Utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill was born in London, the son of prominent Scottish intellectual James Mill—who rose to fame for writing an outlandishly racist and deeply influential history of India, despite never visiting the country—and a mother about whom almost nothing is known, and whom Mill never even explicitly mentions in his autobiography. Hoping to create a genius, Mill's father raised his son strictly and meticulously, isolating the boy from the world and immersing him in Greek and Latin literature, logic and economics, and most of all utilitarian philosophy. This education included audiences with many of his father's illustrious friends, including the influential economist David Ricardo and the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who is generally considered utilitarianism's founder and Mill's greatest philosophical influence. Mill's adolescence was punctuated by a yearlong sojourn in France, a brief attempt to become a lawyer, and a mental breakdown and severe six-month depression that came after he realized that he would be bored, not satisfied, if he managed to undo all the world's injustices (and also in large part because he was exhausted by his strenuous, overly analytical upbringing). Mill followed his father to the East India Company, where he spent most of his adult life (25 years) as a colonial bureaucrat writing correspondence. Because his job was not difficult, he had plenty of time to write on a wide variety of subjects and remain active in London's intellectual life, founding and participating in various philosophical and political groups (most notably the Utilitarian Society and Philosophical Radicals). His important works from this period include 1843's *A System of Logic*, which made breakthroughs in thinking about scientific proof, essays on Bentham and Coleridge, and a number of books and articles on various political issues—always analyzed in terms of utilitarian principles. During these decades, Mill also married his close friend Harriet Taylor. Taylor died shortly after the British government dissolved the East India Company (including Mill's job at it) and took direct control of India in 1858. Like his father, Mill remained a staunch defender of British imperialism throughout his whole life: he believed that the British were nobly "improving" the "barbarians" who lived in India and other territories. In contrast, when it came to the rights of British people, Mill was remarkably progressive for his time—after leaving the East India Company, he became an important administrator at University of Saint Andrews and served in the British Parliament, where he advocated for the economic rights of the poor and became the second ever Member of Parliament to come out in favor of extending voting rights to women. These views proved controversial, however, and he lost re-election in 1868, at which point he moved to the town where his wife was buried in France, bought a house and filled it with the furniture from the hotel room in which she died, and lived out his own last five years. Mill remains best remembered for two works in particular, which have cemented his reputation as the most important British philosopher of the 19th century: *On Liberty*, in which he argues for the protection of individual rights and limits on government authority, and *Utilitarianism*, his most succinct defense of the ethical theory at the heart of his thought and political career alike.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *Utilitarianism* is uniformly an abstract, theoretical work, Mill was actively involved in political reform movements throughout his life. Indeed, Mill, Bentham, and their fellow early utilitarians made it clear that one of their philosophy's primary purposes was to help British society organize itself more rationally, and for the benefit of all. While in some cases these attempts look less noble in hindsight—like Mill's impassioned defense of British colonialism as a means of improving the net happiness of India's "barbarian" natives—in most cases, such as their fights for women's suffrage, the end of slavery, and legal protections for free speech, early utilitarians ended up on the right side of history. Of course, this was only possible within the particular political framework of Victorian England, which saw radical changes in social and class structure in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. With the old aristocracy's dominance replaced by that of a new capitalist class, and with the emergence of a new middle class alongside a large class of impoverished, unprotected laborers, old social rules were suddenly thrown into question and reformers had an opportunity to try and set new standards for public morality, counteracting some of the selfishness sown by industrial capitalism with a conscience of the general good. Most of these reformers were Christians who put their faith front and center, but Mill's group of utilitarian activists were the principal exception: they made the same arguments for social reform, but based on a moral principle that (following the Enlightenment) they grounded in humans themselves, rather than in God. This era saw population explode, communication and transportation technology flourish, public schools and welfare programs open, and novelists spread political and feminist messages. So when Mill wrote about seriously transforming and improving society in *Utilitarianism*, he meant it quite literally, in his specific place and time: he was not writing from the perspective of an imaginary leader who could choose how to structure a society, but rather from his own position as a moral reformer who believed he could make a lasting difference through activism—and succeeded in doing so.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Besides Mill's wide variety of other works, which range from the even more theoretical *A System of Logic* to the much more practical *On Liberty*, the most pertinent sources of Mill's arguments in *Utilitarianism* are undoubtedly the works of his teacher, role model, and friend Jeremy Bentham. Bentham is usually considered the founder of contemporary utilitarianism, which he laid out primarily in the book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. One of the most striking features of Bentham's philosophy—and the one that most strongly distinguishes his from Mill's—is that Bentham thinks utility can literally be calculated through an algorithm, with all kinds of pleasure counting equally, while Mill insists that certain (more refined) pleasures are inherently better than others. However, utilitarian ideas have a much longer history, stretching back to the hedonistic philosophy of Epicurus, whose hundreds of books have all been lost and whose thinking survives only through a handful of fragments and letters, the most important of which is the *Letter to Menoeceus*, as well as the reports of later writers like Lucretius, a Roman poet. And, before Bentham, at least four earlier British thinkers—Francis Hutcheson, John Gay, David Hume, and William Paley—also argued that utility should be the main moral concern guiding action. Additionally, the explosion of work that extended and responded to Mill's conclusions affirms his place at the center of the utilitarian tradition. Just a few of the most important utilitarian thinkers after Mill include: Henry Sidgwick, best known for closely comparing utilitarianism to other ethical systems in *The Methods of Ethics* (1874); Derek Parfit, who is remembered for similar, much more recent reconciliatory work in *On What Matters* (2011), as well as his earlier book *Reasons and Persons* (1984), which illustrates a problem with utilitarian thinking; R.M. Hare, who also combined utilitarianism with other systems, in his case to develop a unique theory of "universal prescriptivism" in books like *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Moral Thinking* (1981); and the analytical philosopher G.E. Moore, who defended a modified version of utilitarianism but argued that pleasure is not the only good in itself (in *Principia Ethica*, 1903, and *Ethics*, 1912). The most prominent and controversial 21st-century utilitarian is the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, who is best known for promoting "effective altruism" and re-popularizing utilitarianism in the public sphere through works like *How Are We to Live?* (1993), *The Life You Can Save* (2009), and "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972). However, this is only a small fraction of the extensive work on utilitarianism—and a similarly enormous amount of work has also focused on Mill himself, from Nicholas Capaldi's *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (2004) to Roger Crisp's *Mill on Utilitarianism* (1997), Alan Ryan's *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (1990), and the edited collection of essays *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life* (2011). Of course, Mill's own autobiography (1873) is perhaps the most interesting source on his life. When taught in ethics classes, Mill's *Utilitarianism* is usually juxtaposed with the major texts of the two other traditional schools of ethical thought, virtue ethics and deontological ethics: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), respectively.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Utilitarianism
- **When Written:** Mid-1850s onward
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1861 in *Fraser's Magazine*, 1863 in book form
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Philosophical essay, ethical theory, classical liberalism
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Academic Ironies. Although Mill spent his entire childhood reading voraciously and ended up running a university late in life, he never actually completed a degree.

Remote Work. Similarly, while he spent more than two decades working for the British East India company, Mill, like his father, never visited India.

PLOT SUMMARY

The stated purpose of John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* is deceptively simple: the author wants to clearly explain his utilitarian ethical philosophy and respond to the most common criticisms of it. In many instances, however, the book is much more layered and complex: Mill often references other important ethical systems (like Kant's deontological ethics and Aristotle's concept of virtue), whose major concepts he thinks utilitarianism explains even better. This is most apparent in the introduction, in which Mill notes that ethics has long been considered an important subject and yet has produced little agreement among philosophers. He thinks this is because they have failed to clearly specify the first principles of their ethical philosophies—they articulate various second principles about how to act, but never explain the theory of moral value that underlies these principles. Mill thinks this theory of value is actually quite simple: everyone, including laypeople and philosophers alike, values *happiness* and nothing else. Although all ethical theories ultimately have to rely on this principle, only utilitarianism is based on it from the beginning.

In the next chapter, Mill gives an overview of the utilitarian doctrine. Fundamentally, utilitarians want to maximize utility,

which means the total of human happiness. Happiness has two parts: "pleasure and the absence of pain." And happiness is the only intrinsically good thing. This means that actions are morally good if they "promote happiness," and morally wrong if they "produce the reverse of happiness." This does not mean people should spend their lives pursuing bodily pleasures: Mill thinks the refined pleasures of the intellect and the emotions are inherently better, as indicated by the fact that "all or almost all [people] who have experience of both [types of pleasure] give a decided preference" to the refined ones. So critics are wrong to accuse utilitarianism of undermining human dignity or encouraging people to become indulgent pleasure-seekers: because humans' intellectual and emotional capabilities give them access to unique experiences and pleasures, "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." Indeed, few humans *are* fully satisfied: many lack the opportunities to fully cultivate their intellects or pursue their interests, and of course it will always be impossible to eliminate all of life's pains. But utilitarians care about *happiness*, not satisfaction, and producing the happiest possible world does not require fixing all the world's problems. Contrary to the assumptions of utilitarianism's critics, Mill does not see the happy life as "a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement," but rather as a life "of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures," and correct expectations about and knowledge of the world. People can be happy by living peaceful and uneventful lives (reducing pain), pursuing interesting and exciting experiences (maximizing pleasure), or embracing a balance of both. And people who are selfish and/or mentally uncultivated will never be happy, even with all the advantages in the world. Indeed, according to Mill, wealth and status are far less important as contributors to happiness than education and individual rights, which all societies should try to guarantee for their citizens. Teaching people to care about the collective happiness has a snowball effect, turning a sense of equality and care for others into an institutional principle of "law and [public] opinion."

Throughout this chapter, Mill also dismisses a number of common misinterpretations and criticisms of utilitarianism. For instance, some people say that self-sacrifice is better than pursuing one's own happiness, and Mill agrees—but only in the cases where self-sacrifice improves net happiness, because in a world where everyone could freely pursue their own happiness, sacrifice would be unnecessary. Other critics worry that people cannot possibly think in every moment about how their actions will affect everyone else in the world, and Mill agrees—most good actions, he notes, are only done for the good of a few people, and do not affect the vast majority of society (about whom only politicians and public servants should be constantly thinking). To those who call utilitarianism "*godless*," Mill replies that God certainly wants everyone to be happy. Those who believe people cannot predict the effects of their actions, he suggests, should study history and get a general idea of the best course of action.

In the next two chapters, Mill takes up two important side considerations about utilitarian philosophy. In Chapter Three, "Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility," Mill asks what sanctions (or gives "binding force" to) utilitarian sentiments. In other words, having established that promoting the general happiness is good, he considers what makes people actually act in ways that do so. Mill decides that "external" sanctions, like shame from others or retaliation from God, are ultimately far less important than the "internal" sanction of the individual moral conscience, which he believes societies should support and cultivate as a way to encourage a general interest in justice and the common good.

In Chapter Four, Mill asks how it is possible to *prove* a moral theory like utilitarianism as true. This essentially requires proving utilitarianism's primary claim, which is that happiness is the *most* desirable thing, and the *only* desirable thing. Just like "the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it," Mill insists, the only way to show that something is desirable is to show "that people do actually desire it." There is no question that everyone desires themselves to be happy, which implies that humanity as a whole—"the aggregate of all persons"—desires its own collective happiness. To show that happiness is the *only* truly desirable thing, Mill looks at examples of other things that people seem to desire, like virtue and money. These things are desirable precisely because they form "part[s] of happiness." He emphasizes that it is wrong to think of happiness as an "abstract idea," when in reality it is a "concrete whole" comprised of various things in a human life. Therefore, he concludes that everything people naturally desire is "either a part of happiness or a means to happiness," which proves that happiness is the *most* desirable thing and the *only* thing that is desirable in and of itself—meaning utilitarianism's fundamental claim is true.

In the fifth and final chapter, Mill asks about the relationship between utility and justice. This is important, he notes, because people often use their sense of justice as an argument against utilitarianism: how can people simply calculate consequences when, in many situations, they feel they *have* to act to do what is right and just? Aren't some things (say, punishing the innocent or taking away people's rights) plainly wrong, even if they ultimately produce good consequences? And don't people's moral instincts about what is just and unjust point them to what is inherently good or bad, making utilitarianism unnecessary?

In fact, Mill fully agrees that feelings of justice almost always point to what is morally right—which, importantly, does not always mean the same thing as what the law allows or prohibits. However, he insists that this is the case *not* because the moral feeling itself serves as proof of what is good and evil, but rather because these feelings are based on even deeper, *utilitarian* instincts: people's sense of justice reminds them what is conducive and counterproductive to collective happiness. So

people are right to feel that it is morally wrong to violate others' rights—by taking away their property or liberty without due cause, for example, even when it produces some good in the short term. Despite the good they may do, such violations denigrate the public's trust in the law, feeling of safety, and sense of equality—outcomes which are always bad for collective happiness in the long term. This does not mean there are no exceptions to violating others' rights: it is perfectly moral to steal medicine if that is the only way to save a loved one's life, for instance, but few people would say the injustice of stealing the medicine is more egregious than the injustice of not being able to get it in the first place.

Mill argues that, when we say that a thing is morally "*wrong*," we mean "that a person ought to be punished […] for doing it." This means not only that someone has failed to act in the best way, but also that they have broken a moral *duty*, whether a general duty that is owed in the abstract (an "imperfect duty") or a specific duty owed to "some assignable person." Injustice is specifically the latter: it is unjust to break a promise made to someone else, while it is morally wrong, but not necessarily *unjust*, for a rich person to be stingy in general. In response to injustice, people feel a moral sense of justice that comes from "the impulse of self-defense and the feeling of sympathy." Essentially, people want to defend others when their rights are violated, just as they would defend themselves in the same situation. So justice combines "vengeance" with a moral interest in others, that is, a commitment to "the general good" based on a sense of equality. This is how Mill connects justice back to utility: it is people's way of responding to the violation of people's rights, with rights being an important foundation for and contributor to the happiness of everyone in a society. Hinting at his political philosophy, Mill argues that such rights are in fact *the most important moral rules of all*: they are "the essentials of human well-being," because they stop people from hurting each other. And yet it is impossible to explain these rules' importance—or the necessity of protecting them through people's feelings of justice and societies' elaborate legal systems—without ultimately showing that they are valuable *because they promote the general happiness*. So according to Mill, while justice is an important feeling that should be celebrated and cultivated, it is not separate from or superior to utility: instead, it actually becomes a further justification for utilitarianism.

