

# John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism

1861

*“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”*

1806-1873

## General Remarks

Aged Moral Theories are divided between 2 categories: natural faculty/Intuitive & inductive schools (through experience & observation) although both school; no progress has been made.

A problem is that we ought to know what right & wrong are before we can tell whether an action is right or wrong; but this is the reverse in scientific procedure, which beings with the particular and works toward general principles.

Moral sense is not supposed to detect cases of right and wrong action, only general principles.

Some argue that general principles of morality are discovered *a priori* Most do not provide a single moral principle or a determinate order.

Kant did produce categorical imperative:

*“so act that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings.”*

However, he could not successfully deduce actual moral duties from that principle, only consequences no one would choose to incur.

## What Utilitarianism is

The highest normative principle is the principle of utility:  
*“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”*

It is a tool for generating secondary moral principles. We cannot prove that happiness (promotion of pleasure & prevention of pain in terms of quantity & quality involving intellect, feelings, & moral sentiments) is the ultimate end of human action, but we can provide rational grounds for accepting that happiness is such an end.

Hierarchy of pleasure whereby some pleasure are higher than others due to quality; people sink into a base life because they have lost their higher capacities; they are difficult to establish & easily wither away; distractions can drag us down; the preference for higher pleasures by at least the majority is good reason to think they are better.

Greatest impediment to happiness: selfishness while greatest aid to happiness is cultivation; most evils can be eliminated (poverty by society/charity & disease by education/sanitation).

Jesus expresses ideal perfection of utilitarian morality: “do unto others as you would do unto yourself; to love your neighbor as yourself.” The happiness of the whole of humanity is paramount;

**Objection:** maximizing happiness is too high a standard for action. Ethics does not require that acting according to its standard should be one's sole motivation; utilitarians have always held that the motive of an action is not the basis of its morality although it reveals its moral worth.

**Objection:** Utilitarianism seem to deem the coldly calculating person most estimable; all systems of morality have the problem they they seem to promote extreme behavior; it is better to err on the side of utility than the side of disutility.

**Objection:** utilitarianism is godless. But it promotes happiness which is presumably God's end for humans; strict versions of divine law are a matter of interpretation of God's will; can interpret it as favoring happiness.

**Objection:** There is not enough time to calculate the effects on happiness of all our actions. But history of humans has made the calculations for us; murder or theft has not occurred for the first time; beliefs have come down through history are the rules of morality for the masses, subject to refinement by philosophers.

**Objection:** utilitarians can do whatever they please in the name of utility. But every system of morality allows for exceptions due to conflicting obligations; these are real difficulties in ethics; utility can be invoked to resolve conflict; there is no way to do so in other systems.

## Ultimate Motivation of Principle of Utility

The question: “What is the source of moral obligation?” is asked in all forms of moral philosophy.

Utilitarians has the same sanctions (motivation) as do other theories: hope and fear of displeasure of both fellow humans & God.

Moral feelings may be innate or acquired; there is no objection to a feeling for humanity being innate; Mills believes the feeling for humanity is acquired, through development of our natural feelings; social people pay regard to others “of course.” moral feeling is strengthened with the advance of political, social improvement.

In summary:

Two classes of motivation for promoting happiness:

- (1) external motivations arising from our hope of pleasing God & fear of displeasing God & other humans;
- (2) motivation internal to the person in view of moral duties developed over one's life (sympathy; religious feelings; childhood recollections; self-worth). The binding force of our sense of duty is that we experience pain or remorse when we act against those feelings by not promoting general happiness. People do have an instinctive feeling which guides the development of duty toward general happiness.

## The Proof of the Principle

The only way to prove that happiness is the ultimate end of human actions is to note that it is what people actually do desire.

*If X is the only thing desired, then X is the only thing that ought to be desired. General happiness is the only thing desired. Therefore, general happiness is the only thing that ought to be desired.*

Happiness is a good: each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the total of all persons.

Happiness is a complex phenomenon composed of many parts: virtue, money, power, and fame. This is compatible with the desire for virtue which is part of happiness. Each contributes to happiness which is “not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole”

## Connection Between Justice & Utility

Justice: a test case for utilitarianism:

People believe our feeling of justice indicates that it is objectively real. We obtain a conception of what we feel to be just by considering its many applications to liberty (unjust to deprive people of morality); personal rights; receive what one deserves; good faith (not to break an agreement); impartiality (not show preference); equality (equal protection); What do they have in common? All moral elements in the notion of justice depend on social utility.

The notion of rights violation also derives from utility. For, rights are claims we have on society to protect us, and the only reason society should protect us is because of social utility. Therefore, punishment and rights which are elements of utility are based on utility.

If justice were as foundational as nonconsequentialists contend, then justice would not be as ambiguous as it is. Disputes (e.g., theories of punishment, fair distribution, and fair taxation) can only be resolved by appealing to utility.

The rule of justice is intended for the good of humanity.

It is more vital to human well-being than any other principle of action.

The feeling of justice is the sentiment that sanctions the rule: a desire for punishment of those who violate it. It arises from the impulse of self-defense and the feeling of sympathy.