An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics

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AN INTRODUCTION TO MILL'S UTILITARIAN ETHICS

John Stuart Mill was the leading British philosopher of the nineteenth century, and his famous essay *Utilitarianism* is the most influential statement of the philosophy of utilitarianism: that actions, laws, policies, and institutions are to be evaluated by their utility or contribution to good or bad consequences.

Henry R. West has written the most up-to-date and user-friendly introduction to Mill's utilitarianism available. This book serves as both a commentary to and interpretation of the text. It also defends Mill against his critics. The first chapter traces Mill's life and philosophical background. The second chapter analyzes Mill's arguments against alternative theories. Succeeding chapters address the theory of qualitative hedonism; the question of whether Mill was an act or rule utilitarian; the theories of sanctions and of the relation between justice and utility; and the "proof" of the principle of utility. An appendix reviews in detail the structure and arguments of *Utilitarianism*.

This book is primarily intended as a textbook for students in philosophy assigned to read *Utilitarianism*, but it should also prove helpful to students and professionals in other fields such as political science, history, and economics.

Henry R. West is a professor of philosophy at Macalester College in Minnesota.

To Pat, my wife,
for love, support, and patience

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My greatest debt is to John M. Robson and Toronto University Press for publishing the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Without that, research on the corpus of Mill's writings would have been difficult and limited. Another debt is to *The Philosopher's Index* for leads to secondary literature.

The paradigm of recent scholarship on Mill's ethics is the work of David Lyons, whose careful analysis of Mill texts has been a model to emulate. I have also been influenced by Alan Fuchs, who, through correspondence and conversation, has challenged some of my tendencies in interpretation. Conversations with Wendy Donner have also been helpful. In the early stages of this study, I was helped and encouraged by J. B. Schneewind.

I am thankful to my colleagues Martin Gunderson and Karen J. Warren for reading parts of the script and making helpful comments for revisions. The readers for Cambridge University Press gave useful suggestions for revisions that improved the book. My friend Robert Foy read the entire manuscript, improving its style for clarity.

I became interested in Mill from a prior interest in utilitarianism, initiated by Professor Charles Baylis in a graduate course on Ethical Theory. My interest was furthered by discussions with fellow graduate students such as David Lyons, David Kurtzmann, and Michael Stocker, and I wrote a doctoral dissertation on utilitarianism, with Roderick Firth and John Rawls as advisors. In three years of postdoctoral research at Oxford University I had the opportunity to discuss utilitarianism with R. M. Hare, J. J. C. Smart, Derek Parfit, Peter Singer, Jonathan

Glover, R. M. Frey, James Griffin, and others. I have participated in NEH seminars, on utilitarianism led by Richard Brandt, and on consequentialism led by Jonathan Bennett. I benefited from the participation of others in those seminars, and I have benefited from commentators on papers that I have presented at professional meetings. Finally, my thinking on utilitarianism has been encouraged and kept on track by many years of conversations and correspondence with my good friend Bart Gruzalski.

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METHOD OF CITATION

All page references to the writings of Mill are to the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 volumes, John M. Robson, General Editor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91). There are many reprints of Mill's more popular works; for easy reference to them I have included the book and/or chapter, section, or paragraph in parentheses or brackets even if the paragraph is not numbered in Mill's text.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

UTILITARIANISM is the ethical theory that the production of happiness and reduction of unhappiness should be the standard by which actions are judged right or wrong and by which the rules of morality, laws, public policies, and social institutions are to be critically evaluated. According to utilitarianism, an action is not right or wrong simply because it is a case of telling the truth or lying; and the moral rule against lying is not in itself correct. Lying is wrong because, in general, it has bad consequences. And the moral rule against lying can be subjected to empirical study to justify some cases of lying, such as to avoid a disastrous consequence in saving someone's life.

Utilitarianism is one of the major ethical philosophies of the last two hundred years, especially in the English-speaking world. Even if there are few philosophers who call themselves utilitarians, those who are not utilitarians often regard utilitarianism as the most important alternative philosophy, the one to be replaced by their own. Examples of the latter are intuitionists, such as E. F. Carritt[1] and W. D. Ross,[2] early in the twentieth century, and, more recently, John Rawls, whose book *A Theory of Justice*[3] contrasts his principles of justice with utilitarian principles and contrasts his contractarian foundation for his principles with the grounds for utilitarian principles. Some of the most prominent ethical philosophers of recent years have

[1] E. F. Carritt, *Ethical and Political Thinking*.
[2] W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*.
[3] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

explicitly considered themselves utilitarians. Examples would be Richard Brandt,[4] J. J. C. Smart,[5] and R. M. Hare.[6] Nearly all introductory courses in ethics include utilitarianism as one important theory to be considered. And public policy is often based on cost-benefit analysis, perhaps not using pleasure and pain as the measures of utility but rather using some proxies for welfare and harm, such as consumer or voter preference or economic goods. Thus utilitarianism has an important place in contemporary ethics.[7]

John Stuart Mill's essay entitled *Utilitarianism*[8] is the most widely read presentation of a utilitarian ethical philosophy. It is frequently assigned in introductory courses on ethics or moral philosophy in colleges and universities and included as an examination topic at both graduate and undergraduate levels. It has been the subject of numerous disputes in books and in philosophical periodicals regarding its proper interpretation, and it has been the subject of numerous attacks and defenses by those who disagree or agree with its conclusions and supporting arguments.

