

John Stuart Mill on Utilitarianism

Mill, J. S., 2001. Utilitarianism. 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Chapter I: General Remarks

Over the last two thousand years, little progress has been made in the advancement of ethics (i.e. the study of the way human beings should behave in society). Like the sciences (with the notable exception of mathematics), the search for fundamental principles has been unfruitful. However, because any given action is directed towards one or more specific outcomes, its consequences should determine whether it is right or wrong. Historically, this has not been the case, and competing moral principles have been promoted without asserting any overarching principle to adjudicate between moral commands that come into conflict. The principle of utility provides this primary principle; ironically, it is likely the very principle that gave rise to the secondary, competing principles that have since become more important to some people. There is no ethical theory that fails to take the promotion of pleasure and prevention of pain into account in its moral calculations.

Chapter II: What Utilitarianism Is

The principle of utility requires the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain. However, pleasure has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. It is better to be a dissatisfied human being than a satisfied pig because human beings can enjoy higher pleasures (e.g. literature) that pigs cannot experience. Critics should not mistake utilitarianism, which considers the happiness of everyone affected by an action, with egoism, which only considers the happiness of the moral agent. Furthermore, critics should not mischaracterise utilitarianism as impractical because of the time required to calculate the outcomes of actions; experience provides the knowledge required to quickly and accurately evaluate the probable consequences of actions. Likewise, critics should not accuse utilitarianism of being godless: Jesus's Golden Rule is a utilitarian formula. Unlike other ethical theories, utilitarianism provides a single, primary principle to adjudicate between secondary, competing principles.

Chapter III: Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility

The superstructures of other ethical theories are acknowledged by their adherents at the same time as their utilitarian foundations are denied. Critics of utilitarianism sometimes ask by what moral force or obligation it operates. Utilitarianism operates by the same moral force as other ethical theories: external sanctions (e.g. others' opinions, and God) and internal sanctions (e.g. one's sense of duty, and conscience). Utilitarianism does not operate by the force of an objective, transcendent moral standard, which does not make internal sanctions more likely to be followed in any event. The strength of the moral force by which utilitarianism operates is attributable to its concern with considering others' happiness, which is fundamental to participation in a society of equals. Utilitarianism requires that the interests of anyone affected by an action must be given equal consideration in ethical decision-making. A system of education and upbringing that cultivates selflessness above selfishness would create within the citizens of any society the ultimate internal sanction for safeguarding the principle of utility.

Chapter IV: Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible

The principle of utility cannot be proven because it is axiomatic (i.e. it is a first principle). The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it and the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; the only proof that something is desirable is that people desire it. The greatest happiness for the greatest number is evidently desirable because people desire happiness for themselves and, by extension, for the greatest number as the aggregate of their individual desires. This proves that happiness is the end that morality should seek to achieve; other desirable things, like good health, music, and virtue, are all part of this end (i.e. they are part of a happy state). Human nature desires only happiness and the means to achieve it. This principle is proven by experience, namely close observation of oneself (i.e. one's desires and behaviours) and close observation of others. Will (i.e. the active state of seeking something) is originally the product of desire but can be subverted. Cultivating wills inspired by desire, through proper education and other methods, is essential to producing happiness in society.

Chapter V: On the Connection between Justice and Utility

Historically, justice has been conceived of as an absolute, objective standard and the principle of utility has been conceived of as a relative, subjective one. Widely accepted examples of injustice include depriving a person of his or her legal or moral rights, breaking faith or contract with a person, and being biased. The two essential ingredients within the concept of justice are the desire to punish a person who has done wrong and the belief that there is a definite individual (or group of individuals) who has been wronged. Justice is something that people feel strongly about because it is concerned with security (i.e. preventing people from hurting one another within society), which the most important moral laws are concerned with. Despite historical misconceptions, justice is grounded in the principle of utility. Attempts to ground justice in other principles have failed, as demonstrated by the fact that different conceptions of justice often come into conflict with one another. The principle of utility overcomes these conflicts by revealing, for example, that it is just to deprive a person of his or her property or liberty (temporarily) to save a life.

George Thinks

Even though Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* contains the first systematic formulation of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* is widely considered the most articulate version of classical utilitarianism and is more popular as a result. Over and above its predecessor, I think there are a few things it's got going for it. First, it's a good deal shorter and far easier to read. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* is much longer and less interesting, particularly as Jeremy Bentham repeatedly lapsed into page after page of pedantically listing crimes and punishments. Second, John Stuart Mill was on the offensive with *Utilitarianism*, actively closing down objections to the principle of utility and persuading his readers of its veracity in the process. Finally, it presents a compelling case for utilitarianism. John Stuart Mill used *Utilitarianism* to argue that the principle of utility is an inevitable maxim for human beings to follow and one that we actually adopt unthinkingly in several situations.

In particular, one point worth labouring is John Stuart Mill's response to critics who claimed that applying the principle of utility is too impractical on a case-by-case basis. In *Utilitarianism*, he argued that experience helps individual human beings build up a mental rule book from which they can diverge if necessary, so most ethical decisions don't require on-the-spot use of the hedonic calculus. This is where some scholars identify the development of rule utilitarianism, although whether or not John Stuart Mill was a rule utilitarian remains hotly debated due to some ambiguities in his writing. Another important point is the claim that the quality of pleasure (rather than merely its quantity) should be calculated in ethical decision-making. John Stuart Mill famously wrote, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Whilst this assertion isn't entirely unproblematic, it is credited with saving utilitarianism from various issues related to exclusively considering the amount (rather than the type) of happiness created by an action.

