

TRUTH AND UTILITY: WHERE DOES MILL STAND?

MARIAN GEORGE PANAIT

Abstract. This article examines the relationship between truth and utility in John Stuart Mill's philosophy and argues for the priority of truth over utility because utilitarian rules must be put to the test of truth to determine whether or not they are possible to apply. The analysis starts from James' position towards Mill, reviews the relevant ideas of Comte and Bentham, and concludes with a study of Mill's position.

Keywords: truth, utility, science, art, morals.

PRELIMINARIES

The purpose of this text is to clarify what in Mill's view is the relationship between truth and utility, or, in other words, which of the two has priority in situations where they appear to collide. I will try to show that the solution to the problem actually lies in an analysis, by Mill, of how the exigencies of truth and utility work; this analysis leads to the idea that the ultimate test for the functioning of the utility principle is in all cases cognitive in nature.

The idea of this research started from the motto of William James' conference on pragmatism; James affirms that Mill would be the leader of pragmatists if he were still alive: "to the memory of John Stuart Mill...whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive to-day"¹. Beyond the usual attempt by a school of philosophy to assume a founding authority, one can ask if Mill would agree with this statement of James. One can decide to look a little more carefully to the best – in my opinion – test possible: has Mill the same position as James on truth and its relation with utility? Therefore, we must clarify what the position of Mill is on truth and its relation to utility.

Marian George Panait ✉
Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy
E-mail: marian.panait21@gmail.com

¹ William James, *Writings 1902–1910*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1987, p. 480.

It may be noted that today philosophers are mainly interested in the utilitarian aspect of Mill's thought; the theory of knowledge is less discussed, so it could be argued that the development of philosophy has already solved the problem of the relationship between the two implicitly assuming the priority of utility. Broader developments in recent Western culture – we are supposedly in the post-truth era – support this widespread but often unexplained viewpoint. Clarifying Mill's position may be important from the point of view of the history of philosophy, but also as a caution regarding postmodern excesses. From the perspective of recent developments, of the way in which Mill's thinking is valued, James' support is relevant.

James' position is quite clear: truth is a property of a proposition, of a theory, which intervenes when that theory, that proposition, produces useful consequences. There is a dispute – which I set aside – whether behind the pragmatist definition of truth there is nevertheless a correspondence with facts. For me it is sufficient that James chooses from a few competing theories the one which is more useful and that he affirms that the truth has as its criterion the „cash value” of a theory, of a proposition: “pragmatism... asks its usual question: ...what, in short, is the truth's cash value in experiential terms?”².

For James there is distinction between epistemology organized around the truth and ethics organized around the right, but both truth and right can be described in the terms of a deeper value, their utility. Utility is central not only for the ethics, but also for epistemology.

Putting together this position on truth with the claim that Mill is pragmatists' original leader, the result, at least for James, is that Mill shares his beliefs concerning truth. James' interpretation of Mill's philosophy can be considered one of the first positions to perceive its direction as a utilitarianism that presupposes its truth³; in other words, James and his pragmatism are important factors in determining how Mill is predominantly understood today.

BETWEEN COMTE AND BENTHAM

It can be useful to make some remarks on the positions of Comte and Bentham before looking more carefully at Mill's sense of the relation between truth and utility. In his youth Mill had a very important intellectual conversation with Comte, as important as his intellectual relation with Bentham. Mill published on both his friends and had written communication with Comte. The influences of Comte on Mill in important aspects are well known: experience, observation,

² *Ibidem*, p. 573.

³ It is worth noting that prior to pragmatism the commentators of Mill and Comte, for example Littré or Whittaker, did not adopt this position, did not contribute to the evolution of James' understanding of utilitarianism.

induction, the invariability of laws and so on. Comte's and Mill's positions on induction are of the utmost importance due to the fact that in the scientific method reigned in the 19th century. Usually, Comte is credited with influencing Mill on this matter, but there are arguments which sustain a reciprocal influence around the year 1843. It is important to observe that the methods of induction are more elaborated in Mill than in Comte who is not as precise on the matter and still practices an enumerative induction⁴. Comte himself acknowledges the merits of Mill's work *System of Logic*, and especially of the treatment of induction: "such is your admirable appreciation, as clear as it is profound, of the four general modes of elementary induction"⁵. Comte's more probable influence on Mill concerns Mill's uniformity of nature principle which mirrors Comte's invariability of laws principle. All in all, Mill is indebted to Comte in matters of epistemology. Despite the fact that the correspondence as such is not invoked – due to the importance of observation, induction and uniformity of nature – one can assume that this is a theory of truth in the background of Mill's epistemology; but we don't need labels in order to understand the relation between truth and utility in Mill's philosophy.

Concerning his utilitarian commitment, Mill is indebted to Bentham. Bentham was explicitly a supporter of the correspondence theory of truth. Bentham, like Mill, understands by logic rather a theory of knowledge which is centred on truth. But he considers that truth can be subordinated to utility since he agrees not to tell a truth which produces disutility: "the moral or popular sanction is, with only here and there a casual exception found in action constantly on the side of truth"⁶.