CHARACTERS

John Stuart Mill – The author, a prominent 19th-century English liberal philosopher, legislator, and colonial bureaucrat. Mill is one of the most influential thinkers in the school of classical liberalism, and is perhaps best remembered for presenting the theory of utilitarianism in this short book of the same name. The central tenant of Mill's argument is that utility, or the total of human happiness, should be maximized by creating an ethical system in which happiness-promoting things are considered the moral ideal. Although this doctrine remains closely associated with Mill, he did not actually invent it, and in fact was *taught* to be a utilitarian by his prominent father, who was a close friend of Jeremy Bentham, the other most influential early utilitarian. Mill followed in his father's footsteps not only philosophically, but also professionally: after a precocious childhood, he joined the British colonial bureaucracy to help govern India from afar. His role in Britain's disastrously destructive colonial regime—which he declared subject to no "rules of international morality" because he believed Indians were "a barbarous people" incapable of civilization and therefore not party to "the law of nations"—contrasted sharply with his utilitarian philosophy and role promoting progressive ideas like women's suffrage as a member of Parliament back home in the U.K.

Immanuel Kant – An important 18th-century German philosopher and who remains an incredibly influential thinker. Although his thought revolutionized practically every branch of philosophy, in the public eye he is generally best remembered for his notoriously complex ethical thought, and specifically for his argument that morality must be derived from pure (a priori) reason alone. This argument led him to the famous moral law he called the "categorical imperative," in which people are unconditionally obligated to act morally. Although Kant's abstract, intention-based philosophy is usually contrasted with utilitarianism, Mill argues that Kant ultimately relies on and validates utilitarian principles.

TERMS

A priori – A philosophical term from the Latin for "from the earlier." Although its connotations are complex, in short, the term refers to knowledge that is accessible prior to, or independently from, experience. The term is most closely associated with **Immanuel Kant**, who argued that ethical laws must be a priori (as opposed to other thinkers who thought people could determine what is ethical by observing and experimenting in the world). **Mill** cites the term in this context.

Utility – Another word for net or aggregate happiness, which is utilitarianism's principal measure of good and evil. Since **Mill** defines happiness as "pleasure and the absence of pain," the utility of an action is essentially the sum of the pleasure it creates, minus the sum of the pain it causes, both taking into account all the people the action affects. Note that while the word *utility* in common usage often has connotations of ignoring emotional experience, the opposite is true in utilitarianism—utility in this context is explicitly concerned with happiness above all else.

Expediency – A now-uncommon term for what is convenient or

advantageous. **Mill** carefully distinguishes between two interpretations of this word: in popular discourse, something is usually "expedient" if it is good for the doer, but not necessarily the right thing to do. In chapter two, Mill clarifies that utilitarians are against *that kind* of "expediency." But in the rest of the book, Mill reclaims the term to mean simply the most advantageous or best thing to do—namely, the course of action that maximizes utility.

First Principles – A term for the most fundamental principles of a discipline or field of knowledge. First principles are fundamental assumptions on which the rest of a discipline is based. In philosophy, this essentially means a priori arguments that can be neither proven nor disproven through logic, and from which other secondary principles are to be derived. For **Mill**, the first principle of ethics is the idea that what is good is simply maximizing utility, whereas secondary principles would be specific rules about what to do and avoid doing *in order to* maximize utility.

Secondary Principles – According to **Mill**, secondary principles are principles that can be derived directly from first principles, but that are not themselves fundamental. In the realm of ethics, this means rules that people should follow to fulfill the first ethical principle of maximizing utility or promoting the general happiness. An example of a secondary principle is the rule that it is wrong "to rob or murder, betray or deceive."

THEMES

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UTILITARIANISM, HAPPINESS, AND THE GOOD LIFE

Although he did not invent the utilitarian doctrine, philosopher John Stuart Mill remains its best-known proponent, largely because of his attempts to make it accessible to the general public and assuage common doubts about it through this widely publicized essay. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill lays out this deceptively straightforward philosophy with a specificity that he hopes will clarify his audience's misinterpretations, whether innocent or deliberate. He emphasizes that utilitarianism is based on a single, central principle—the supremacy of happiness over all other goals—and that focusing on this principle can clarify a specific and achievable vision of the good or desirable life.

Utilitarianism is a simple philosophy, which essentially boils down to one principle: happiness, and nothing but happiness, is intrinsically good for human beings. Utilitarianism's name comes from the concept of "utility," which is synonymous with the collective happiness of all people. Mill defines happiness as "pleasure and the absence of pain." Therefore, a utilitarian thinks that actions are good when they increase humanity's net happiness, creating more pleasure than they cause pain, and evil when they cause more pain than pleasure. This "greatest happiness principle," the core idea of Mill's philosophy, is the only test that must be applied to determine whether an action is good or evil. The reasoning behind Mill's theory is equally straightforward. Like many ethicists throughout history, Mill agrees that everyone ultimately acts for the sake of happiness, whether consciously or not. While other ethical theories try to base good and evil in something more fundamental than humans' collective self-interest (like God's laws, absolute moral virtues, or human nature), Mill thinks that ethics should accurately reflect the reality that people act for the sake of happiness—philosophers can then focus their energies on figuring out the best way to do so. Accordingly, he sees utilitarianism's simplicity as a distinct advantage and quickly turns to practical concerns, clarifying his theory for his detractors and showing what it means for individuals and societies.

Based on his fundamental principle, Mill develops a specific (but not narrow) vision of what constitutes the best life for human beings. He defines it as "an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing." First, Mill is careful to differentiate his doctrine from hedonism, a philosophy which holds that people should maximize bodily pleasures (for instance through excessive eating, drinking, and sexual activity). Mill believes such a "a life of rapture" is simply impossible, and that attempting to live according to hedonism would mean maximizing the quantity of pleasures while forgetting the quality of them. Unlike some of his predecessors (most notably Jeremy Bentham), Mill thinks that some pleasures are better than others—specifically, he argues that pleasures of the intellect are usually superior to pleasures of the body, because "all or almost all who have an experience of both [types of pleasure] give a decided preference" to intellectual ones. Therefore, for Mill, the good life is not about self-indulgence, but rather *cultivation*.

Since people are not born developed enough to appreciate the pleasures of intellectual life, Mill thinks that people must be properly educated and given enough freedom to pursue these higher pleasures. These freedoms include political liberties like freedom of speech and assembly, but also material liberties—that is, freedom from ills like poverty, disease, and trauma. And if given access to the whole range of human pleasures through the support and education of a relatively democratic society, Mill thinks people must build two other

personality traits: generosity and "mental cultivation" (or an "inexhaustible" intellectual interest in the world). The first is important because it makes happiness infectious: generous people take pleasure in others' happiness, while selfish people resent it. And the second is important because it allows people to think freely, take "a sincere interest in the public good," competently pursue the intellectual pleasures that Mill puts at the top of his hierarchy, and learn not to set their sights too high (or "expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing"). In short, the best or happiest human life requires education, political and economic freedom, and the careful improvement of individual moral character. When one is fortunate enough to possess all these traits, Mill thinks there are two primary ways to live a life of maximal utility without trampling on others' happiness. The two paths are "tranquility and excitement." People can choose one or try to combine both. Those with tranquil lives, who suffer little pain, "can be content with very little pleasure," while those with exciting lives "can reconcile themselves to [withstand] a considerable quantity of pain." Accordingly, while the best human life requires many specific social and individual conditions, it is not so rigid as to deny people *choices*. The good life involves a particular set of forms, which can be filled by many kinds of content and accessible to many kinds of people with diverse interests and dispositions.

Mill's greatest achievement in *Utilitarianism*, and arguably in his entire body of work, is that he presents a complete, wide-ranging ethical theory—from the greatest happiness principle to a detailed vision of what constitutes the ideal human life—in just a few pages. Indeed, while this is the central argument of his book and the principal takeaway for most contemporary readers, it takes up only a small portion of it, while the rest is dedicated to clarifying misinterpretations of the often-maligned theory. While many instinctively associate utilitarianism with an indifference to human feelings, Mill clarifies that in fact utilitarianism's very purpose involves making happy, emotionally-fulfilling lives accessible to as many people as possible.

CRITICISM AND THE PRINCIPLES OF UTILITY

In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill continually references his critics in an attempt to show that all other ethical systems ultimately rely on utilitarianism's first principles: no matter how deeply they elaborate their moral values, at the end of the day all ethical theories see happiness and utility maximization as inherently good, thereby corroborating utilitarianism's core idea. Non-utilitarians either use utilitarian principles to decide between competing moral values (for instance, when deciding whether stealing is permissible in order to save a life) or ultimately base their instincts about what is good and evil on the maximization of utility (for instance, by insisting that precisely those actions that maximize utility are just or correct). Mill shows that his critics—from skeptical laypeople to famous philosophers before him—are actually utilitarians themselves on a fundamental level. This allows him to circumvent arguments against his theory and further demonstrate that utilitarianism is the most logical, straightforward, and practically applicable moral philosophy.

Mill first takes up a number of objections to his theory in his second chapter, where he looks at his popular critics' instinctual concerns about utilitarianism. According to Mill, these critics are not sophisticated philosophers offering competing ethical systems, but rather laypeople whose casual ethical judgments betray their misunderstanding of utilitarianism and whose instincts reveal that they ultimately agree with it. For instance, the most common objection against utilitarianism is the notion that "utility is opposed to pleasure," when in fact utility *refers to* the maximization of pleasure. These critics instinctively know that pleasure is somehow connected to good and evil, but they reject Mill's utilitarianism because they wrongly conflate his doctrine with the popular connotation of "utility" as pure functionality unconcerned with people's feelings or desires. While they think they are attacking utilitarianism, Mill reveals, these critics are actually defending it. Similarly, later in the same chapter, Mill responds to the objection that utilitarianism would ask everyone to renounce their own happiness for the sake of others. He replies that, while self-sacrifice often leads to greater net happiness, it is not good in and of itself, since it is tragically wasteful to sacrifice oneself for the sake of nothing. Sacrifice is valuable because of what it achieves for other people—it would be pointless for everyone to self-sacrifice because there would be nobody left to enjoy the fruits of their sacrifice. So, the objection that utilitarianism implies sacrifice only makes sense *because* it relies on the principle of maximizing utility.

Mill's final chapter, which interprets people's moral instincts about justice, offers his most elaborate and powerful argument for utilitarianism's superiority over other forms of ethical thought. Again, Mill's central purpose is to show that, although people may initially worry that utilitarianism would tell them to ignore their moral instincts, in fact those instincts are correct—precisely *because of* utilitarian principles: societies maximize their citizens' collective happiness by following their instincts about what is just and unjust. Specifically, while Mill's critics think it would be wrong to calculate the consequences of each course of action instead of following their instincts about what is right, Mill thinks that their instincts almost always point to what is best for utility. This is because the consistent application of laws that "forbid [hu]mankind to hurt one another" is crucial to preserving public trust in institutions. For instance, while an illegal search of a suspected criminal might appear to minimize harm and maximize utility in the short term, in fact it erodes people's sense of trust in society in the long

term, and therefore it affects all people's ability to live happy lives. Accordingly, instincts about justice point to how the consistent application of rules protects "the essentials of human well-being" and maximizes utility. The difference is that, whereas Mill's detractors believe that justice is real—that is, a specific and absolute value that can be pinned down, understood, and used to reform society—Mill thinks that the principles people cite when they talk about justice and injustice are actually reflections of the more fundamental utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness.

Mill not only shows his contemporary political opponents that his utilitarian philosophy agrees with their ethical conclusions, but he also enters a far older and more wide-reaching debate. Mill demonstrates how other famous ethical theories, like Kant's rule-based deontology and Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics, ultimately have to appeal to utilitarian principles. Above all, Mill makes frequent implicit references to Kant. In short, Kant thought that morality needed to be based in a priori, universal principles that inherently applied to all human beings—but Mill argues that Kant had no "rule for deciding between [his] various principles when they conflict," and could only settle such questions by looking at what was best for the greater good. Similarly, Mill responds to the other most prominent theory of ethics, the Aristotelian notion that personal virtue (or character) is the ultimate defining feature of good and evil. Mill argues that virtue is an important ingredient of a utilitarian philosophy, but not "good in itself." Like justice, virtue is good only because it is a "means to the ultimate end" of happiness: people should be virtuous because the love of virtue is the mindset "most conducive to the general happiness." Therefore, while Kant and Aristotle are usually correct about what is right and wrong, they simply miss the first principle behind their correct ethical instincts, just like all the less-sophisticated critics Mill answers in his second and final chapters. In this short book, then, Mill manages to answer not only the critics who worry that utilitarianism means endless self-sacrifice and the political thinkers who wonder what a seemingly case-by-case utilitarian philosophy would mean for societies whose justice systems are based in systems of blanket moral rules—but also the most respected moral philosophers in European history.

THE COMMON GOOD

Beyond his defense of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill is largely remembered for championing the ideas of individual freedom, civil rights, and unbridled capitalism that became foundational to what the English-speaking world often calls *liberal democracy*. While his ideas are now often used to argue for protecting individual property rights rather than pursuing what seem to be the interests of the majority, throughout *Utilitarianism* Mill consistently thinks about how to make society benefit as many of its citizens as possible. He envisioned a society in which citizens coalesced around collective interests, values, and institutions, and he conceived his central project in life as promoting the creation of such a society through utilitarianism. Accordingly, this book continually examines what utilitarian philosophy implies for politics and advances a vision of government designed specifically to look out for the common good by cultivating the greatest happiness for all citizens through the promotion of education and individual rights.

