiness into one of striving for universal happiness. The assertion of the principle of utility and happiness as a goal is universal both in the sense of its property of being universally addressed and in the sense of its absoluteness, revealing the nature of man; i.e., it applies to everyone and admits of no alternative or exceptions. Moral universality here can only be considered as an ethical interpretation of the anthropological affirmation: if the goal of human nature is happiness, then for a person it is natural/normal to strive for happiness, and this desire meets his nature. Only an implicit epistemological attitude helps to avoid tautology: to accept the observed reality as an absolute fact given, beyond which there is no transcendence that can set its purpose and order. As a result, we do not merely repeat that if it is natural for a person to strive for happiness, then it is natural that he will strive for it, but we point to an adequate type of activity that corresponds to reality. Thus, the moral universalism here is only a *sui generis* reflection of anthropology².

Act utilitarianism does not go further, believing that the rationality of the individual is sufficient to carry out moral arithmetic on this basis. And the only more or less tangible universal requirement that is possible in this situation is the requirement to maximize utility/happiness. But Bentham is fully aware of the complexity of such calculations, when he notes that “a feeble and limited mind may deceive itself, by considering only a part of the good and evil” [Bentham 1843, 12]. But for him this is no reason to doubt the correctness of the approach itself to the implementation of the utility principle, and he sharply declares: “...If a man calculate badly, it is not arithmetic which is in fault, it is himself” [Bentham 1843, 12]. However, Mill, fully sharing the view that we need to “deduce the effect of actions on happiness from the laws of human nature and the universal conditions of human life” [Mill 1864, 94], notes that Bentham can be accused of “relying

² The futility of using such anthropological universality in constructing the methodology of utilitarianism can be judged by the criticism of Philippe Gillig in the discussion on the universality of “desire of wealth” when the principle of maximizing utility is considered universal, traditions and norms are relativized due to their historicity, thereby the concept of universality either bifurcates between this principle and the norms, which returns us to the division of anthropology and morality, or the moral universality is not taken into account at all [Gillig 2017, 1–27].

too exclusively upon such deductions” [Mill 1864, 94]. According to Mill, such calculations should be supplemented with a “generalization from specific experience,” since only “consilience of the results” of both methods will raise ethics to a status of scientific knowledge and “give to any general proposition the kind and degree of evidence” [Mill 1864, 94]. The result of the generalization is precisely the rules/norms, and the requirement of such “consilience” between the proposed/calculated act and its result with the rule will compensate for the “febleness of mind.”

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the history of economics in the 20th century reveals a similar discrepancy in the method: economics is the only science that has experienced direct influence of utilitarianism on its formation and evolution as a discipline. By the middle of the 20th century, the neoclassical theory had become dominant in economics, so that the very concept of economics is still identified with it [Avtonomov 1998, 35]. The neoclassical methodology is based on the principle of calculating the maximum utility, following Bentham [Becker 2003, 30]. Similar to Bentham, today’s economics assumes self-sufficiency of rational calculation of utility by an individual and does not include cultural, social, or psychological factors, such as traditions, moral norms and estimates, i.e., all that Mill added to Bentham’s “moral arithmetic.” It is assumed that a person makes a decision only on the basis of “individual preferences, their origin is not subject to research, and the rules are observed insofar as their implementation yields results that are compatible with the system of preferences” [Avtonomov 1998, 51].

On the one hand, this method shows amazing explanatory power because all activities by definition have a goal, therefore, all activity strives for an optimal result, in order to maximize it. This is the key to translating any act into the language of neoclassical economic theory, i.e., determination of costs and utility [Becker 1976, 14]. As a result, the methodological expansion of economics into subject areas of other humanitarian disciplines (sociology and psychology) started in the middle of the 20th century. For example, in sociology, the “achievements” of this method are demonstrated even in the analysis of the changes in religious devotion and performance of religious practices (see: [Iannaccone 1998]). Opponents will jokingly call this methodology “economic imperialism” [Radaev 2008, 117].

On the other hand, this method is going to increase specificity in our understanding of both man and rationality. A person in neoclassical economics is an absolutely atomic and static subject, whose activity is viewed independently of any cultural context or judgments of other people, his desires lie outside his inner experience, his whole being is determined by one hyper-goal – maximizing utility [Becker 1976, 5].

As a result, rationality is reduced to choosing the optimal result, losing other characteristics. This is what makes it possible to maximize the mathematization of the method, understood as addition of utility and subtraction of costs, and economic relations are presented in the general form of explanation of any type of activity³ [Avtonomov 1998, 30–34; Becker 1976, 6–9; Radaev 2008, 118]. However, advances in mathematization, i.e., exacting science in its strictest sense, will generate the opposite effect: instead of more accurate understanding of human activity we will simplify its structure and be unable to see and take into account all of its aspects. As a result, within a couple of decades since Becker's expansionist manifesto, researchers will appear within economics itself, pointing to the incompleteness of the neoclassical method in determining how people and societies achieve maximizing utility [Avtonomov 1998, 55–56]. There also appear interdisciplinary areas, e.g., socioeconomics, psychoeconomics. It is the insensitivity of the neoclassical economic method to cultural factors that turns out to be its main drawback.