4 Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right; Facts, Values, and Morality*, and other writings.

5 J. J. C. Smart, "An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, eds.

6 R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*, and other writings.

7 A textbook illustrating this is William H. Shaw's *Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism*.

8 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*. References to *Utilitarianism* will be in parentheses in the text. In quoting from Mill, an effort will be made to add the feminine pronoun when the masculine is used to refer to a representative human being. About this Mill says: "The pronoun *he* is the only one available to express all human beings; none having yet been invented to serve the purpose of designating them generally, without distinguishing them by a characteristic so little worthy of being the main distinction as that of sex. This is more than a defect in language; tending greatly to prolong the almost universal habit of thinking and speaking of one-half the human species as the whole." *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (bk. 6, ch. 2, sec. 2, n. 837).

The present work is conceived as a contribution to those disputes, both of interpretation and of the merits of Mill's philosophical position. It is an effort to present an interpretation of the work as a whole and of its constituent parts, taking into consideration many of the conflicting interpretations found in philosophical literature, and to defend the essay against many of the objections that have been presented against it or its utilitarian philosophy. It is my belief that Mill's version of utilitarianism is far clearer and more consistent than it is often made out to be, and that his version of utilitarianism is a plausible if not a totally defensible ethical theory. A complete defense of utilitarianism would require a refutation of all alternatives to it, or at least a discussion of other serious alternatives to show the superiority of utilitarianism. I am not sure that such a comparison is possible, because alternatives may rest on metaphysical or dogmatic assumptions that are beyond rational discussion; but, in any case, it is not my aim to do that. Nevertheless, it is my aim to answer many of the standard objections to the theory. Thus this is a work of substantive moral philosophy as well as exegesis of a text.

Mill's essay is often read only in excerpts, and that can be misleading. For example, Mill introduces utilitarianism in the following way: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (210 [II, 2]). This formula is ambiguous in several ways. First, it appears to apply to each act that an agent might consider doing, case by case. Such an interpretation is what has been called "act-utilitarianism," in contrast to "rule-utilitarianism" or other more complex versions of utilitarianism. In Chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism* and in other writings, it is clear that Mill is not an act-utilitarian. One chapter of this book will be devoted to a discussion of that issue, drawing on the data in *Utilitarianism* and remarks by Mill in his correspondence. Another ambiguity is what is meant by the expression, "right in proportion as

they tend to promote happiness." One interpretation is that a particular act has some consequences that promote happiness and other consequences that produce unhappiness. An act, then, has a net tendency when the tendency to promote unhappiness is subtracted from the tendency to promote happiness or vice versa.[9] Given an act-utilitarian interpretation of the formula, one could then say that an act is right if it in fact has a greater net tendency to promote greater happiness (or less unhappiness) than any alternative. This is the sort of act-utilitarianism defended by J. J. C. Smart in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. This is not only act-utilitarian but "actual consequence" utilitarianism in contrast to "foreseeable consequence" utilitarianism. But another interpretation of "tends" in the formula is possible. It is that a *kind* of action tends to promote happiness to the extent to which that kind of action *usually* promotes happiness. The tendency, then, is the probability that actions of that kind have been found to promote happiness. Such an interpretation will be defended in this work. Many objections to utilitarianism are directed against act-utilitarianism and against actual-consequence utilitarianism. Mill's theory is much more complicated, and it is not subject to many of those objections.

Sometimes Chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism* is read without the chapter on the "sanctions" that motivate morality, the chapter on the "proof" of hedonism, and the chapter on justice. These are all controversial chapters, but taken together they help to interpret Mill's version of utilitarianism. Understanding the "sanctions" requires an understanding of Mill's psychological theories, which are found in his notes to an edition of his father's psychology textbook. Understanding the "proof" is aided by his comments in a letter to a correspondent. The chapter on justice shows that Mill took rights very seriously.

[9] This is the interpretation given by Roger Crisp, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, 104. Crisp also interprets Mill as an act-utilitarian (113) and as an actual-consequence utilitarian (99–100).

In the chapters of this work, these chapters are interpreted in the light of Mill's correspondence and other writings. In *Utilitarianism* Mill gives little attention to alternative moral theories. Chapter 2 is devoted to showing that Mill had reasons to reject other theories, as well as the positive arguments for utilitarianism found in the essay.

