

The Stuart Mills' Ethical Theory of Utilitarianism

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Stuart Mills' ethical theory of utilitarianism is one of the most attacked texts in the history of philosophy. Some philosophers argue that this text only tries to show the many mistakes a brilliant philosopher can make. However, several secondary works of literature have shown that Mill's text is not as foolish as some philosophers have often portrayed it. Mill has made a lot of observations to support utilitarianism. In moral philosophy, intuitions play a major role (Mill, 538). It is, therefore, clear intuitions that act as the best observational basis for one to justify moral principles. However, Mill highly criticized intuitionism throughout his philosophical work. His critique of intuitionistic approaches to morality shows that philosophy has two segments. His first argument is that intuitionists have not been able to bring proper institutional moral judgment. Secondly, he argued that what most people call moral intuition are the effects of modern social discourse and education. Therefore, Mill recommends the utilitarian principle, which has three steps. First is that one must strive for his well-being. Secondly, he argues that an individual should also support the well-being of others. Lastly, our well-being shows our ultimate goal and the rightness of our actions, which determine our happiness.

John Stuart Mill wrote an ethical theory that is well described in a classical text named Utilitarianism in 1861. The book justifies the principle of utilitarianism as a foundation of morals. The principle states that actions can be thought to be right if they tend to promote happiness for all human beings (Mill, 546). Therefore, John Stuart Mill is seen focusing more on the consequences of actions and not on moral sentiments or rights. Mill views happiness as pleasure and where pain is absent. He further states that pleasure differs in quantity and quality. He argues that what people have achieved regarding goals and ends, such as proper living standards, should be considered as part of their happiness. Mill writes that utilitarianism is in line with natural sentiments that come from the social nature of human beings. If society were to use utilitarianism as an [ethical principle](#), people would absorb these standards since they are morally binding. He supports this by arguing that everything that human beings desire to have is either a means or an end to their happiness. Finally, Mill states that sentiments of justice are based on utility, and the reason why rights have been put in place is that they are necessary for human beings to be happy.

Mill defines utilitarianism as something that considers specific theories of life as the foundation of morality. This can be further studied as the mill's theory of value and the principle of utility. His philosophy of life was based on only one thing that is desirable for a human being to be happy, and that is pleasure. In contrast to some belief that considers pleasure as a homogeneous matter. Mills argues that some types of pleasure are more important than others depending on their quality. Because of this, his argument is referred to as qualitative hedonism. However many philosophers

have argued that qualitative hedonism is not usually a consistent position. A further critic claims that there has not been any evaluative basis to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. Mill further says that more valuable pleasures are those that have higher faculties. Such pleasure includes the pleasure of feelings and imaginations, pleasures of moral sentiments, and pleasures of intellect. In his text, Mill further argues that a dissatisfied human being is better than a satisfied pig. It can also be explained as it is better to be a Socrates who is dissatisfied than a fool who is satisfied. This is a surprising argument, given that Mill was a hedonist (Mill, 541). He argues that every individual has a manner of existence, and he prefers to employ higher faculties. It is evident that those people with pleasures that employ higher faculties agree that they are better than the lower ones. This is enough evidence that there is indeed the pleasure of higher value. Therefore for a human being to have the best life, higher faculties must play the greater part. This is probably the reason why Mill put a lot of greater emphasis on education.

In some other arguments, Mill argues that morals are what lead to social rules. Mill argues that what people judge as morally upright is what presumes rule in society. Stuart Mill is seen concentrating more on what makes a social practice to be moral rules. Mill finds the answer to this as what people refer to society as morally upright or morally wrong. He further states that an act is seen as ethically wrong if people think that it should be stopped either through punishment, bad conscience, or public disapproval. There is a very significant difference between simple expediency and morality. Therefore, expedient actions or wrong actions can be referred to as actions that we cannot recommend to a person. On the other hand, immoral actions or inexpedient actions are not usually sanctioned. Mill explains the differences between various types of actions (Mill, 538). Based on his system of logic he gives aesthetics, prudence, and morality as departments of the art of life. He further argues the principle of utility takes charge of not only morality but also taste and wisdom. According to Mill, there is a field of action in which an individual is rightfully supposed to fulfil moral rules. But there is also another field in which sanctions on some immoral behavior are considered inappropriate. These are those actions that are based on the liberty of an individual. According to Mill, in our private sphere, we can do what we want as long as we do not harm other people. It is good to know that Mill views morality as a social practice.

Mill also argues that actions that are considered unjust provoke outrage in society. What makes injustice cause outrage is the fact that it cannot be ignored by the theory of morals. He argues that every individual has a sense of justice that comes from moral judgment. He further contends that there is a general rule of justice. He considers the integration of justice as the only challenge to the theory of utilitarianism. Mill also views vengeance as having an animal character.

Apart from Mill's argument on the utilitarianism principle, other critical philosophers of utilitarianism saw happiness as the only ultimate goal of every human being. The word utilitarianism comes from the Latin word 'utils', which means useful. Therefore this is a theory that is mainly concerned with the consequences of our actions. This is because any action leads to either pain or pleasure. One of the strengths demonstrated by Mill's theory is that it is based on rational principles. It argues that morality is not only based on the belief in God but also on the idea of how human beings should

behave. Another strength based on this principle is the fact that it is a democratic principle (Mill, 533). This is further referred to as a common sense approach since it argues that human beings prefer to be happy than miserable. It advocates for individual happiness, but it is against individual pursuit. The content presented by utilitarianism is beneficial because it makes it easy to connect morality with the pursuit of happiness. The principle of utilitarianism is also very convenient since it focuses more on the outcome of a specific action rather than the motive. If a decision brings happiness to a large number of people, then it is the best decision to make.

However, utilitarianism has a variety of weaknesses, as shown in the text. One of the major flaws is that it is not easy to quantify pleasure because the hedonic calculus is not as accurate as it has been portrayed. Pleasures and pains cannot easily be quantified in the real world. For example, the pleasure of watching your child grow to become a man cannot be compared to the pleasure an individual obtains by only eating a chocolate bar. Therefore, the criterion of hedonic calculus is usually irrelevant. Secondly, various consequences of actions cannot be easily foretold. This is because human beings cannot be easily predicted so is their actions. Another weakness of this concerns the topic of justice. This is because utilitarianism does not demonstrate how pleasure needs to be distributed. It ensures that a lot of people gain pleasure, but it does not consider the minority group. Lastly, this ethical theory fails to recognize what true happiness is. Instead, it concentrates on the fact that happiness comes as a result of our actions (Mill, 535). People have different perspectives of what brings pleasure and what brings pain despite them having shared knowledge of what is pleasure and pain.

Despite all these weaknesses presented by the theory, it remains persuasive because of its approach, which is based on common sense. It has a more flexible approach that contains preferences, happiness, and duties that are more reasonable.

Work Cited.

Mill, John S. *On Liberty & Utilitarianism*. Wordsworth Classics, 2016. Print.