Because utilitarianism takes everyone's happiness as its central value, moral thinking is always social thinking for Mill, and elaborating a utilitarian philosophy also requires explaining how to build the society most conducive to the general good. Utilitarianism defines utility as the *collective* happiness of all people, considered as equals. This is because, if happiness is an intrinsic good (which Mill argues that it is), then all happiness is equally valuable. All people are capable of experiencing pleasure, pain, and happiness, so all of their interests must be taken into account. Therefore, from Mill's perspective as an ethical thinker trying to define what is good and bad for humans, he must look at societies as well as individuals. While the vast majority of individual actions affect very few people, people must consider everyone they affect when their actions *do* implicate others. Namely, those in positions of power must think about the broad effects of their actions. Since Mill thinks that utilitarianism is the best guide to morally correct action, he of course thinks that the politically powerful should follow it—and must therefore look at the collective good when designing and implementing policies for their societies.

Mill begins transitioning from an individual moral perspective to a social one by examining what makes people obey moral rules. This line of inquiry leads him to advocate for the perpetuation of moral conscience through public institutions. He sees two explanations for why people follow moral rules: the "external sanction" of threatened punishment and the "internal sanction" of the individual moral conscience. While he agrees that the former can be used to promote moral behavior, as through a justice system, he believes that the latter is more important. Namely, while some people only avoid committing violent crimes because they fear punishment from the state or their communities, most avoid such crimes because they see them as morally wrong. Mill concludes that, if utilitarians want to promote the collective good, they should try to spread moral conscience. And he believes that this conscience is largely formed through "education and opinion." Common sense reflects "the social feelings of mankind," so in practice, it *usually* aligns with what is actually right (even if the people who follow it do not understand the first principle of utility-maximization that establishes *why* it is right). But in theory, people can be taught anything, or "cultivated in almost any direction," which presents both a danger and an opportunity to utilitarianism. That is, people can be taught shoddy moral values that create

an unethical society, but they can also be taught to care for one another and promote the collective utility. Therefore, Mill sees it as crucial that societies "cultivate" people's moral consciences in order to make them see an unbreakable connection between their own happiness and that of everyone else. This is, of course, his purpose in spreading the utilitarian philosophy, so that each person learns a "feeling of unity with all the rest." Mill thinks this feeling—as an extension of utilitarianism itself—should be "taught as a religion."

Ultimately, Mill believes that creating a maximally happy society requires building institutions whose cornerstone is moral conscience and public trust. Specifically, he thinks these institutions must ensure access to education and protection of individual liberties. First, he advocates for public education because he thinks it not only allows the government to make people think in terms of the common good, but also gives people the level of mental cultivation necessary to appreciate life's finer pleasures. Secondly, he argues for individual liberties because he considers them necessary to create a sense of general, collective trust: people must believe that general rules will be enforced, which in practice means laws must protect civil liberties. While he does not outline which liberties should be protected and why in this text, he does lay the groundwork for the argument he makes elsewhere.

When the full sweep of Mill's argument is considered, from his central principle of maximizing happiness to the implications this idea has for the structure of contemporary societies, it is easy to see the essential connection between utilitarianism and classical liberalism, the two doctrines that he is famous for espousing. While both have been updated, challenged, and misinterpreted over the years, they remain at least nominally foundational to the political ideologies of most contemporary democracies. And Mill also played a crucial rule advancing them, specifically by promoting egalitarian social policies as a Member of Parliament. At the same time, it is also easy to see how one man might fall far short in attempting to declare one social structure best in every political and cultural context—and far easier still considering Mill's day job as a colonial functionary, in which he promoted the conversion of Indian lives and labor into British profit because he believed Indians were "barbarians" with no moral value. If nothing else, the contradiction between Mill's philosophy and his own life demonstrates the profound difficulty of exporting philosophies, even ones as supposedly universal and simple as utilitarianism, to places one has never been.

META-ETHICS

How do we determine what is right and wrong? In ethics, this question, which defines the field known as meta-ethics, is as important as practical questions of which moral stances, courses of action, and social structures are actually the right and wrong ones. Like any philosopher building an ethical theory from the ground up, John Stuart Mill must offer some explanation of this: what makes happiness the best thing for humans, and therefore proves the utilitarian theory true? In *Utilitarianism*, he offers an unconventional answer to this question, which allows him to circumvent and undercut all these meta-ethical debates entirely: he says that happiness is desirable simply because "people do actually desire it," and that this fact is impossible to deny or refute.

By looking at previous philosophers' work and reflecting on the role of ethics in human life, Mill identifies meta-ethical questions as fundamental and analytically prior to moral ones: before presenting his theory of *what* is good and bad, Mill first needs to make a convincing case for *how* good and bad should be decided. While most fields of thought begin with data and then derive principles from them, philosophy—like mathematics—begins with principles, creates a "general theory" out of them, and then applies this theory to "particular truths." The first principles of mathematics are straightforward. But those of philosophy are far more difficult, since unlike the basic rules of numbers, they are not obvious to everyone. According to Mill, these first principles of philosophy specifically must come from reason, rather than instinct (although he leaves open the question about whether they come from purely abstract reason, or reasoning *about* experience). At the very beginning of his introduction, Mill recognizes this set of difficulties and attributes 2,000 years of disagreement among philosophers to it. He believes that they are looking too hard, and in the wrong places, for the foundation of ethical philosophy. The principles they come up with, which they believe to be first principles, are actually derivative second principles. In many cases, this is because they derive these principles from their moral instincts—which Mill thinks almost always agree with moral truths but are ultimately only second-order ways of getting there. For Mill, this problem—the confusion of first and second principles—applies not only to arcane academic philosophy, but also to "morals [and] legislation" (including government), which also require deriving rules from abstract, theoretical truths. If philosophers' disagreements are largely about their meta-ethical failures, then politicians' failures probably stem from the same issue. In other words, Mill thinks he can kill two birds with one stone, revolutionizing both ethics and politics simply by investigating where good and evil originate.

From a purely philosophical perspective, utilitarianism's key innovation is its meta-ethics: Mill believes that he proves its moral principles in a different way than other theories prove theirs, and that this method reveals those other theories' weaknesses. Utilitarianism presents the principle of maximizing happiness as its one and only first principle and sees all other ethical principles as second-degree corollaries or consequences of this. One argument for this conception is that

any other imaginable moral principles will eventually, at some point, conflict—and the only way to decide between them is to choose the principle that, in that case, upholds the greater good. As a result, Mill shows that utilitarianism's first principle is more fundamental than what other philosophies consider first principles. In the fourth chapter, when it comes to proving his central principle, Mill returns to the idea that there are two basic sources of knowledge that can be used to establish first principles: "our senses and our internal consciousness." (While he believes ethics should come from the latter, *reason*, he thinks it is also possible to prove utilitarianism's validity by reference to the former, *instinct*.) Mill determines that showing that happiness is the most important end, or desired goal, of action simply means proving that everyone *does* desire happiness (and nothing but it). He compares it to how "the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it"—he believes there is no other way of proving such claims, which are not based on any other more basic claims. It simply *is* the case that people want to be happy, and it is impossible to make sense of human behavior if one chooses to deny this fact. Mill notes in this chapter that he also has to prove that nothing else is inherently desirable like happiness. He makes a case for this claim by suggesting that happiness is a composite, which can be made of different parts in different contexts—but whenever anyone wants something, they want it either as *a means to* happiness, or because it is *a part of* happiness itself. Mill continues that, becuase "each person […] desires [their] own happiness," therefore "the general happiness" is the prime value for ethics because it is "a good to the aggregate of all persons." If ethics is supposed to direct people to behave in ways that are objectively or absolutely good, this means people should do what is good from the most objective or impartial perspective—which, for Mill, is that of "the aggregate of all persons." Good and evil depend on the situation, not the doer.

Although Mill's supposed proof of utilitarianism seems almost too simple to warrant serious consideration, its simplicity actually makes an important statement about the kind of claims that need to ground ethical thought. While most philosophers worry that it would look stupid or uncreative to make such a straightforward argument and therefore go to great lengths to invent moral principles and elaborate justifications for them, Mill thinks that it is far more honest and important for them to name their principal assumption—that happiness is good, the assumption on which all ethics must rest, and the principle at the center of utilitarianism—and then consciously base the rest of their doctrines on it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MONEY

In his fourth chapter, Mill uses money as an analogy to illustrate the role of virtue in his ethical thought. He responds to critics who argue that virtue is "good in itself," which these critics say disproves the utilitarian claim that happiness is the *only* inherent good. In response, Mill *agrees* that virtue is inherently good, and yet maintains the position that *only* happiness is inherently good. To explain this apparent contradiction, Mill uses a familiar example: virtue is like money. At first money is a means to something else (buying things). Then, people want what money gets them so badly that they begin to desire money *itself*. And this is fine: money even becomes "a principal ingredient of [people's] conception of happiness," and it is very difficult to conceive of a happy life that does not include it. Accordingly, Mill's point is that money is good not as a *means to* happiness, but as *part of happiness itself*. This not only explains Mill's argument about virtue, but also illuminates the nature of happiness, which is "not an abstract idea but a concrete whole." It is the sum of all the good things one needs, wants, and does in a reasonably pleasurable, minimally painful (or maximally pleasurable, not-too-painful) existence. Virtue, Mill says, works the same way: being virtuous is an important *part* of a happy life, which means that desiring virtue in itself is merely desiring "a part of happiness." Therefore, happiness remains the only inherent good—but its parts are *also* inherently good.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hackett edition of *Utilitarianism* published in 2001.

Chapter 1 Quotes

It is not my purpose to criticize these thinkers; but I cannot help referring, for illustration, to a systematic treatise by one of the most illustrious of them, the *Metaphysics of Ethics* by Kant. This remarkable man, whose system of thought will long remain one of the landmarks in the history of philosophical speculation, does, in the treatise in question, lay down a universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation; it is this: "So act that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings." But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the consequences of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.

Related Characters: Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

Mill begins *Utilitarianism* by surveying the history of European ethical thought in order to make space for his own theory within it and lay out what he considers utilitarianism's meta-ethical advantages. After noting philosophers' remarkable disagreement about what makes things good and evil, Mill points out that there *is* one thing they have in common: whether they recognize it or not, they all believe in the first principle of maximizing utility—that whatever is best for the most people is good. This is the foundational idea of utilitarianism, but the key difference between Mill and all these other philosophers is that Mill makes his priorities clear.

Mill specifically singles out Immanuel Kant, who (alongside Aristotle) remains the most influential ethicist in the Western tradition. Kant is remembered in large part for his ethical thinking, in which he argued that the first principle of ethics should be that people must act in ways that can be followed collectively by "all rational beings." While this is an ambitious and noble pursuit, Mill notes, ultimately it requires people to consider the consequences of their actions: nothing says there is "any logical (not to say physical) impossibility" in everybody indiscriminately hurting someone else, but it is clearly a morally bad thing for anyone to indiscriminately attack another person. The only way to explain why it would be bad for all people to commit this violence is by showing that the *outcome* would be negative—in other words, by looking at "the *consequences* of [a law's] universal adoption." So although the first principle of Kant's philosophy is not utilitarian, it is only meaningful because it relies on the utilitarian assumption that it is "good" to increase pleasure and decrease pain, and "bad" to do the opposite. For Mill, then, this alleged first principle is actually only a *secondary* principle, for even the illustrious Kant cannot formulate an ethics that circumvents the foundational first principle of the "greatest happiness principle."

> Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof. The medical art is proved to be good by its conducing to health; but how is it possible to prove that health is good? The art of music is good, for the reason, among others, that it produces pleasure; but what proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good? If, then, it is asserted that there is a comprehensive formula, including all things which are in themselves good, and that whatever else is good is not so as an end but as a means, the formula may be accepted or rejected, but is not a subject of what is commonly understood by proof. We are not, however, to infer that its acceptance or rejection must depend on blind impulse or arbitrary choice. There is a larger meaning of the word "proof," in which this question is as amenable to it as any other of the disputed questions of philosophy.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As he tackles the problem of ethical philosophy's first principles in his introductory chapter, Mill gestures to the profound methodological difficulty in establishing first principles at all: what is it that makes something inherently good? If music is good because it creates pleasure, for instance, then *music is good* is a secondary principle, not a first one, and the real first principle is that *pleasure is good*. Therefore, any apparent first principle that turns out to be explainable by reference to some other principle is, actually, not a first principle at all. Any real first principle must simply be true on face, and the central good in human life must therefore be "admitted to be good without proof."

How can one prove a first principle "without proof"? Mill emphasizes that it is not about choosing one at random. Rather, this first principle must be self-evident. This is the subject of Mill's fourth chapter, in which he essentially argues that happiness is obviously good (meaning desirable) in and of itself because it is impossible to deny: everyone desires their own happiness, which means that humanity desires the collective happiness. Nobody can deeply, sensibly desire their own unhappiness. For Mill, the difficulty is not proving that happiness *is* desirable, but rather showing that nothing else is (except for things that are a *part* of happiness).

Chapter 2 Quotes

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. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The "greatest happiness principle" is the central concept in Mill's utilitarian philosophy, and the only test that needs to be applied to determine if an action is good or bad. Only consequences matter for Mill, not intentions or personality; a person with a history of evil acts is just as capable of doing good as a person with a history of benevolence (although much less likely to). Similarly, morality is about *acts*, not about actors or the circumstances in which they happen. For Mill, the only morally relevant question is whether one is improving or worsening the world, compared to if one had not acted.

Furthermore, unlike some rule-based forms of morality that simply hold things to be good (if they follow rules) or bad (if they break them), utilitarianism is also interested in the magnitude of good and bad. Unlike his predecessors, Mill has no interest in actually calculating the amount of good or evil that an act produces or a sensation consists of, but he does still think it essential that a moral theory be capable of finely distinguishing degrees of good and evil. Unlike for many religious thinkers and rule-based moralists like Kant, Mill believes that it is perfectly possible to suffer significant pain but be happy, or severely hurt people but still live a good life.