Mill derived his utilitarianism from his father, James Mill, and from Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth-century founder of the utilitarian tradition in moral philosophy. Mill was critical of Bentham in two early essays on Bentham, and in his essay *Utilitarianism* he revises Bentham's quantitative analysis of pleasures and pains by introducing a qualitative dimension to the analysis. The tone of Mill's essay also differs from the tone of Bentham's writings. Bentham writes polemically to attack the current moral thinking that appealed to moral feelings, which he called "caprice." Mill also rejected any appeal to a moral sense, but in this essay, he is out to show that utilitarianism is supportive of most commonsense morality. Many interpreters have been led to emphasize the differences between Mill and Bentham. My reading of Mill, on the other hand, will emphasize the similarities. Mill, like Bentham, was a reformer. He was an advocate of women's rights and of better wages and voting rights for the working classes. He opposed aristocratic privileges. He thought that Christianity was a source of perverted ethical doctrines. And Mill, in spite of the greater complexity of his analysis of pleasures and pains, like Bentham was a hedonist. Mill revised and perhaps broadened and softened Benthamism, but he never deserted it.

Chapter 1 will give a brief statement of biography for those unfamiliar with the life of the man whose *Autobiography* is a classic work of that genre of literature and whose other works were important contributions to philosophy of science, economics, and political theory. This chapter will also place J. S. Mill's work in the tradition of utilitarianism stemming from Jeremy Bentham. Those familiar with Mill's life and Bentham's philosophy may wish to skip that chapter and go on to Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 presents Mill's criticism of alternative ethical theories found, not in *Utilitarianism*, but in other writings. In those writings, Mill attacks the appeal to Nature, to God's commands, and to a moral sense, as the foundation for ethics.

Chapter 3 analyzes Mill's controversial evaluation of pleasures and pains on the basis of "quality" as well as "quantity." Many critics have claimed that Mill has deserted hedonism in making this distinction. I argue that Mill is correct to distinguish between pleasures and pains on the basis of qualitative phenomenal differences and that this is not a desertion of hedonism. But I also argue that he has not successfully made out his claim that those who have experienced pleasures that employ the distinctively human faculties consistently prefer them.

Chapter 4 states Mill's theory of the sanctions that motivate moral behavior and explicates the psychological theory that is their background.

In Chapter 5, the question whether Mill is properly interpreted as an "act-utilitarian" or as a "rule-utilitarian," or as neither, is discussed. My conclusion is that neither formulation captures the structure of Mill's position. Mill wants rule-utilitarian reasoning to be used in some contexts; act-utilitarian reasoning to be used in others; and he has an important role for rights and for a distinction between duty and supererogation (actions that are meritorious, beyond the call of duty).

Chapter 6 sets out and defends Mill's "proof" of the Principle of Utility. Mill's argument for hedonism is usually attacked as committing a number of fallacies. I defend it against these charges and claim that it is a persuasive argument.

Chapter 7 restates Mill's theory of the relationship between utility and justice, showing that, on the analogy of rule-utilitarian reasoning, the role of rights and of justice in Mill's system is consistent with his utilitarianism.

An appendix gives an outline of the structure of *Utilitarianism*, in the order of the chapters of the essay, summarizing Mill's arguments. For those unfamiliar with the work, for those who have read it but without confidence in following the arguments,

or for those who want a quick review, a reading of the appendix before reading the remainder of the book will be helpful.

This book is intended for a wide audience, from the reader first becoming acquainted with Mill's philosophy to the professional philosopher or even the Mill scholar who is familiar with the controversies surrounding Mill's work. For those who are unfamiliar with Mill, I strongly recommend that after reading Chapter 1 and perhaps Chapter 2, they read Mill's essay *Utilitarianism* or at least the appendix that summarizes it, before attempting to study Chapters 3 through 7.

1

MILL'S LIFE AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

UTILITARIANISM as a distinct tradition in ethical thought was founded by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). The principle of utility, that the production of happiness and elimination of unhappiness should be the standard for the judgment of right action and for the criticism of social, political, and legal institutions, was proposed by many writers in the eighteenth century, but it was Bentham who attempted to build a complete system of moral and legal philosophy upon that basis, and it was Bentham whose doctrine became the basis of a reform movement in the nineteenth century. A brief statement of Bentham's philosophy will be given at the end of this chapter.

John Stuart Mill was a direct heir of Bentham's philosophy. His father, James Mill (1773–1836), had moved from Scotland to become a freelance journalist in London, where he edited two journals, translated books, and in the period of John Stuart's childhood wrote a multivolume *History of British India*. This became the standard work on the subject and earned him a post with the East India Company, which, as a quasi-governmental bureau, managed British colonial interests in India. Soon after moving to London, James Mill became acquainted with Bentham. John Stuart writes in his *Autobiography* that his father was "the earliest Englishman of any great mark, who thoroughly understood, and in the main adopted, Bentham's general views of ethics, government, and law."[1]

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, reprinted in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, vol. 1 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, J. M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, eds., 55 (ch. II, par. 11). References to the *Autobiography* in this chapter will be in parentheses in the text.