Thus, the history of economics in the 20th century appears to be a bright example of applying the theoretical principles of both types of utilitarianism, showing Mill's correctness: calculation of universal good (or even personal good) is so complex that it cannot be explicated solely in an individual's experience, no matter how advanced this individual is at counting. We should also note that this illustration shows, on the one hand, the impossibility of transposing the neoclassical economic method onto ethics (first of all, practical ethics), and, on the other hand, the possibility of developing (on the same basis) a general, interdisciplinary humanitarian methodology of research and formation of activities in a person, which could become a truly ethical methodology. Although at the moment this is little more than an ambitious assumption.

Similar problems – restriction of the subject area and inadequate reflection of real processes – are also observed in communicative ethics, whose focus on rationality in decision making and coordination of interests is closest to the utilitarian “moral arithmetic.” R.G. Апресян notes that “discursive-normative communication can be impossible in relations with ‘aliens,’ ‘strangers’ as well as with ‘rebels’ and ‘robbers’” [Апресян 2016]. Thus, the fact that “by putting forward their expectations and demands and by making recommendations and assessments, people appeal to current, contextually defined interests (of their own, of other people, environment or community),

³ It is noteworthy that G. Becker sometimes even argues in much the same way as Bentham: the failure of the economic method “the limited success is mainly the result of limited effort and not lack of relevance” [Becker 1976, 9].

as is assumed in the ethics of discourse, but also to some abstract general interests, timeless and supralocal judgments, if those turn out to be effective” [Apressyan 2016]. Consequently, overcoming the limitations of Bentham’s method, Mill also overcomes the potential limitations of Habermas’s communicative ethics, finding a solution precisely in adopting such “timeless and supralocal judgments.” And the remark of R.G. Apressyan that “special efforts are needed to create social prerequisites for communicative interaction, its political and organizational support” [Apressyan 2016], had already been foreseen and taken into account by Mill, who considers the formation of an act in its two aspects: (a) internal – a rational procedure of decision-making and determining the utility; (b) external – training, education, the existence of a jurisdiction where the external directs and, if necessary, compensates for internal processes [Mill 1864, 24–25]. The activities of experts also relate to the external aspect, which Mill does not exclude when discusses the problems of determining the utility. We can say that in upbringing and examination, universalism is manifested in relation to an individual in an active form, and in a rational search it is manifested only passively because, in order to take moral standards and traditions into account, the individual has to choose them himself.

The nature of moral universality

So what is universality in Mill’s ethics? We find another cue from R.G. Apressyan in his analysis of the ethics of discourse when he draws attention to the fact that the function of supralocal representations remains unresolved. However, these ideas, in fact, are “common values” and form culture, as “a sphere of various kinds of meanings, patterns, texts, traditions” [Apressyan 2016]. Such an answer is fully consistent with Mill’s idea that practices that have historically proven themselves in attaining utility are formalized as traditions and expressed as general rules.

In fact, moral universality as a phenomenon is the result of the development of a specific and therefore universal experience, in which it is always recognized a priori for each individual experience, and the practice of realizing interests is performed primarily in interaction with another person. It is also a form of representation of species experience. All this reveals universality as universally addressed rules and values in which the species experience is addressed to the individual. In this case, universality is not the same as ubiquitous prevalence of certain norms, regardless of cultural differences. The question of at what level of generality it is necessary to consider experience (of a separate culture or of the whole of humanity) in order to obtain the most accurate result is secondary as compared to the very fact of generation of universally addressed rules and values by the formation of experience from common (prior to individual) activity.

The culmination, the essence of such an experience, according to Mill, is the Golden Rule of Morality. He points to it, speaking about the essence of the utilitarianism program, as “the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality” [Mill 1864, 25]. R.G. Апресян writes that the peculiarity of this rule is that “judgments and actions built on this pattern are fundamentally reversible, universalizable and impartial, but the realizability, reversability, and impartiality are presumptive, imaginary and only postulated by one party” [Апресян 2016]. This, in turn, requires a person to have a certain rational competence consisting in the ability to “identify with others and correlate one’s actions with others” [Апресян 2016]. If the orientation at overcoming the isolation of a moral agent in Mill’s utilitarianism is obvious and indicated in the most general sense by the Golden Rule, then the “imaginary nature” of this overcoming is eliminated by orienting the individual at the “timeless supralocal ideas” that create the cultural context of relationships between people, due to which imagined reversibility, universality and impartiality become a reality. In other words, individual experience develops in line with the species experience⁴, which compensates for the limitations of the former, expanding it (an individual who is poor at counting receives a hint for decision making). At the same time, the principle of analysis of species experience is the same as in the experience of an individual – the achievement of maximum utility. Its results, respectively, are always specifically historical, because the maximum can only be achieved in a perfect society, which has obtained full and true knowledge about human activity and its nature. In this situation, not only norms and traditions depend on experience, but also the consideration of the original principles.