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

One of the criticisms frequently leveled at utilitarianism is that it is hedonistic or self-indulgent. It wrongly equates all kinds of pleasure and all kinds of pain, the criticism goes, and so is incapable of distinguishing between ostensibly lowly, unsophisticated, uncivilized bodily pleasures and the supposedly greater, more cultivated pleasures of the intellect, emotions, and aesthetic sensibilities. In a sense, this is a fair criticism, for Mill's teacher Jeremy Bentham defended this idea. He famously thought that, "quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry." (Push-pin was a popular children's game in Bentham and Mill's era.)

Mill, however, disagrees with Bentham: physical pleasures are of a lower *quality* than intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic ones. As with his first principle of all ethics—the greatest happiness principle—the order of pleasures does not require extensive logical proof. Rather, it is simply obvious on face value to people: anyone "who ha[s] experience of both"—by which Mill probably means his fellow British aristocrats—will apparently prefer the cultivated pleasures, so there is no need to question their superiority. Of course, Mill also emphasizes that the question of the hierarchy among pleasures does not affect the central principle that they should be maximized.

> It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Extending his discussion of the hierarchy of pleasures, Mill asks whether it is always worth cultivating and educating oneself so that one can experience the higher pleasures, even if it potentially means opening oneself to disappointment. He concludes that it is, arguing that although "the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied," sophisticated and cultivated people are living happier lives than satisfied fools. One part of his argument is, yet again, that sophisticated people are capable of distinguishing among differing qualities of pleasures and choosing the better ones. Therefore, they are more likely to access better pleasures. And their intellectual capacities allow them to gain pleasure from understanding the very nature of the world, regardless of what actions they do or do not undertake.

But the more important element is that Mill's utilitarianism evaluates good and evil based on the amount of *pleasure*, not satisfaction. Therefore, a more cultivated person can still have a greater quantity of pleasure than a fool, even if they are relatively unhappy, because their capacity for pleasure is far greater. Of course, this conclusion remains controversial—anyone who believes ignorance is bliss would certainly disagree with Mill here.

> Capacity for other nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

After outlining the greatest happiness principle and the general framework for determining what is good and evil according to utilitarianism, Mill begins to elaborate his picture of the ideal human life. He places a strong emphasis on intellectual development and curiosity: he thinks that the capacity to take an "inexhaustible" interest in the world is, alongside generosity, the most important character trait conducive to a fulfilling, happy life. And he argues that this kind of "cultivation" is in most people's reach—and yet the vast majority fail to achieve it. He blames society at large for this: it forces people to work in unfulfilling jobs and does not reward intellectual pursuits. The solution is, of course, to overturn both of these tendencies. Although Mill seldom clarifies this dimension of his social vision, it is clear that, for better or worse, he wants more people to live as he does.

> A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

At first, Mill presents utilitarianism through a series of theoretical, abstract arguments that leave many readers, particularly those unaccustomed to reading philosophy, utterly confused about what he actually thinks people should do with their lives. Fortunately, he rather directly states in this passage what he thinks the best human life looks like: not only should one maximize the balance of pleasure over pain by experiencing "few and transitory pains, [and] many and various pleasures," but one should also "active[ly]" engage with the world and have realistic expectations about what the world will bestow in return. This is in no way groundbreaking or revolutionary: it is, in a sense, the life of fulfilled interest and physical security that many have been able to live throughout history. Mill's primary complaint is not that people are not happy, but rather that the means to achieve happiness are not widely available enough.

Of course, Mill's direct motivation for offering this portrait of happiness is responding to one of the most common (and most misguided) objections to utilitarianism. Since it is simply impossible to constantly experience "a state of exalted pleasure," as this objection goes, the utilitarian attempt to maximize pleasure is doomed to fail. This is already nonsensical on one level—even if happiness *does* mean "exalted pleasure," it is still possible to try and maximize it. Yet Mill's primary concern is not refuting this objection as an argument, but rather using it to clarify precisely what kind of pleasure he and other utilitarians think people should seek.

> The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure; with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility of enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both, since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

While Mill outlines what a happy life looks like, he is careful neither to specify too much, which would wrongly exclude many possible ways of living happily, or give such a broad picture of happiness that he opens himself to misinterpretation and fails to help people set their sights on some concrete target. In this passage, he clarifies that there are two opposing ways to live happily: pursuing tranquility (a focus on minimizing pain) and excitement (a focus on maximizing pleasure). But it is wrong to think of this as an either-or situation: rather, Mill believes there is a spectrum between these two strategies, and that each person will have to decide where they rightly fit within it. This demonstrates that Mill's picture of happiness is about form, not content. In other words, one can be happy pursuing nearly any hobby or goal, with nearly any level of intensity, as long as one finds the proper balance of challenge and comfort, fulfillment and longing.

> In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, everyone who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escapes the positive evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering —such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14-5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mill summarizes the social requirements of his conception of happiness. Because it can take such a wide variety of possible forms, happiness is in turn widely accessible: any person with the safety and freedom required to meaningfully pursue fruitful interests can achieve it. Society's goal, in Mill's eyes, should primarily be to ward off the conditions that restrict happiness—tyranny,

oppression, sickness, and poverty, among others. Accordingly, it is easy to see how his utilitarian philosophy ties in with his political philosophy. Notably, it is a primarily negative doctrine: he thinks that people should be adequately protected so that *they* can actively pursue their own happiness, but not that the state should necessarily play an important role in guiding people's free activity. At the same time, he sees "correct[ing] and improv[ing]" social ills as one valid path to happiness, particularly for utilitarian reformers and those like them. Even if contemporary uses of Mill's liberalism have diverged widely from his original intentions, it is easy to see how foundational many of his ideas have been, for better or worse, to 20th- and 21st-century capitalist democracies.

> I must again repeat what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. "To do as you would be done by," and "to love your neighbor as yourself," constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness or (as, speaking practically, it may be called) the interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and, secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole, especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

One crucial juncture in Mill's argument is the connection between the individual happiness and that of the collective: although it is easy to see why every individual would want to be happy, it is much harder to explain why every individual should act for the sake of everyone's happiness. Indeed, this jump is so easy to miss that many of Mill's critics simply assume he wants everyone to act egoistically, for themselves and at the expense of everyone else. Here, Mill clarifies that this is not at all the case: even if many observers would tend to contrast his ethical theory with authoritative religious ones like that of Jesus, in fact they agree on what "ideal perfection" in moral virtue looks like.

The Golden Rule applies to everyone because good and evil is objective, which means that utility must be calculated from a bird's-eye view, *not* from the perspective of the person undertaking the action. Of course, people must try to approximate this removed perspective when they deliberate about possible courses of action. Simply by virtue of their humanity, all human beings are equally capable and deserving of living happy lives, as well as equally able to feel pleasure and pain. Accordingly, they must all be considered as equals in the process of calculating utility, which means that people should always think of and treat everyone else as equal to themselves: one should "do as you would be done by" and "love your neighbor as yourself."

In addition to linking the concept of individual utility with that of general utility through this argument, Mill argues that they should be linked in people's minds, with institutions and public discourse designed to encourage everyone to see their fate as irreconcilably tied up with that of everyone else. This again contributes to his insistence on linking ethics and politics, and on building a democratic society that encourages people to defend their fellow citizens against injustice.

> The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is, the legitimate and authorized expectations, of anyone else.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Although he emphasizes that every utilitarian actor must think of all other people as their equals and therefore put the common good first whenever it conflicts with their personal interests, Mill also notes that "the great majority" of decisions do not involve this conflict, but rather only the utility of the actor and perhaps some immediate circle of people affected by the action. In other words, even though the collective happiness is the most important value to uphold, people are almost never called to do so, unless they are involved in politics or their actions affect the collective in some other way. So utilitarianism, Mill emphasizes, does not in any significant way intervene in people's normal ways of making decisions. In the vast majority of cases it agrees not only with virtually every other moral system, but also with the common sense that people already apply to decisions in their daily lives.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The internal sanction of duty, whatever our standard of duty may be, is one and the same—a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral natures rises, in the more serious cases, into shrinking from it as an impossibility. This feeling, when disinterested and connecting itself with the pure idea of duty, and not with some particular form of it, or with any of the merely accessory circumstances, is the essence of conscience.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-9

Explanation and Analysis

In his third chapter, Mill asks what actually gives force to ethical rules like utilitarianism's greatest happiness principle. He explains that there are two relevant kinds of "sanctions" or motivating impulses for behavior: "external" sanctions, meaning rewards and punishments for action, and "internal" sanctions, or people's own feelings about their actions (in short, *moral conscience*). Although he thinks that external sanctions can serve to promote a society's moral order, Mill believes that internal sanctions are generally a far more powerful and important force because they encourage people to act morally even when others are not evaluating them and because they encourage people to police and shame others' immoral behavior (or, as it were, become part of the external sanction that helps to "cultivate" other people's moral consciences).

Here, he describes the internal sanction or moral conscience, describing the attitude that he believes people should take toward injustice. It is also significant that he describes this conscience in the Kantian language of moral duty: although utilitarianism and duty-based ethics are generally opposed to one another, the concept of moral duty can still be legible within a utilitarian philosophy and play an important role in promoting moral behavior. In other words, for Mill, although moral duty does not determine what is right and wrong, the feeling of moral duty is what convinces people to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.

❝ The deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture make it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings—perhaps make him denounce and defy those feelings—he still needs to be conscious that his real aim and theirs do not conflict; that he is not opposing himself to what they really wish for, namely, their own good, but is, on the contrary, promoting it. This feeling in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But to those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education or a law despotically imposed by the power of society, but as an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Having emphasized that conscience is central to people's moral behavior, Mill next connects this idea back to politics. Here, he provides a moral account of political disagreement, in which people all care for one another's happiness but disagree about the best means to promote it. Of course, he realizes that for "most individuals" (especially those involved in politics) this is not the case—this idealized account is his way of showing how moral conscience can tie

people's concept of their own interest to that of others' interests, and therefore defend and pursue those others' interests in an egalitarian, utilitarian spirit.

While in the previous chapter he suggested that people should make decisions based on the premise that they are equal to all other human beings, here he clearly explains what will make them feel this way: a conscience and emotional disposition so ingrained that they are automatic and instinctual. Again, Mill depicts instinct as an important tool in the promotion of ethical action, while emphasizing that it is not where ethical principles themselves originate. Those in power, Mill reaffirms, should ensure that education, public discourse, and institutions to encourage people to think collectivistically and impartially rather than letting "their selfish feelings" get the better of them.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35-6

Explanation and Analysis

In his fourth chapter, Mill sets out to explain why the philosophical first principle of utilitarianism—the idea that happiness, and nothing but happiness, is inherently value for human beings—is actually true. This is a difficult task because, as he already outlined in the introduction, first principles by definition cannot be proven by appeal to any other argument, principle, or piece of knowledge—rather, they *are* the foundational pieces of knowledge, so nothing can underlie or justify them. They simply have to be true, and if they are not, everything built on them fails.

Accordingly, Mill argues that happiness is good (which he defines as synonymous with *desirable*) simply because it is—everyone already knows this, because everyone wants to be happy. It is nonsensical to be human and desire one's own unhappiness, meaning pain rather than pleasure for oneself. It is simply undeniable that people enjoy pleasurable things (in fact, to say that something is pleasurable is simply to say that people enjoy it) and dislike painful things (which, similarly, are negative by definition). This is not to say that pleasure and pain are not often mixed together, or that something painful cannot be good or something pleasurable bad. Rather, the crucial factor is the *balance* of pleasure and pain: something painful now, for instance, can be good on balance because it produces more pleasure in the future.

Since it is impossible to deny that happiness is good, and ethics is about what is good from the removed perspective of humanity as a whole, it becomes clear that the collective happiness is good from an objective ethical perspective. Indeed, none of this is particularly controversial, and even non-utilitarian philosophers would likely agree that happiness is inherently good. Rather, the important and controversial part of Mill's argument here is the notion that happiness is the *only inherent good*—that everything else is either good but only as a tool for achieving happiness, or good in itself because it is "part of happiness." It is therefore not surprising that Mill dedicates most of his chapter to defending this much more complex thesis.

❝ Happiness is not an abstract idea but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

The central threat to Mill's first principle—that happiness, and nothing but happiness, is inherently good or desirable for human beings—is the objection that there are other inherently good things, and therefore Mill is wrong about the "*nothing but*" part of his claim. He addresses all these

objections together in his fourth chapter, where he argues that his critics are right to say that more things—most notably, virtue—are good in and of themselves. While this might initially seem to completely undermine Mill's argument, he instead challenges the second link in his critics' chain of reasoning: he accepts that the things they cite are inherently good, but he rejects the idea that their inherent goodness disproves the fact that only happiness is inherently good.

This sounds like a paradox: how is it possible for many things to be good, but only happiness to be good at the same time? As Mill explains here, all these other inherently good things are only inherently good because they are part of happiness. He urges his readers to stop thinking of happiness as "an abstract idea," a goal or transcendent state removed from people's day-to-day experiences. Rather, it is a thing, "a concrete whole" with various "parts." Like money, an example Mill uses as an analogy, virtue can be seen as inherently good only because it is *part* of happiness. So saying that virtue (or money) is inherently good does not deny the fact that happiness (which includes virtue and/or money) is inherently good.

It might help to think about an analogous situation of parts and wholes. Imagine that you are saving up to buy a bicycle, and nothing but a bicycle. You are not, of course, hoping to buy the abstract idea of a bicycle. You want a real one. But someone might point out that you are wrong about *just* wanting to buy a bicycle, because you also clearly want to buy wheels, tires, handlebars, and a seat—of course, this is all true, but this person's criticism is absurd because the fact that you need to have all these parts to have a bicycle does not change the fact that you only want to buy a bicycle. The bicycle is a "concrete whole" made up of various components, and to speak of one of the components as desired does not negate a statement about the exclusive desirability of the whole. Similarly, then, to say that virtue is desirable does not mean that something besides happiness is desirable, because virtue is *part* of happiness, just like a wheel is part of a bicycle.

> It results from the preceding considerations that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united; as in truth the pleasure and pain seldom exist separately, but almost always together—the same person feeling pleasure in the degree of virtue attained, and pain in not having attained more. If one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38-9

Explanation and Analysis

After outlining his theory about happiness as a "concrete whole" with various parts that are also desirable, Mill is able to present the claim that nothing but happiness is desirable in a new form: there is nothing desirable that is not a part of happiness. This claim is strategic because it allows him to sidestep all the critics who say that something other than happiness is inherently good—Mill can instead agree that this other thing is good, but insist that it is merely a part of happiness, and therefore that it does not disprove his central claim.