Bentham makes these remarks in relation to his legal profession in a matter that can have serious consequences. For this reason, we understand his statement correctly if we connect it with Carl Schmitt's idea that it is the sovereign who decides in the case of an exception. In other words, the exceptions invoked by Bentham are more relevant than ordinary cases that are unproblematic. Therefore, truth and utility are not coincident, but utility has primacy when truth can produce disutility, despite the fact that Bentham doesn't redefine truth in the terms of utility as the pragmatists do. Recall that Mill criticized Bentham's ideas that personal interest is more important than that of the community and the fact that Bentham propounds the principle of utility without considering the quality of pleasures, considering only their quantity. But the most important difference between the two philosophers consists in the ways they see the relation between truth and utility.

⁴ Mary Pickering, *Le positivisme philosophique: Auguste Comte*, in *Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques*, 2011/2, vol. 67, p. 49–67, p. 66: *il [Comte] n'a pas fourni beaucoup de directives en ce qui concerne l'emploi de l'induction...*

⁵ Auguste Comte, *Lettres a John Stuart Mill 1841–1846*, Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1877, p. 143.

⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *Introductory View of the Rationale of Evidence*, in John Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, William Tait, Edinburgh, MDCCCXLIII, vol. VI, p. 264.

WHERE MILL STANDS

Looking at Mill's philosophy, one can see at first glance a clear cut between epistemology and ethics. In epistemology truth is central while in ethics utility is central; Mill's works *System of Logic*, and *Utilitarianism* (and, in a lesser measure, his writings on Bentham and Austin) express his position on truth and utility, respectively. If things are clearly cut, we have only to respect the separation and look at the definitions; the truth is a true proposition: "Whatever can be an object of belief... must, when put into words, assume the form of a proposition. All truth and all error lie in propositions". A proposition expresses a statement constructed mainly on the basis of induction: "the foundation of all sciences, even deductive or demonstrative sciences, is induction"⁷ and he adds that this is the case for any science, including mathematical subjects⁸.

The principle of utility expresses the fact that the purpose in life is the search for happiness defined as the acquisition of pleasure and elimination of pain: "the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness... by happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain"⁹. With varying nuances, this principle is adopted – if only implicitly – from Aristippus and Epicurus to contemporary utilitarian philosophers, adherents of either act utilitarianism or rule utilitarianism. The most salient feature of Mill's utilitarianism is the introduction – based on intensity, duration, certainty – of the distinction between higher pleasures and lower pleasures. The former are more desirable than the latter because they satisfy to a greater degree the requirement of the utilitarian principle of obtaining the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people. Mill's adherence to this principle is strongly determined by this distinction between pleasures: "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied"¹⁰.

As such these positions of Mill can create the impression that the two fields, knowledge and morality, are clearly separated and there is no need to further analyse their relation. The very short definitions highlighted here were proposed by Mill during an interval of twenty years, (1843–1863) in which he covers interesting aspects concerning the relation between truth and utility, especially the fact that from the beginning Mill was aware that the relation between science and morality is important and has to be solved in a proper, i.e., scientific manner.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Longmans, London, 1904, p. 147.

⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 166.

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in Mary Warnock (ed.), *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 186.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

In order to highlight the relation between truth and utility in Mill's philosophy one must look at how he understands the application of the syllogism in both fields. As we have seen, for Mill all knowledge has its origin in induction, in observation, but the inductive method must be combined with the deductive method (syllogism). Induction provides the cognitive material that is laid out in the form of the syllogism. But for the argumentation to work it is necessary to assume: "the statement that the uniformity of the course of nature is the ultimate major premise in all cases of induction"¹¹. Mill's claim that even this axiom (as he calls it) – in reality an assumption with principal value – is obtained by induction has generated disputes – which I shall not enter into – over a possible circularity: the principle is obtained by means of induction, and induction is in turn supported by it. However, it must be pointed out that the uniformity of nature does not exclude its ordering on several levels and in different domains of reality. On the contrary, the laws and regularities which are usually expressed in the conclusions of syllogisms, laws which are adapted to various fields, are to be understood as particular cases of more general laws; all together attesting to the uniformity of nature's course. Alongside this fundamental assumption, the canon of induction as elaborated by Mill (method of agreement, method of difference, indirect method of difference, method of residue, method of concomitant variations)¹² represents in his opinion a sufficient guarantee for the truth of induction-based propositions. Formally, Mill insists that the major premise of a syllogism is always a universal proposition¹³: "All ratiocination, therefore, starts from a *general* proposition, principle or assumption...the other premise...asserts that something...belongs to...[the class that] was affirmed...in the major...it follows...[that] the conclusion [is true]"¹⁴. This makes any conclusion deductively drawn from a syllogism have a certain degree of generality, but not the same degree of generality as the major premise: "the syllogistic process [is] that of reasoning from generals to particulars"¹⁵. This schematism works not only in science, but also in every other field of human activity. For science an important example of Mill's thinking is this: in the major premise the principle of uniformity of nature is stated, in the minor premise there is a sentence stating the different cases of attraction between two objects as they have been observed up to that moment, and in conclusion is the proposition that enunciates the law of universal attraction. Mill has no doubt about the soundness of such an argument since he believes that based on the uniformity of nature, once you know one case, under similar conditions, the others cannot

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *System...*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 253–266.