This is also why the attempt to criticize such an experience through “Hume’s guillotine,” which is undertaken, for example, by B. Russell [Russell 1967, 778–779], misses the mark. In Mill’s words, “the only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it [...] the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it” [Mill 1864, 52]; and Russell interprets the statement as an unreasonable imperative, because “a thing is ‘visible’ if it can be seen, but ‘desirable’ if it ought to be desired,” while “we cannot infer what is desirable from what is desired” [Russell 1967, 99]. It is not surprising that Russell went on to emphasize that “anything whatever may be an object of desire” [Russell 1967, 99], cites the example of a masochist with his pleasure derived from pain – an example that also works against the Golden Rule

⁴ In this case, Mill recalls Aristotle, saying that man is a social being by nature [Mill 1864, 49–50].

adopted by Mill (his subjectivity). “The masochist, no doubt, derives pleasure from the pain that he has desired, but the pleasure is because of the desire, not vice versa” [Russel 1967, 99], Russell writes.

However, what is Russell wrong about? This is clearly seen if his argument is turned against the Golden Rule. The masochist does not seek pain but pleasure, and, according to the Golden Rule, he should contribute to the pleasure of another, which no longer necessarily consists in receiving pain⁵. That is, in the words of Russell, the “object of desire” can only be pleasure itself and not just any thing. Pleasure is a unique and exclusive object of desire; in this exceptionality it is also the essence of desire. It is precisely the logic of possibility that works, not the imperative, since a thing is desirable if it is possible to desire. After all, we are not talking about a specific interest (a way to get pleasure), but about “the ultimate ends,” which “do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term.” According to Mill, this is “to be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct” [Mill 1864, 52]. Russell, on the other hand, tries to analyze the essence of the primary principle as evidence, while for Mill this is the main result of the generalization of species experience. Other results appear already as concrete norms, as well as goals of “non-hedonistic nature” (P.A. Gadzhikurbanova’s characteristic): self-esteem, beauty, and truth. She also draws attention to the fact that a specific feature of Mill’s philosophy is precisely the synthesis of pleasure as the super-goal with those goals “to which we strive even before we get pleasure from them” [Gadzhikurbanova 2010, 130].

In the context of the problem of moral universalism, the problem of the mechanism of generalization of both species and personal experience fades into the background, representing special epistemological interest (for example, we can consider the relevance of Mill’s inductive method in studying moral problems). Indeed, according to the prerequisite observability of experience, we simply state this generalization as a fact, and the result of the generalization is not considered as a logically derived truth, nor does it exhaust the entire possible data set, but only extends it to the maximum available for a person at a given moment. This is the difference between the ethics method and the strictly scientific method, as well as an additional indication (along with historicity) of the impossibility of absolute moral standards. The moral imperative in this case is not an absolute requirement, but rather moral heuristic. Otherwise, Mill would not consider the behavior of a modern person in the light of the ideal of self-sacrifice for the

⁵ For example, pleasure can also be taken in the exact opposite – in causing pain (thus, the masochist and the sadist interact completely within the Golden Rule).

benefit of future generations [Mill 1864, 23–24], since the available species experience does not allow creating an ideal society (it would be different if the truth had already been announced) and requires improvement⁶. But just like the discovery of pleasure as a constitutive element of activity gives utilitarianism the “primary principle,” the discovery of universality gives the principle of constitutionalization of experience: experience is valid only as general and creating a common space of the act, including acts of all other persons. Without this, personal experience is just a set of incidents. It is in the generalization of the act that a person affirms another person.

Conclusion

Mill’s utilitarianism is not so much proclamation of the species experience as a basis of morality as a proposal for analysis of such experience⁷, its rational explication, a reflective assessment of its historicity through the utility principle (studies of applicability of this principle also relate to the problem of determining the mechanism for generalizing experience). The effectiveness of such an explication determines the effectiveness of the utilitarian approach as a whole, if we do not consider it as an artifact of philosophical history. It becomes obvious that moral arithmetic is not complete without taking into account existing norms and values. The problem of moral universality as universally addressed rules and values, generated by common experience, is key to understanding Mill’s method and its difference from Bentham’s method. And the important thing is that it reveals communication as a fundamental component in the ethics of utilitarianism, methodologically bringing it closer to communicative ethics. Thus, the utilitarian goal of maximizing utility can be technologically (i.e., at the level of act formation and decision making) considered as a task of maximizing communication. It is the increase in the effectiveness of communication at different levels (species to individual, individual to individual) but not the transformation of the individual into a high-precision moral arithmometer that will lead humanity to universal happiness.

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⁶ Here it is enough to recall Mill’s activities in the struggle for women’s rights, i.e., in his attempt to change the then existing norms.

⁷ This also corresponds to the statement of R.G. Apressyan on “the need to reconsider the concept of culture in order to clarify the nature of the processes of translation and reception of common meanings and their adaptation for everyday practice” [Apressyan 2016].

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