Having established this, Mill is able to return to the most important of happiness's parts: *virtue*. He can now agree that virtue is of incredible importance, but without sacrificing his "greatest happiness principle." Combining a sequence of observations about virtue, he summarizes the ethical stance of the virtuous person. First, he recalls that virtue is one of the best means to promoting happiness, since virtuous people tend to act in ways that benefit themselves and others. Secondly, he points out that people who are seeking to improve the world will naturally notice that virtue promotes happiness, and therefore they will want to be virtuous—but only as "a means [...] ultimately to happiness." Thirdly, people will soon begin to value and elevate virtuous character and behavior itself, irrespective of the context in which it happens or the effects it produces. Virtue begins to symbolize happiness itself—people begin to derive happiness from knowing they are virtuous and start seeing happiness as essentially impossible without virtue. Now, it "is desired as itself a part of happiness," which means

that it is "desired for itself." Of course, there is not necessarily any end point to this course of development. This is why Mill emphasizes that "the pleasure and the pain seldom exist separately." It explains moral progress: ethical people and collectives, Mill suggests, always see how they can improve and feel driven by their moral conscience to do so.

Virtue's transformation—from being an unintended route to happiness, to being a deliberate tool for the creation of happiness, and finally an end in itself and part of happiness—parallels the transformation of particular ideas from unanalyzed truth to explicit belief to instinct. Mill talks about virtue in terms of people's emotions in order to emphasize that, once virtue becomes desirable in itself, people no longer control or even understand their desire for it; rather, it becomes habitual and instinctual, automatic and ingrained. This shows Mill a path forward for utilitarianism, a way of thinking he thinks is currently an unanalyzed truth but could be ultimately ingrained in people as an instinct if they are brought up in the right social conditions.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ In all ages of speculation one of the strongest obstacles to the reception of the doctrine that utility or happiness is the criterion of right and wrong has been drawn from the idea of justice.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Mill dedicates his fifth chapter to justice, which is at once the most significant objection to utilitarianism and, he argues, one of the most persuasive reasons to be a utilitarian. On face, it seems strange that, after spending three chapters outlining his theory, detailing why people should follow it, and explaining why it is true, Mill decides to focus his last and longest chapter on a much narrower topic apparently unrelated to utilitarianism. But he does this both to show how utilitarians can deal with significant objections to their theory (besides the surface-level misinterpretations he easily dismissed in his second chapter) and to provide a detailed taxonomy of different levels of morality and the social consequences and associations of each.

Mill's critics think that humans' sense of justice and outrage at injustice should disprove utilitarianism because it is such a common, strong feeling that guides people to what is obviously right and wrong, regardless of the consequences. For instance, many people think that it is right and just to punish criminals rather than rehabilitate and support them, even though the latter may have better consequences for society. Of course, many people have the opposite instinct, which leads Mill to his central critique: the only way to settle competing theories of what is just and unjust is to appeal to the greatest happiness principle. While feelings of justice and injustice often point to what is right and wrong, they do not define right and wrong, which is where Mill disagrees with his critics.

Besides this argument, Mill has a lot to say about justice, but nearly all of it is favorable. He thinks that claims about justice are actually just complex, specific claims about utility—specifically, he thinks that justice is a specially evolved feeling that serves to ensure people care about one another's interests and rights. Feelings of injustice point to violations of what Kant called perfect moral duties, which means blamable harm committed to "some assignable person." So, among negative actions, some are bad but not immoral or blameworthy (e.g., cutting one's thumb while cooking), some are immoral and blameworthy but not necessarily *unjust* (e.g., never giving to charity), and some are bad, immoral, and unjust all at the same time (e.g., stealing someone's possessions). In other words, justice is the highest, most exclusive, and most important category of morality—it expresses "moral requirements" for the smooth and trustworthy functioning of a society in which citizens have meaningful rights. But it only makes up this category *because* it expresses an essential principle that must be upheld in order to promote human happiness.

> The sentiment of justice, in that one of its elements which consists of the desire to punish, is thus, I conceive, the natural feeling of retaliation or vengeance, rendered by intellect and sympathy applicable to those injuries, that is, to those hurts, which wound us through, or in common with, society at large. This sentiment, in itself, has nothing moral in it; what is moral is the exclusive subordination of it to the social sympathies, so as to wait on and obey their call. For the natural feeling would make us resent indiscriminately whatever anyone does that is disagreeable to us; but, when moralized by the social feeling, it only acts in the directions conformable to the general good: just persons resenting a hurt to society, though not otherwise a hurt to themselves, and not resenting a hurt to themselves, however painful, unless it be of the kind which society has a common interest with them in the repression of.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mill distinguishes between "the sentiment of justice," which is the combination of self-defense and sympathy for others (which leads people to come to the defense of others), and the enactment of justice in a society, which he believes should require institutions to act in accord with this "sentiment of justice" only when doing so promotes the general good. This distinction is crucial because it allows Mill to continue tying action to utility: in short, the *feeling* of justice is not a reliable indicator that one should take action, which means that it is not a sufficient moral principle on its own. (It does, however, rather consistently indicate that something bad and immoral *has* occurred or *is* occurring.) Rather, the feeling of justice can only inform action when a utilitarian assessment of consequences determines that action taken to remedy injustice is likely to increase net happiness. Accordingly, Mill shows that, while justice is an important guide to morality, it does not decide or determine morality—that remains utility's job.

> The principle, therefore, of giving to each what they deserve, that is, good for good as well as evil for evil, is not only included within the idea of justice as we have defined it, but is a proper object of that intensity of sentiment which places the just human estimation above the simply expedient.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Mill's rather complex way of saying that he believes people should care about and defend one another's rights. In this sentence, he first says that the reciprocity "of giving to each what they deserve" is "included within the idea of justice." He means that "the idea of justice" involves the principle that people should be treated as they treat others—a concept of reciprocity that follows naturally from the idea that all human beings are equal. Since everyone's pleasure and pain matters equally, society should seek to promote everyone's happiness. In order to do this, societies need common rules that "forbid [hu]mankind to hurt one another" by guaranteeing equal rights to everyone on a level sufficient enough to preserve people's trust in one another and the institutions that bind them together. Violating these common ethical rules means committing injustice against another human being, and following these rules means treating others justly. In other words, then, acting justly requires acknowledging everyone's fundamental rights and responding appropriately to people who violate others' rights—or "giving to each what they deserve."

In the second part of this sentence, Mill says that reciprocity is not only inherent to justice, but is also "a proper object of that intensity of sentiment which places the just human estimation above the simply expedient." This phrase is confusing because of Mill's language, not his argument. First, people have strong feelings ("that intensity of sentiment") about justice ("the just human estimation") that they do not have for things that are beneficial but not related to moral duties ("above the simply expedient"). Secondly, these same strong feelings should be directed towards the idea of reciprocity (the feelings' "proper object"). What he means is that, because justice requires reciprocity, people should feel strongly about and relentlessly defend it. This is particularly significant because, again, Mill sees emotions as useful tools for promoting and sustaining morality: they are useful not only because they are powerful motivators for behavior, but also because they can be influenced by outside forces, or cultivated in an effort to build a more just, equal, and happy society.

> All persons are deemed to have a *right* to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse. And hence all social inequalities which have ceased to be considered expedient assume the character, not of simple inexpediency, but of injustice, and appear so tyrannical that people are apt to wonder how they ever could have been tolerated—forgetful that they themselves, perhaps, tolerate other inequalities under an equally mistaken notion of expediency, the correction of which would make that which they approve seem quite as monstrous as what they have at last learned to condemn. The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of color, race, and sex.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

After thinking through the concept of justice, Mill comes to this conclusion about the primary injustices of his time. To any reader familiar with Mill's life work as a colonial administrator ruling over Indians whom he considered "barbarians" too uncivilized to have any moral worth, the principles he outlines here are likely to seem bafflingly ironic, to say the least. (Perhaps he thought that the British Empire was one of the convenient exceptions in which "some recognized social expediency" required inequality, or perhaps he believed he was civilizing people in order to eventually make them his equals.) Nevertheless, this passage shows that his heart was in the right place, at least theoretically, and that his thinking was rather progressive for his time. This accounts, of course, for his defense of policies like women's suffrage in the British Parliament. While it is entirely unclear what would ever make a pervasive social inequality "expedient," or good for humanity as a whole, Mill's social theory here was novel because he assumed that hierarchies are always wrong unless proven otherwise.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: GENERAL REMARKS

Although philosophers have seen ethics as a subject of prime importance for 2,000 years, Mill begins, they have reached very little agreement about what the principal value in human life actually is. While most sciences use "particular truths" about the world to reveal a "general theory" of underlying principles, philosophy works in the other direction, developing a "general theory" and *then* deriving "particular truths." This is also true of "practical art[s], such as morals or legislation," which are extensions of philosophy: because people always act with some purpose in mind, defining "rules of action" requires coming up with "a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing."

Mill begins by putting his theory in conversation with the broader field of philosophical ethics, which both establishes his authority as a writer and sets the stage for his case for utilitarianism. He focuses on other thinkers' meta-ethical confusion: they conflate the first and second principles of ethical philosophy, but utilitarianism has a much clearer "conception of what we are pursuing." Mill also makes utilitarianism's stakes clear: the ground rules for morality that he establishes will in turn imply a vision of the "practical art[s]," meaning that he can derive wide-ranging moral rules and even principles of government from utilitarianism's central principle.

Mill clarifies that, contrary to popular opinion, the "moral faculty" (that is, the ability to distinguish right and wrong) is part of human *reason*, not human *instinct*. The two main branches of ethical thought—the "intuitive" thinkers who think moral laws are a priori, and the "inductive" thinkers who think people can derive moral laws from experience—agree that morality is about applying general laws to specific situations. These two groups also agree that morality's structure is scientific, with certain fundamental theoretical principles about morality as the "groundwork" of specific "maxims" that describe how people should act. Among the fundamental principles, one must be the most important, or else there should be some clear "rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict." However, the main ethical thinkers have not specifically explained their principles or defined the hierarchy among them.

Here, Mill outlines the most important questions in meta-ethics, which are methodological *because they speak to* how *morality should be established in the first place (rather than what specifically* is *moral and immoral). Although he indicates a preference for reason over instinct, throughout his book Mill consistently argues that people's moral instincts ultimately align with utilitarian principles anyway, which means he does not negate the value of moral instincts. Similarly, he does not take a stance on the "intuitive" versus "inductive" debate because he thinks that utilitarianism wins out either way. In short, Mill makes it clear that the power of his theory (from the analytical perspective of truth-seeking philosophers) lies in its first principle of utility, which is more fundamental than the principles on which other philosophers base their theories.*

Mill thinks that the "steadiness or consistency" in people's moral thinking comes from a principle that everyone believes in, but few people recognize explicitly: they do what they think will bring happiness, both to themselves and to other people. All ethical thinkers see that happiness is important, and Mill thinks that even "a priori moralists" like the famous philosopher Immanuel Kant ultimately have to rely on the utilitarian principles that will be defended in this book.

Mill now explicitly states utilitarianism's core axiom, which he thinks is the true rational principle *underlying most people's* moral instincts. *No matter what moral beliefs someone holds, Mill thinks, it is impossible to deny that people's most important goal is actually happiness. Unlike other moral philosophies, utilitarianism gets straight to the point: if happiness is the ultimate good, then what is good is simply what promotes happiness. Mill's nod to Kant might be unfamiliar to many readers without a background in philosophy, and Mill recognizes this, as his audience consists as much of a British public curious about his theories as of philosophers and other academics. Essentially, Kant went to great lengths attempting to establish moral principles that were ostensibly based purely in rational thought, but that (according to Mill) ultimately appealed to the general good of all people. Kant puts the cart before the horse, Mill thinks.*

Any moral theory must rely on assuming that some things—like pleasure, health, etc.—are fundamentally good and showing how everything else is a means to those things. As a result, it is not possible to "prove" utilitarianism in any ordinary sense, but Mill thinks there is a different way to "prove" it, which he will explain in Chapter Four. But first, he wants to make sure his readers clearly understand utilitarianism, which is often misinterpreted.

Mill clarifies that his meta-ethical argument bypasses those of most other philosophers: it does not much matter whether one looks toward reason or instinct, the mind or the world, because searching in all these places will always lead one to the principle that more happiness is better, less happiness is worse, and nothing is good or bad unless it affects human happiness in some way.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS

Mill begins by dismissing the misconception that "utility is opposed to pleasure," and that utilitarians are about putting pragmatism and order above "beauty" and "amusement." Instead, according to Mill, utilitarians believe that right actions are ones that promote happiness and wrong actions are ones that go against happiness. He defines happiness as "pleasure and the absence of pain." This happiness is the only thing that is good in itself, and everything else that is desirable is such either because it is pleasurable itself, or because it leads to greater pleasure and less pain.

*In this chapter, Mill has two central goals: he wants to briefly explain his simple ethical theory, and he wants to address the endless stream of criticism it has received from the British public. Due to this structure, this chapter might seem disjointed: in its opening lines, Mill has already laid out his deceptively straightforward philosophy. While the word "utilitarian" is still associated with function-over-form thinking and ruthless pragmatism, Mill explains here that this is not at all what utilitarian*ism *is about. The fact that utilitarianism was already a topic of popular discourse in 19th-century England reflects Mill's place in a longer utilitarian tradition: although his is the name most associated with the doctrine now, the philosophy goes back further, at least to his teacher Jeremy Bentham and arguably to ancient Greece (specifically Epicurus).*

Many people worry that utilitarianism denigrates humanity by saying that pleasure is the most important thing to pursue. Critics say this makes humans look like beasts. But humans are capable of far greater pleasures than animals, Mill argues, and "a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness." Utilitarians before Mill consistently argued that intellectual and emotional pleasures are greater than physical ones.

