

## **Philosophy Report – February 2020**

### **Elizabeth Long**

We continued with our study of Michael Sandel's book, *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?*, this time Chapter 2 which considers utilitarianism, as expressed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mills. Utilitarianism is the theory that consequences are what matter, and so the just action is that which promotes the best outcome for the greatest number of people or the greatest happiness for the greatest number principle.

Sandel uses many practical examples to make one think about what is right and to challenge us. The true story of 4 sailors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who, in order to survive, kill and eat the dying cabin boy is a case in point. They were found guilty of murder but had defended themselves using the principle of the greatest good for the greatest numbers. As a group, we discussed this and other examples as well as some from today's world, e.g. can face recognition be justified, are ID cards a good idea? quarantine?, all examples where the greater good could be said to supersede individual rights.

John Stuart Mills believed in a modified utilitarianism where individuals should be free to do what they like as long as it doesn't harm others. He also countered Bentham's view that there is a single measurable scale of pain and pleasure by claiming that it was possible to distinguish between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures and that people would naturally prefer 'higher' pleasures once they were aware of them. Sandel goes on to describe what happened when he tried this out with his students – did they prefer The Simpsons or Shakespeare? No prizes for guessing the outcome.

Sandel concludes the chapter by allowing that Mill was a more humane philosopher but that his ideas, although he claimed were based on utilitarianism, were based more on a moral idea of human dignity and personality outside utility itself.

Next meeting: Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> April at 10am at Penny's Café, when we will be continuing to explore Justice with reference to Sandel and other philosophers.