



Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mills

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Mill's Utilitarianism is one of the most important, controversial, and suggestive works of moral philosophy ever written. Mill defends the view that all human action should produce the greatest happiness overall, and that happiness itself is to be understood as consisting in "higher" and "lower" pleasures.

Utilitarianism Details

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From Reader Review Utilitarianism for online ebook

Lisa says

People who've studied philosophy are, IMO, the most interesting people with whom to share conversation. There's a kind of elegance about the way they put a case for an idea, and I like the way that while are open to dissenting opinions, they can demolish them in style.

Mills shows how it's done. Here and there he pours a little scorn, but mostly it's a classically intelligent, coherent, logical argument for the principle that when trying to decide on a course of action, one should choose the position that brings happiness to the greatest number of people.

8/10 for utilitarianism; 1/10 for applying it to capital punishment.

Mohammed Al-Garawi says

Before I start talking about utilitarianism, let me tell you one thing or two about the philosopher who wrote this book.

John Stewart Mill was the son of the 17th century British philosopher James mill. And by taking full control of his son's educations and keeping him from associating with children of his own age, James Mill produced a prodigy who was said to have started learning Greek at three and Latin at seven. By the age of twelve young Mill was a competent logician, by sixteen a skilled economist- and at twenty he had a nervous breakdown.

Public education my ass.

Now that you've had a glimpse of Mill's background, here's the definition of utilitarianism: a theory in normative ethics holding that the proper course of action is the one that maximizes utility, usually defined as maximizing happiness and reducing suffering.

In other words, the morality of an action is judged by how much happiness it produces and how much suffering it reduces.

Classic utilitarianism is very similar to, if not a branch of consequentialism (defining the moral justice of an action by its consequences). In this book, Mill defines utilitarianism, defends it, and gives his opinion I how to apply it and enhance its applications in real life.

He also presents his theory of natural rights and democracy.

All in all, this is a shot, yet a very dense read. I definitely recommend it to those who are interested in moral philosophy.

Amy Armstrong says

Okay, I'm not sure what to say about this. It's like milk; it's good for you, but can leave you bloated and gassy and the cover is totally uninspiring. Most of the writing is equally uninspiring. I recommend 2 minutes

of Utilitarianism followed by 20 minutes of Googling gossip facts about Mill.

Robert says

Utilitarianism by John Stuart Mill is one tough book to read. But, if one understands it, it does prove to be interesting. Simply put, Mill explains that there is no basis for morality: what is good and what is bad. Utilitarianism is an idea that moral worth of an action is determined by the usefulness of it. People never settle for less. No one would like to be a happy animal. As Mill words it, "It is better to be an unsatisfied Socrates, than a satisfied fool." Major themes in the book included happiness, desires, and utility. Unjust laws do exist. This clashes with the theory of justice. Removal of justice would hurt society in the beginning, but, as Mill says, people would eventually learn in the end and peace would exist. If someone threatens your happiness you punish them. That's how Mill envisions justice. Whatever leads you to happiness is good, and that's what the book pretty much states. I feel there's a little hint of Machiavelli in the text. The idea that "the end justifies the means" is one danger I see that utilitarianism may turn into.

Tyler says

The last chapter saved this book from a one-star rating. While it's still wrong in a whole, I believe that Mill makes very small but important points throughout the book. For instance, he realizes that equality, with a government, requires inequality because some have more power than others (i.e. the people in government). Overall, though, his "proof" of utilitarianism is weak. His analysis of other ethical theories are very topical and not in-depth. And lastly, the most annoying thing about this book; WAY too many damn commas and extra thoughts in the middle of a sentence. What looks like a paragraph sometimes turns into one sentence with commas and semi-colons. The chapter on justice saves it a little bit but he doesn't seem to offer any solutions. For instance, he points out that we could possibly blame somebody for something they didn't do or we could NOT do that, which is more just? Well, Mill says it could go either way which this is completely counter-intuitive. He also says that a person deserves to keep his money, the rich specifically, because it brings more utility. His biggest arguments are his weakest yet very subtle and intelligent points come out mixed with those big arguments.

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Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Maureen says

The greatest proponent of utilitarianism in modern memory is Dr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame. The fact that an essay written in the 1860s is still having an impact on contemporary culture speaks to the longevity of J.S. Mill's idea. It has fueled countless debates among students in philosophy classes, and in the general public. The Greatest Happiness Principle is certainly worthy of consideration, and Mill's treatise has probably figured into many people's calculations when weighing momentous life decisions.

Andrew says

Mill writes about Utilitarianism. If you've read any modern take on this ethical system, there's nothing new here. The first chapter is very long and boring - I guess back in Mill's time he needed to justify Utilitarianism over other ethical systems like the Christian Bible pleas - now we, probably due to Mill, Utilitarianism is a completely understandable concept and doesn't really need to be defending in contrast to religious morals.

The rest of the book is fun, and Mill shows his passion for the subject.

It was fun to read his responses to various objections, objections that people still voice today (like how utilitarianism doesn't respect the individual, in favour of the greater good). Its strange that Mill tied in his responses in the book yet people still voice them with blissful disregard to the fact that Mill had plausible responses already lined up.

I'd recommend this book to anybody getting into ethical studies. Its an important work that has become a part of our social unconscious.

Hamidreza Hosseini says

satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question."

- John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism

I remember reading bits of Mill's Utilitarianism during a course of political philosophy and public policy when I was in college (my major almost 20 years ago was public policy). I have always been attracted to the basics of Mill's Utilitarianism and William's Pragmatism. Thus, may I disagree with Ferris Bueller. I do believe in *isms*. Anyway, I hadn't touched Mill in quite awhile (6 years) and figured it was probably time to dust off some of those foundational Western political philosophers. Who knows, we all may be rebuilding a Republic soon.

Ben Labe says

Here, Mill offers a thorough description and defense of his moral theory, proposing the greatest happiness ("utilitarian") principle as the unique first principle underlying all moral conduct. "The 'greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness," he argues. Happiness, Mill defines as "pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain." While this definition seems dubious at first, Mill demonstrates it to be very robust in its sweep, inventing novel arguments to distinguish between elevated and base pleasures (to Mill, ignorance is anything but bliss) and cleverly subsuming other ends under the banner of the "ultimate" one that he has proposed. That happiness is indeed the ultimate end he infers empirically (rightly admitting the futility of rigorously proving one's first principles). Eventually, Mill proceeds with a discussion of justice and its connection to utility. Not only does he show the primacy of the utilitarian principle over a justice principle in terms of its scope, but he demonstrates how it is capable of resolving disputes over justice. In so doing, he produces two extremely useful examples regarding distributive justice in the field of economics, resulting in the book's very best chapter. All in all, decent philosophy, but very poor style.