Mill recognizes that the most controversial part of his philosophy is his argument that happiness is merely about maximizing pleasure: others might agree that happiness is the supreme goal but reject the idea that happiness just consists of having more pleasure than pain. However, Mill emphasizes that his conception of pleasure is expansive: unlike some similar thinkers (such as Bentham and Epicurus), Mill does not think all pleasures are alike. Most importantly, he is not talking about hedonism, or the pursuit of purely physical pleasures. Rather, he thinks that just pursuing physical pleasure would mean forgetting what is special about human beings: our capacity for complex intellectual, emotional, and spiritual experiences means that true happiness is about much more than just physical sensations.

These earlier utilitarians argued that refined pleasures are better than bodily ones because they provide "advantages" like "permanency, safety, [and] uncostliness." In contrast, however, Mill thinks that intellectual, emotional, and spiritual pleasures are inherently better than physical ones. One pleasure is better than another when "all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference" to it. And people who know both refined and bodily pleasures prefer refined ones. Nobody would choose to become "a fool" only to lower their standards for satisfaction, if nothing else because of their "sense of dignity." While the fool may be easier to satisfy, "highly endowed being[s]" can see the world's imperfections and better appreciate the good in the world. In short, "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."

Here, Mill specifically breaks with his teacher Jeremy Bentham, who thought that pleasures and pains could literally be measured and ranked through a "felicific calculus" that considered things like their "permanency, safety, [and] uncostliness," as well as more basic elements like how intense they were and how long they lasted. This distinction between Bentham's ideas and his own allows Mill to further refute the conflation of utilitarianism with hedonism, and also introduce a more straightforward method to rank pleasures. If intellectual pleasures are categorically better than physical ones, then utilitarians are not hedonists, but rather enlightened, liberated intellectuals. Yet, from a contemporary perspective, Mill's claim that people prefer refined pleasures is deeply biased: he is specifically referring to educated European people, mostly from the upper classes, who think they have better taste and that they are capable of greater enjoyment than their counterparts of different social classes or cultural roots. His language betrays a risk in his kind of thinking: by assuming that people who prioritize different pleasures are somehow deficient or do not know better, he makes it seem like the mission of educated Europeans to teach the rest of the world their "refined" way of life, perhaps even at any cost. Notably, this is exactly what Mill thought he was doing when he spent decades working for and defending the murderous British colonial government in India.

Mill admits that people sometimes err and choose lower pleasures over higher ones, but in fact they do this despite *knowing* that the higher pleasures are better for them. And people sometimes get jaded and selfish with age, "los[ing] their intellectual tastes," but this is usually because boring jobs or a lack of means make higher pleasures inaccessible to these people. So these examples do not disprove the fact that the "pleasures derived from the higher faculties" are inherently better than those tied to people's "animal nature." Mill also notes that his readers and critics do not need to accept this point about the hierarchy of pleasures in order to accept that "the greatest amount of happiness" should be the supreme purpose of action. A deed can be good if it "makes other people happier," even though it does not benefit the doer.

Mill's argument is fragile because, if someone can show that there are some people versed in the intellectual "refined" pleasures who have chosen to give them up and pursue just physical pleasures, then his hierarchy of "highly endowed being[s]" over "fools" falls apart. Recognizing this, he suggests that such people either recognize they are erring or else are forced by an unjust society to abandon "refined" pleasures. And he suggests that this criticism should not dissuade its holders from being utilitarians—they should still believe in maximizing happiness, but can decide to define this happiness differently.

Mill considers two more objections: some critics say that happiness is impossible, and others argue that "renunciation" is a better way to live than indulgence in "happiness." The first criticism misunderstands happiness as constant, exciting pleasure, when in reality happiness means having "few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures," and realistic expectations. More specifically, "tranquility and excitement" are the two main components of happiness, and people can be happy with one, the other, or a balance of both. But it is also possible to waste these assets and make oneself unhappy, namely through "selfishness" or a lack of "mental cultivation" (by which Mill means active intellectual interest in the world).

The objection that it is impossible to always be happy again confuses Mill's picture of the good life with the common-sense assumption that pleasure simply means physical sensations that feel good. It is impossible—and would be very impractical—to live in a constant state of physical ecstasy. Besides, this is not what happiness really means. Mill explains that tranquility can lead to happiness because, without much pain to suffer, people can become more sensitive to the pleasures they do experience. For the opposite reason, people can also become more sensitive to excitement: although one might suffer, one can become hardened to pain and experience a great deal of pleasure. So Mill is not advocating for an ascetic life, nor for one of adventurous risk-taking. He recognizes both of these as options for finding happiness, but believes that everyone has to find their own balance. Regardless of where one lands on the spectrum, however, he thinks of generosity and "mental cultivation" as essential traits. The first means one is likely to take pleasure in others' successes and pass happiness on, and the second is what makes people capable of higher ("refined") pleasures.

Mill emphasizes that proper education is the key to creating a society of mentally cultivated people who have "genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good." Anyone can be happy if they are properly educated, given sufficient liberty in society, and free of disease, poverty, abuse, trauma, and grief. While some of "these calamities" are unavoidable, humanity can solve many of the severest ones, like all poverty and most disease. Even taking part in these great efforts to improve human life, Mill notes, is a source of great pleasure for the cultivated.

Education and cultivation are not necessarily the same thing, but the first is a means to the latter, because it teaches people how to actively pursue knowledge and follow their curiosity. Mill makes the social implications of utilitarianism clear here: a society should guarantee all its members political and personal freedoms, physical safety, economic security, and access to the best possible medical care. In fact, this idea lies at the foundation of most modern liberal democracies, which achieve Mill's goals with varying levels of success. Mill, like these societies, believes that government's role is to ensure these conditions for people, so that they can pursue their own happiness in the ways they see fit. This belief also motivated Mill's own political activism in Britain during his lifetime.

Mill returns to the second objection: the idea that renunciation is better than happiness. People who renounce, he argues, sacrifice their own happiness to pursue virtue and nobly contribute to the happiness of others. If everyone did this, the world would be full of the *means* to happiness, but it would also be full of people who refuse to use these means. Therefore, for Mill, this is "inspiring proof of what men *can* do, but assuredly not an example of what they *should*." He agrees that "sacrifice is the highest [human] virtue" and that those who are *willing* to be unhappy actually often end up the happiest (for they can stay tranquil even in the worst situations), but this does not mean that "sacrifice is itself a good." Rather, sacrifice is good because it leads to what is good in itself: "the sum total of happiness." Mill adds that sacrifice that does not increase happiness is pointless, and is neither good nor bad.

When referring to renunciation, *Mill is talking roughly about two lifestyles. The first is withdrawing from material goods and physical pleasures, as a monk or ascetic would do. The second is sacrificing oneself in order to help or save others—which is similar to the first kind of renunciation because it involves denying oneself physical pleasures, but different because its goal is helping others, not achieving enlightenment. It is important for him to address these ideas because many people instinctively associate morality with these kinds of lives. But Mill notes that it is always better to help others and achieve enlightenment* while also *being fully satisfied oneself. While it is* generally true *that living a life of asceticism or service to others will improve the common good, these lifestyles are only good insofar as they serve the common good. Again, Mill suggests, his critics are misinterpreting their moral instincts (selfless service to others is* usually *good, which is true because service to others usually increases overall happiness) with absolute moral laws (selfless service to others is* inherently *good, which is false).*

Mill emphasizes again that the most important value is the sum of *all* human happiness, and that all people are equal in calculating this sum. This means political systems should be designed to connect people's individual happiness with the happiness of the whole society, and people should be taught by "education and [public] opinion" to see this same deep connection between the individual and the collective.

Mill notes that societies and their governments largely determine how much their citizens prioritize the collective: his argument for teaching utilitarian thinking through "education and [public] opinion" is, to a significant extent, the reason contemporary students take civics classes and contemporary political institutions emphasize transparency, responsibility, and ethical conduct. Notably, utilitarianism basically assumes that everyone is equal—not that everyone is equally happy, but rather that everyone is equally capable and deserving *of happiness (and the means to access it).*

Mill now looks at yet another objection: the idea that utilitarianism sets an impossibly high standard, forcing people to always act with everyone else in mind. Mill explains that, while people have a duty to promote the common good, this does not always need to be their motive, and it is fine to act for other reasons as long as "the rule of duty does not condemn" the action. For instance, saving a drowning person is morally correct, even if one only does it for money. Society is made of individuals, and "the great majority of good actions" only concern the good of those individuals. There is no need to think about society unless one's actions might violate someone's rights, or one holds an important public position and one's actions affect society as a whole.

Mill sees that it is easy to misconstrue his philosophy as holding that everyone must always be thinking about the collective. Again, he sees this interpretation as a needless exaggeration: he does not want to turn everyone into a philosopher. He makes a useful distinction between doing what is good and doing what is good because it is what is good. *In short, he does not care about people's motives, but only about their actions (after all, only actions contribute to happiness). In "the great majority of" situations, then, it is fine to behave for the sake of oneself and one's immediate circle, and to follow commonsense notions of morality—except, that is, in the few exceptional cases when one's own interests are opposed to the interests of others.* In those cases, *Mill thinks, people must stop and think about the common good, reflecting on whether their actions are beneficial or detrimental to net happiness.*

Mill then turns to the objection that utilitarianism turns people into cold, utility-calculating machines who do not care about people's moral character. He replies that virtuous people with the right motivations can still end up doing evil, and vice versa, which proves that the moral qualities of an action are different from the moral qualities of the person who does them. Every ethical system agrees about this distinction. While believing that an *action*'s goodness is about its consequences, then, utilitarians can also have separate ideas about what makes a *person* good. Indeed, good actions are precisely what *build* good character, so by promoting good actions, utilitarians also promote good character. Mill admits that some utilitarians do fail to appreciate "beauties of character," but any moral system is bound to have "puritanically rigorous" interpreters who miss these same beauties.

Mill's answer to this objection allows him to introduce three important ideas. First, morality depends on deeds, *not their* doers. *But secondly, despite this fact, it is still important for people to be virtuous because this will* lead them to *instinctively take good actions and usually increase the world's net happiness. And thirdly, the fact that "beauties of character" are valuable as a means to good actions (but* not in and of themselves*) is another good reason for utilitarians to prioritize the building of common institutions and collective moral values.*

Mill continues answering his critics, now turning to arguments he considers even more outlandish. Some people call utilitarianism "a *godless* doctrine," but Mill thinks that God wants nothing more than "the happiness of his creatures," which means that utilitarianism is actually godlier than other ethical systems. He notes that "whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals" will effectively contribute to the maximization of happiness, and that utilitarians can interpret religious texts just like other philosophers or religious thinkers.

Mill's answer to his Christian critics is characteristically clever: prioritizing human happiness does not mean ignoring *God's will, but rather* fulfilling *it. Therefore, the implication goes, not only is it perfectly possible to be a good Christian and a good utilitarian, but in fact utilitarians are the* best *Christians, and the moral rules outlined in scripture should be taken as useful guides to prioritizing the general good (but not infallible rules for human conduct).*

Other critics call utilitarianism "expedient," a word that usually means putting private benefit above the public interest. But this is actually what utilitarians are *against*: they want to maximize happiness, with everyone's interests weighed equally. For instance, it might be "expedient" to lie one's way out of a sticky situation, but this violates the social norm of truthfulness, which is necessary for people to have trust in each other, and therefore very important for "human happiness on the largest scale." This does not mean there are no exceptions—like deciding not to tell bad news to a very sick person, if it may worsen their condition. But there are few such cases, when the benefit of breaking the rule outweighs the damage of weakening it, and "the principle of utility is good for […] weighing these conflicting utilities" and deciding when it is acceptable to break such rules.

Like the objection that "utility is opposed to pleasure" from the beginning of the chapter, this criticism is based on a simple misinterpretation of terms. If the previous objection relied on a misunderstanding of what "utility" was, this objection relies on a misinterpretation of "expediency" (a word that is no longer commonly used in English). In contemporary terms, some people think that utilitarianism allows people to make exceptions for themselves by referring to the "greater good." It is okay to tell a lie just this once, one might think—but in this case, one forgets the long-term consequences of lying, both because one has to keep up the lie and because one loses others' trust and goodwill. When such lies come from public figures, they erode the general moral fabric of society as a whole. In short, then, people who make moral exceptions for themselves on the basis of the "common good" are simply wrong about their behavior being good, *and Mill argues that considering the concept of utility would help people avoid such mistakes.*

Other critics say that figuring out what is best for the general happiness before taking action would simply be too time-consuming. But Mill thinks that all of human history is time enough to serve as a guide: people have been "learning by experience" for generations. People can easily come to "agreement as to what *is* useful," which is already expressed through "law and opinion." While people can continue perfecting themselves and their moral rules infinitely, there is no need to return to straightforward first principles before every decision. Everyone "go[es] out upon the sea of life with their minds made-up on the common questions of right and wrong," and humanity keeps clarifying the finer points, while sticking to the same basic principles.

In responding to this penultimate objection, Mill continues to clarify what, precisely, he thinks is valuable about moral instincts: they give people rules of thumb to follow in most situations, shortcuts that can generally lead them to make good decisions. Situations of moral conflict, when people have to seriously think about what course of action is right and wrong, tend to also *be situations in which they have either* no *strong moral instincts or* conflicting *ones. Accordingly, the problem is not moral instincts in and of themselves, but rather the conflation of moral instincts and moral* laws. *At the same time, here Mill also responds to his critics' general concern that he is throwing tradition to the wayside. Just as he preserves the role of moral instincts in his argument by putting them in their proper place, he saves history and "law and opinion" by showing that they serve an important function for the promotion of the common good. Mill is essentially saying that utilitarianism is revolutionary as a moral theory from a philosophical point of view, but it does not require people to revolutionize their common sense about what is right and wrong.*

Mill looks at one last criticism of utilitarianism: some argue that, because utilitarianism allows for exceptions to rules, people will excuse themselves from following the rules when it benefits them at the expense of others. But Mill argues that people can misinterpret any moral doctrine this way, for every rule has exceptions. At least utilitarianism gives people a way to decide between different "secondary" moral principles when they come in conflict: people can appeal to the "first principle" of utility.