¹³ Universal in the sense that it concerns an entire class of objects, more numerous than the class of objects to which the sentence in the conclusion refers; that is, the major premise always has a greater degree of generality than the conclusion; this is the very mechanism of deduction in the case of the syllogism.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *System...*, *op. cit.*, p. 113–114.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

function differently. What he considers to be the universal law of causation expresses precisely this idea, that under similar conditions the same causes produce the same effects; and the multitude of examples in this regard may ultimately be reduced to the application of the principle of uniformity of nature and the canon of induction in those fields.

As early as 1843, in *System...* Mill distinguishes between science and art: “The imperative mood is the characteristic of art, as distinguished from science. Whatever speaks in rules or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact, is art”¹⁶. Mill retained this distinction throughout his life, relying on it when needed as a background condition for his positions on both truth and utility; for example, in *Utilitarianism* (1863) Mill expresses this fundamental difference thus: “but though in science the particular truths precede the general theory, the contrary might be expected to be the case with a practical art, such as morals or legislation”¹⁷. It is clear that described in this way this difference between science and art highlights precisely the fact that the former works with facts and descriptions, and the latter with imperatives, rules, etc. At the same time, we must keep in mind that precisely because it starts from stipulating ends, stating imperative, rules, etc., at some point art must face the test of science, its conclusions must be subjected to the test of science. It should also be borne in mind that, although distinct in its content, when it comes to reasoning, art must undergo the same combination of the inductive method with the deductive one.

Although in the context of this analysis the main interest is morals, it must be said that the term *art* refers not only to morals, but also to politics, aesthetics, etc. that is, to all disciplines that work with *must be* or *ought*, with imperatives, with rules, not with the description of facts¹⁸. In agreement with his positions described above, Mill admits that there can be a syllogism that is constructed only with art contents, but there is an error “overlooking the necessity of constantly referring back to the principles of the speculative science”¹⁹. Let's take two examples. The first syllogism that has only art contents might look like this: in the major premise the sentence enunciating the utilitarian principle of the greatest utility; in the minor premise, the sentence stating the finding that the payment of debts has increased the general utility, and in conclusion the proposition stating the rule that debts must be paid. If the conclusion of this syllogism is subjected, as Mill requires, to the test of science, the following syllogism can be formed: in the major premise the rule that debts must be paid, and in the minor premise the proposition

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 616. It should be noted that Mill specifies that he uses the term *art* in the old way, without specifying what it consists of. According to the etymological dictionary of the English language, one of the ancient meanings of the term *art* is that of “system of rules and traditions for performing certain actions” s.v. *art* in <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=art>. I believe that this meaning of the term is what Mill has in mind.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹⁸ Cf. John Stuart Mill, *System...*, *op. cit.*, p. 621.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 618.

that says that from observations up to that point debts have been paid, in conclusion is the proposition that the rule that debts must be paid is possible to apply. Another example, similar to the previous one; the syllogism with exclusive content of art is as follows: in the major premise the sentence stating the principle of greatest utility, in the minor premise the sentence stating that for the increase of utility various needs must be satisfied, in conclusion the sentence stating that the distribution of goods must be made according to needs. If the conclusion of this syllogism is subjected to the test of science, the following syllogism is obtained: in the major premise the sentence stating the rule that distribution must be made according to needs; in the minor premise the sentence stating that resources are limited, and in conclusion the proposition stating that this distribution rule is impossible to apply. In the first example the rule passes the science test therefore it is possible to apply it, whereas in the second example the rule doesn't pass the science test, therefore it is impossible to be applied.

CONCLUSION

Put to the test, James' claim that Mill could be the original leader of pragmatism proves inadequate. According to the foregoing, Mill does not define truth in terms of utility as does James, nor does he admit, like Bentham, exceptions to respect for truth. On the contrary, Mill demands that all propositions expressing art rules – obtained directly from an art induction or as conclusions of syllogisms with art content (as well as any proposition that enunciates a rule specific to any type of art²⁰, moral, political, etc.) – be subjected to the test of science. This means that we have learned where Mill stands: his utilitarianism must pass the test of truth, of science. Thus, it is clear that Mill gives priority to truth; he shows that some of the rules of art do not pass the test of truth; which means, in his view, that these rules are impossible. Utilitarianism and its principle work only as long as they are possible from the point of view of science, knowledge, and truth. Paraphrasing James, it can be said that Mill would today be a leader of those philosophers who, although they are open to the many postmodern phenomena that seem to increase the usefulness of each and therefore of all (act utilitarianism), nevertheless maintain that there are limits placed by science, knowledge and truth, contrary to the varied post-modern utilitarian impetus (in other words, Mill would support a norm utilitarianism rather than a free-wheeling act utilitarianism or an unrealistic rule utilitarianism).

²⁰ In either occurrence the term *art* is used in the sense of Mill.