This criticism is essentially the same as the argument that utilitarianism promotes "expediency." While those who make this objection worry that utilitarianism facilitates bad behavior by making morality about specific situations and not absolute rules, Mill insists that he does not do away with moral rules—he merely explains the true reasons behind them and, in fact, gives people an even better *reason to follow and promote them. Indeed, people will always treat themselves as exceptions to the rules. And contrary to this example of people excusing bad behavior by compulsively citing utilitarianism, in reality, according to utilitarians, breaking the rules is only acceptable after extensive moral reflection and analysis.*

CHAPTER 3: OF THE ULTIMATE SANCTION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY

Any moral philosophy must explain why people should be obligated to undertake the actions it considers right—in other words, where its "binding force" comes from. People raise this question whenever they are forced to consider adjusting to a new concept of morality, even though they tend to unquestioningly accept the morality they learn at an early age from "education and opinion." In fact, this popular morality—like the idea that it is wrong "to rob or murder, betray or deceive," is made of secondary, not primary, moral principles. So while people believe in a number of rules that help maximize happiness, they ironically do not believe in the fundamental rule behind these secondary rules: maximizing happiness. Mill hopes that people can start learning to accept this first principle with the ease that they learn the secondary ones.

What makes people act morally? And specifically, what makes people act morally according to utilitarian rules? *It is uniquely important for Mill to establish this because other doctrines have an answer to this question built in: religious morality says that following the rules is God's will (and/or will be rewarded in the afterlife), and even Kant says that everyone must follow the common rules of reason because it is a requirement of their very humanity. In other words, these rule-based moralities vest their power in the source of the rules. This allows philosophers to justify telling people to follow them, and it gives the people who are asked to follow them a convincing reason to do so. But utilitarianism needs to look elsewhere to justify itself to people in this way, even if there is no question about the truth of its first principle (that happiness, and nothing but happiness, is good).*

Mill returns to utilitarianism's "sanctions" or "binding force." There are two kinds: "external" and "internal." *External* sanctions are outside punishments: for example, people think that, if they act immorally, their reputations will be destroyed or God will punish them. For utilitarians, these external sanctions express the ultimate moral principle of maximizing utility: good reputation is a reward for acting for the common good, and God wants to maximize his creatures' happiness. In contrast, an *internal* sanction is the actor's own feeling of pain and displeasure at the idea of acting immorally: their moral *conscience*. Mill admits that some people lack conscience and only act morally due to external sanctions, but thinks that most people's consciences can be "cultivated" in accord with utilitarianism, as with any other moral ideas.

In short, Mill thinks people follow moral rules either because other people force them to, or because they feel good when they do what is right and bad when they do what is wrong. He thinks that a good society needs both these "sanctions," which encourage people to do what is right, and that therefore utilitarians should actively promote both of them—this means fighting for a morally better system of laws and public accountability (to spread external sanctions) and *building a culture in which people see their actions as morally important and internalize principles of right and wrong (to "cultivate" internal sanctions).*

Some people contrast their own "objective" moral principles, which they see as coming from God or some other nonhuman source, with utilitarianism's "subjective" principle, which is thought up by humans themselves. Mill says this does not matter: ultimately, people only obey "objective" principles because of their "subjective" feelings about those principles. Similarly, it does not matter where conscience comes from (if it is innate or learned). If conscience is innate, people should immediately learn to be utilitarians, because the most "intuitively obligatory" moral idea is feeling empathy for other people's pleasure and pain. If moral conscience is learned, as Mill happens to believe, this means it can "be[] cultivated in almost any direction," including quite easily to the utilitarian principle.

Mill looks at these two criticisms in order to establish that nothing makes either internal sanctions (moral conscience) or external sanctions (praise and punishment from others) inherently better than the other. As he is preparing to argue that internal sanctions are more important than external ones when it comes to promoting moral behavior, this allows him to clear the air and preempt the criticisms of those who simply trust more in the rules that others give them. Mill sees the debate over "objective" and "subjective" principles as meaningless: people just call something "objective" when they very strongly believe in it. And the question of conscience's origins is similarly unimportant, because conscience is a tool *for promoting the greater good—Mill is more interested in* using *the tool than in thinking about where it comes from.*

Whereas people can dismiss particularly wacky moral beliefs by analyzing them away, they cannot do this to utilitarianism. This is because utilitarianism's real power is the "basis of powerful natural sentiment" behind it: "the social feelings of mankind." Everyone recognizes that they are part of a society. Society must look at "the interests of all," and because people are equal, they must treat everybody's interests as equal—those who look down on others face "constant protest," and getting anything done politically or socially requires working with others toward collective goals. As societies grow more equal through history, this tendency only accelerates.

Mill again returns to instinct, which he continues to see as a valuable tool because common moral instincts largely agree with utilitarianism's conclusions: people are naturally social beings with social instincts, and therefore they can harness these instincts (and those of others) to promote "the interests of all." He also takes the opportunity to again emphasize the centrality of equality for utilitarians, who cannot see happiness as inherently valuable without in turn realizing that everyone*'s happiness is equally valuable. Finally, it is important to note that Mill clearly believes in a continuous narrative of human progress throughout history, which he explains by suggesting that more equal societies tend to believe more strongly in collective moral responsibility and therefore are more willing to fight to maintain their equality. Of course, these ideas are no longer as widely accepted as they might have been in Mill's time.*

When cultivated properly, Mill concludes, a person's social feelings lead them to picture themselves "as a being who *of course* pays regard to others." Through education and social interaction, Mill argues, everyone can gain a "feeling of unity with all the rest." Indeed, Mill thinks this feeling should be "taught as a religion." Once this moral conscience takes root, it is difficult for people to get rid of it: when morally conscientious people meet injustice and selfishness, they become more, not less, dedicated to justice and equality. They hope to make selfish and unjust people happier by spreading the "feeling of unity" and sense of moral conscience to them, too. Even though Mill thinks a majority of humanity remains selfish and morally unconscientious, he also thinks moral conscience will continue to grow, as it is far stronger than external sanctions and can even use them for its benefit.

Mill ties his previous observations into a powerful conclusion: utilitarians should try to convert internal sanctions into external ones. *In other words, they can harness people's moral instincts to build moral institutions that in turn cultivate those same moral instincts, and so on in a cycle—like an equal society that continues to demand equality, Mill believes, these moral sanctions are self-reinforcing. Although proposing one's ideas be "taught as a religion" might seem arrogant today, Mill's ideas certainly align with those of many religious and social movements that emphasize fighting for equality and standing up for the powerless. Indeed, it is worth considering what his call for a religion of social justice can offer to contemporary politics.*

CHAPTER 4: OF WHAT SORT OF PROOF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY IS SUSCEPTIBLE

Mill reminds the reader that first principles cannot be proven in normal ways. First principles about *knowledge* can be proven through "our senses and our internal consciousness." However, ethics asks for first principles about "conduct" or "practical ends." At the same time, this is based on a piece of knowledge—what is *good* or *desirable*. For utilitarians, this is nothing more and nothing less than happiness. So if "the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it," then the only way to prove something desirable is "that people do actually desire it."

Having explained his theory, defended it against its detractors, and outlined what should make it valid in the eyes of those who are asked to follow it, Mill now turns to another important nuts-and-bolts issue that should be particularly important to other philosophers: what makes his theory true*? First, he has to return to meta-ethics by asking what can make* any *claim about good and evil true. Because he is establishing* first principles*, he can only look for basic things that cannot possibly be disproven—like the fact "that a sound is audible," which can be* explained *through science but not* proven *as true by anything but human experience. Similarly, then, by definition, his first principle about what is good or desirable can only be proven by looking at what "people actually do desire." But it is worth pausing to evaluate Mill's argument. First, are* good *and* desirable *really one and the same? Or is it merely that the* ultimate *good is the same thing that everyone* ultimately *desires—what they would choose if they could have* anything*—which is, of course,* happiness*? And secondly, what happens to other kinds of moral claims—ones that base values on God, human reason, or the universe itself—under Mill's system, in which there is no way to prove anything good except by proving it desirable to people?*

Mill thinks it is plainly true that everyone desires happiness for themselves, which makes happiness good for each person. In turn, Mill contends, "the general happiness [is], therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons." This means it is ethically desirable, and can be *a* proper goal of action and *an* inherent value for an ethical system. But this is not enough: Mill wants to show that happiness is the *only* thing valuable in itself, and therefore the *only* value an ethical system should try to fulfill. He has to prove "not only that people desire happiness, but that they never desire anything else."

Again, Mill does not try to offer a convoluted argument to support his moral theory, unlike most past ethicists. Rather, he simply says that everyone should understand that their happiness is a good thing, and he essentially challenges his readers to prove that it is not*. (Of course, he recognizes that it is excessively difficult to make a coherent argument for such an idea.) The other interesting and contentious part of Mill's argument here is the notion that the desirability of happiness for one person implies the desirability of a common happiness for* all *people—the group to whom morality should properly apply. If ethics is about what is good for* humanity in general*, in other words, then it simply must adopt the moral perspective of all of humanity.*

Some critics would say that, since people desire things like "virtue and the absence of vice," utilitarians cannot prove happiness to be the *only* criterion for good and evil. However, Mill disagrees: utilitarians in fact think of virtue as the absolute best "means to the ultimate end," and virtuous people gain pleasure from their virtue, which they see as "good in itself." This principle applies generally: people should not enjoy "any given pleasure" *because* this pleasure contributes to happiness as a whole. Rather, the pleasure contributes to happiness *because they enjoy it*: although pleasure is a means to creating greater happiness, it is also "a part of the end" itself.

Mill now looks to a much more sophisticated objection to his theory, one that can be easily made by those who adhere to virtue-based ethical systems that put the cultivation of character *above all else. (Whereas Mill thinks only acts, not actors, are good and bad, virtue ethicists think it is the exact opposite.) This objection is powerful: if Mill shows that happiness is absolutely valuable but another philosopher shows that virtue is inherently valuable, too, then Mill cannot claim happiness to be the only true end of human action and therefore cannot suggest that people should always act for the greatest happiness. This is Mill's first response: virtue, like moral instincts, is an excellent tool for the promotion of the greatest good—virtuous people will tend to act rightly and promote the common good, just as following one's moral instincts will tend to produce ethical outcomes.*

Mill illustrates this principle by looking at the parallel example of **money**: people originally love money because they can buy things with it, but then begin to desire money "in and for itself," and sometimes even care more about having money than spending it. Money turns from "a means to happiness" into "a principal ingredient of the individual's conception of happiness." Indeed, happiness is made up of all sorts of pleasures and desires: it is "not an abstract idea but a concrete whole" made of various parts. Virtue, then, is like money. At first, people seek it because they know it can maximize their pleasure and protect them against pain. Later, it becomes "a good in itself," and indeed the best of all happiness's component elements, for—unlike fame, wealth, and power—more virtue will never lead to less happiness.

This is Mill's second and much more powerful response to the objection about virtue. Virtues can be seen as valuable only because they are part of happiness. *His analogy to money makes this much clearer—just as people desire money even though it is technically only a means to an end, good people can desire to be virtuous because their virtue demonstrates a moral goodness of which they should be proud, even though virtue is not good except* as part of *happiness. Therefore, Mill absorbs the criticism leveled at him by virtue ethicists: yes, virtue is desirable in and of itself, but this actually* further affirms *the primacy of happiness.*

Ultimately, Mill explains, the above discussion shows how, besides desiring things that are a means to happiness, people can desire things that are "a part of happiness." And this is the "proof [to which] the principle of utility is susceptible." If Mill can show that no natural human desire is anything but a desire for "either a part of happiness or a means to happiness," then he has proven that happiness is the only goal of human life, the proper standard to make moral judgments about good and evil actions, and the sole "criterion of morality" itself. And it is possible to give this proof through "fact and experience." Mill argues that "practiced self-consciousness and self-observation" will show anyone that "to think of an object as desirable […] and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing."

Mill's observation about the structure of happiness allows him to absorb many more criticisms: anytime someone argues that something is an inherent good, which would theoretically refute happiness's status as the one and only inherent good, Mill can simply respond that that thing is good because it is part of happiness. *Therefore, his proof is complete: happiness is inherently good because everyone unavoidably desires it, and it is the* only *good because there is nothing people desire that is not "either a part of happiness or a means to happiness." He literally challenges the reader to try and disprove him: can you imagine something that you want, but that neither gets you closer to happiness nor would be part of an ideal happy life? If so, why do you want it, and what makes it good?*

Mill considers the objection "that the will is a different thing from desire," and therefore that people can will things they do not desire or enjoy. He agrees that this is true, but says that willing things one does not enjoy is just proof of "the power of habit," that is, of people getting stuck in the habit of doing or obtaining things they no longer find pleasurable. At first, one wills what one desires, but one can keep willing it when one has stopped desiring it. There is nothing inherently good or bad about this—or, by extension, about the will. However, it is possible to make the will work for absolute good by developing a desire for virtue and the accompanying "will to be virtuous."

Will is another philosophical concept that might seem out-of-date or confusing to contemporary readers: it essentially means choosing what desire to pursue. (This is related to the debate on whether we have "free will," or actually make our own choices rather than being forced one way or another.) In other words, the objection Mill is answering says that people will choose to do things they do not want or enjoy. Mill agrees that this is true, but thinks it is not a problem for utilitarianism, because what is good is determined by what people desire, *not by what they* will. *At the same time, he sees another opportunity to argue for promoting the general good—because will is simply the force of habit, teaching people good habits and correct moral instincts can help them habitually do what promotes the common good.*

CHAPTER 5: ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN JUSTICE AND UTILITY

"The idea of justice" has often gotten in utilitarianism's way. It is a powerful, instinctual moral feeling, but people are wrong to assume it is automatically valid only because it feels so natural. Here, Mill intends to figure out what it means to say that something is just or unjust, and whether this quality in a thing is inherent and independent ("like our sensations of color and taste"), or instead a more complicated way of expressing a moral truth about utility (although people tend to resist this possibility).

Mill dedicates this last chapter to "the idea of justice" not only because his more sophisticated critics use the idea of justice as evidence that merely calculating the consequences of an action cannot adequately capture its morality, but also because discussing justice allows him to outline a general procedure for dealing with objections to utilitarianism that come from moral instincts. *Instead of trying to debate the importance of justice, Mill tries to affirm it* through *utilitarianism—in other words, he shows why the moral instincts people try to use* against *utilitarianism are actually* reflections *of utilitarian principles themselves.*

Mill first wants to define what it means for an act to be just or unjust, so he looks at a few examples. First, taking away people's liberty or property is unjust, because that means violating their legal rights, unless they "forfeited" or never should have had those rights. Second, unjust laws clearly exist, meaning that justice is not only about following the law, but rather about respecting people's "*moral right[s].*" Third, justice implies that people should get what they deserve (do-gooders "deserve good" and evildoers evil). Fourth, it is unjust to break promises or commitments, and fifth, it is unjust "to be *partial*—to show favor or preference to one person over another" in the select situations that do not call for it, like courts, elections, and punishing a child. Impartiality, Mill concludes, is really about allowing only the proper motives to influence action.

Mill chooses a set of examples that he sees as clear and incontestable—at least among the British reading public of his time—which allows him to build a convincing analysis of the moral instinct of justice. The first two examples tie justice to "moral right[s]," and the next three suggest that such rights have to do with people receiving the sort of treatment they deserve. Mill's implication, of course, is that the instinct about what people morally deserve is ultimately based in utilitarianism.

Justice also dictates equality, but not absolutely, because everyone wants equality "except where [one] thinks that expediency requires inequality." Everyone has a different sense of what counts as expedient, ranging from "those who support the most outrageous inequality" like slavery, but still declare they theoretically believe in equality, to those who rightly think that judges should have "powers not granted to other people." So it is clear that people mean a wide variety of things, in a wide variety of contexts, by the word "justice."

Mill notes that even moral instincts that at first appear to be unshakeable, consistent laws—like justice—actually have shades of meaning and contingency depending on the situation. When it is advantageous (good for utility), it is all right to break the norm of equality. Therefore, Mill is already suggesting that people who adhere to moral rules are actually utilitarians because they are willing to break those rules for the sake of utility. Readers should note that the word "expedient" takes on a new context here: before, Mill was talking about how people misunderstand "expediency," contrasting this term with the idea of the common good, and here, he is talking about what is actually *best or most "expedient," which in Mill's terms is* identical to *the idea of the common good.*

Mill wonders whether etymology might help him clarify what "justice" originally meant. It comes from the Latin for "that which has been ordered," which indicates that it is based on the idea of following the law. In Rome and Greece, societies ruled by the people themselves, it came to mean following the laws that *should* exist, not necessarily the sometimes wrongly conceived laws that *do* exist. This includes the moral laws that apply in private life (where nobody would want the courts to meddle, but people would still want wrongdoers punished). If this is the source of justice as a feeling and idea, however, then it seems no different from "moral obligation in general," meaning right and wrong, broadly conceived.

Again, Mill clarifies the distinction between judicial and moral laws. They are linked in the sense that legal systems should seek to approximate morality as closely as possible in the proper domains of life. But precisely because the law fails *to capture morality and should stay out of private life, it is crucial to separate the two. This is further evidence for Mill's earlier claim that the internal sanction of morality (the individual conscience) is a more important driver of moral behavior than the external sanction (reward and punishment). Therefore, while people tend to instinctively associate justice with justice* systems *(the law), when asked to further reflect, they will realize that justice is about* morality. *Everything just is moral and everything unjust is immoral. But this does not make the concept of justice useless, or entirely reducible to that of morality: rather, justice tells people something meaningful about the* kind *of morality or immorality tied to an act.*

Indeed, calling something "wrong" is another way of saying "that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it," which is the real difference between things being *moral duties* and merely being good or bad (but not enforceable as such). This question of punishment, Mill argues, divides morality from "expediency and worthiness" in general. He now turns to the two kind of moral duties: imperfect duties, which are owed in general but never in any particular moment (like giving to charity), and perfect duties, which one must perform in a specific situation in order to fulfill a right possessed by "some [other] person or persons."

It is important to remember that, when Mill talks about certain immoral behaviors deserving punishment, he is not only talking about legal punishment, but also things like social retaliation or personal torment. Neither is he saying that all *immoral acts should be punishable by* law. *Imperfect and perfect duties are two categories* within *morality, and their relevance to Mill's discussion of justice will soon become apparent. The fact that he distinguishes between them shows that Mill's moral calculus is not as simple as it is often made out to be: while it is true that actions are good if and only if they contribute to the general happiness (and bad if and only if they detract from it), this is* not *the only relevant moral distinction that can be made. While some rule-based moral philosophers claim that utilitarians cannot distinguish between types or categories of moral good, Mill clearly does, although he thinks that these categories' definitions rely in some fundamental on the principle of utility.*

Mill says this is the same as the difference between justice and the rest of morality. Injustice always means a violation of perfect duty, wronging "some assignable person." So justice means "some individual person can claim from us [some action of ours] as [their] moral right." In contrast, it is morally right to be generous, but nobody is owed our generosity, so that is an imperfect duty.

In short, Mill's argument is that people use the term "justice" to talk about perfect moral duties. *It is* wrong *and* immoral, *but not* unjust, *to be stingy—because generosity is an imperfect moral duty. (Similarly, it could be wrong but neither immoral nor unjust to cut one's finger while cooking.) So each category is a subset of the next: only some bad acts are immoral (if they are wrong enough to merit punishment), and only some immoral acts are unjust (if they violate a* perfect *duty, meaning their actions harm someone specific).*

Having figured out what justice is, Mill now turns to the question of where it comes from. He declares that, while justice is not all about expediency, the *moral* dimension of justice *is*. He summarizes that justice means "the desire to punish a person who has done harm" to "some definite individual or individuals." This feeling of justice comes from the fact that people want to defend others who are wronged, and for whom they feel sympathy. In short, it is "vengeance" combined with a moral concern for "the general good." If someone pursues justice in the right way, "consider[ing] whether an act is blamable before [allowing oneself] to resent it," then they are really seeking to promote the collective interest—maximizing happiness. (Even Kant's formulation of moral action implies that people think about "the interest of mankind collectively" before acting.)

Mill completes his definition of justice. But by defining it in terms of other, more basic human feelings ("vengeance" plus "[concern for] the general good"), he does not *mean to challenge its importance. Rather, he sees these feelings as essential, valuable, and worth promoting, precisely because they are oriented toward the promotion of the general good. Again, Mill is using "expediency" to mean what is beneficial or best for utility, as opposed to its colloquial meaning of self-interest as opposed to collective interest. This allows him to distinguish between the* feeling *of justice (self-defense combined with sympathy) and the* moral *determination of whether justice should be* enacted *(meaning whether people should be punished for their unjust actions). This moral part of justice—which requires people to "consider whether an act is blamable" and think of the collective interest—is the part that aligns with utility.*

Having pointed out that justice is our response to the "violation of a right," Mill now asks what a right is and decides that it is something we expect society to defend, in the service of the "general utility." Of course, people also have an emotional attachment to their rights, which guarantee their security. This emotional attachment makes cases where rights are at stake "so much more intense" than normal cases of utility, to the point where "*ought* and *should* grow into *must*, and recognized indispensability becomes a moral necessity."

In this chapter so far, Mill has distinguished justice from morality and mere good, and then explained that the moral component of justice has to do with appropriately responding to unjust acts. This means, as he shows here, that morality is inextricably tied to the social dimension of human life, and that ethics and social philosophy are extensions of one another. Rights are the expression of individual morality in a social context, and emotions, in turn, give force to rights by connecting people to one another (like "external sanctions"). This is a curious argument because much of Mill's disagreement with his predecessors—Jeremy Bentham and his own father—came after he had a mental breakdown at the end of his adolescence and came to believe in the power of emotions (which Bentham and the elder Mill largely rejected).

Any explanation that sees justice as "totally independent of utility" cannot account for the ambiguity in what different people consider to be just. Mill provides an example: some people think criminals should be punished for their own good, others think the purpose of punishment is to give an example to potential future criminals, and still others think "education" and "circumstances" are responsible for crime, so criminals should not be punished. All three have good principles for considering their approach just, but none can explain why their idea of justice is better than the others'. People have tried to get out of this difficulty by proposing ideas like the social "contract," which is not only a hypothetical, but also no better as a principle of justice. Meanwhile, others think of an entirely different principle of justice: "an eye for an eye."

Mill has completed his analysis of justice and explained what it has to do with utility: the feeling of injustice reflects an instinctual response to a certain kind of immoral, happiness-stifling behavior, and the enacting of justice involves directing these instincts toward the social good (the promotion of utility). Accordingly, he now turns to more concrete arguments against the idea that justice is an independent, absolute moral value "totally independent of utility" (rather than, as Mill thinks, an instinctive interpretation of the utilitarian principle). The argument he presents here is the most straightforward and undeniable one: different people think different things are just and unjust. If some of them were simply wrong about what justice really *is, then the ones who are right would be able to produce some convincing explanation that their own concept of justice is the true one. But they cannot: everyone has reasons to prefer their concept of justice, but all these reasons are either meaningless or* utilitarian. *For instance, defenders of different models of punishment all say that their own model of justice is the right one because criminals deserve some particular kind of treatment, but none can coherently explain why their idea of what criminals deserve is truer than any other idea. If criminals deserve punishment because of the social contract, one must then ask what gives the social contract validity; if they deserve it because of "an eye for an eye," one must ask why "an eye for an eye" is the best policy, and answers to these questions either get no closer to an absolute concept of justice or end up appealing to the consequences—the resulting utility—of each principle.*

Mill looks at a few more examples: should people with "superior abilities" get paid better, or should everyone get paid equally because they put in equal effort? Should everyone pay the same tax rate, should the rich pay a larger portion of their income, or should everyone owe exactly the same amount? Again, utilitarianism is the only way to resolve these questions. But none of this makes justice any less important, or makes it the same as expediency. Justice "concern[s] the essentials of human well-being," which can be thought about in terms of rights, and so justice is more important than every other moral principle. Specifically, justice is about "the moral rules which forbid [hu]mankind to hurt one another," which are the basis of people's ability to generally trust in one another and live peacefully as a collective.

As with the previous case of punishing a criminal, Mill chooses these cases because his readers are likely to have competing instincts about what is just: it is fair for people to get rewarded for their results (a product of their ability), but also fair that people who work equally hard should get paid equally, and also unfair that some people have superior abilities in the first place. This and Mill's other examples challenge the simplistic idea of justice as an absolute value "totally independent of utility" because they show that people's instincts about justice are not always reliable or fixed; rather, they point the way to another, more fundamental way of determining morality: utilitarianism, which is the only way to decide among competing principles of justice. Therefore, Mill concludes that the instinct of justice is valuable because it helps enforce the most important rules that promote the common happiness in a society—but that it is wrong to mistake this instinct for morality in and of itself.

The result is that "the most marked cases of injustice"—violence and theft—demand punishment, and that people must pay back the good done to them, including keeping their promises and maintaining their friendships. These basic principles of justice are the source of most of the laws that societies implement through their court systems.

Mill sees justice as the connective tissue between personal morality and society as a whole, which is part of why he devoted so much energy to politics during his life. By extension, if justice reflects the moral rules that promote utility, then a society's justice system *reflects that society's collective moral conscience.*

The principal "judicial virtues" are equality and impartiality. First, these are necessary to achieve justice. Second, the notion of "returning good for good" and "repressing evil for evil" means treating other people in a way equal to how they treat us, and that all people should deserve equally good treatment as long as they treat all the rest equally well. Third and finally, "the very meaning of utility, or the greatest happiness principle" requires that "one person's happiness […] is counted for exactly as much as another's." For these three reasons, "all persons are deemed to have a *right* to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse." Accordingly, "all social inequalities" that are not expedient are unjust, especially if people continue to tolerate and dishonestly justify them. As examples, Mill cites slavery, class distinctions, and hierarchies "of color, race, and sex."

Mill now returns to several of the instincts that make up the idea of justice, but which people often erroneously take as valuable in and of themselves (rather than as indirect expressions of the principle of utility). He interprets these instincts in terms of his picture of justice, showing that the instinctual desire for equality and reciprocity should be the basis of any justice system, except when these values come in conflict with one another or with utility. They should, in turn, be the basis of human society, and this is Mill's philosophical justification for his unshakeable belief in providing equal rights and social services to all people. Yet it is worth asking whether Mill does leave too open a door for politicians and legislators to justify breaking with equality in so-called exceptional circumstances. Grotesquely enough, for instance, Mill promoted the British empire in India in part because *he thought he was "civilizing" Indians and bringing them up to an equal level with Europeans. In other words, he justified the mistreatment of people he considered inferior "barbarians" by claiming he was trying to make them his equals. Contemporary readers can see the profound irony in Mill, an irredeemable racist against non-Europeans, defending equality and decrying racism and sexism.*


Mill summarizes his view of justice as the set of "moral requirements" that are the most important for utility, and therefore that people are obligated to fulfill above all else. There are exceptions, of course—like when one must steal "food or medicine" in order to save a life. Mill concludes that he has tied up "the only real difficulty in the utilitarian theory of morals." Doing what is just is obviously always expedient, and in this chapter he has explained why cases of justice *feel* different from cases of mere expediency: justice involves "the natural feeling of resentment," which becomes moral in when considered alongside "the demands of social good." This overwhelming feeling is a good thing—it should be celebrated because it drives people to do what is right.

In his conclusion, Mill emphasizes that he has reconciled with his critics rather than dismissing them: these critics' instincts about justice correctly reflect what is moral and immoral. But justice is subservient to the principle of utility, not independent of it. In other words, the same people who question utilitarianism because they think justice is more important than utility are, at the end of the day, secretly utilitarians themselves. And their strong instincts are incredibly important for a well-functioning, equal society. Although he was personally involved in profound injustice, then, Mill's philosophy *clearly supports any progressive social justice movement that seeks equality for oppressed groups and/or the righting of historical wrongs.*



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