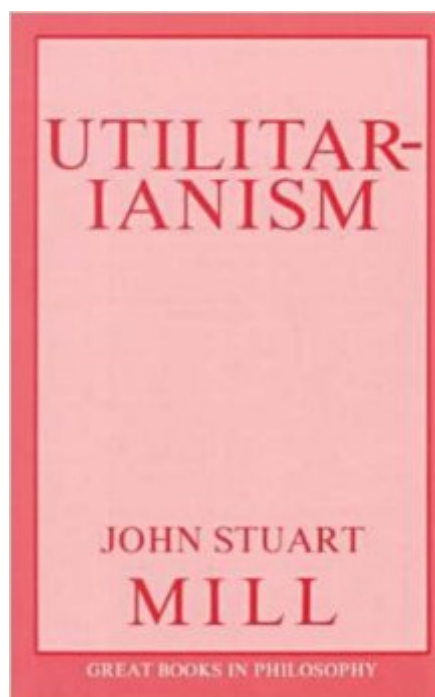


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Utilitarianism (Great Books In Philosophy)



Synopsis

What is the foundation upon which moral judgments are made? Why and how do we conclude that an action, performed or contemplated, is right or wrong, good or bad? In the eighteenth century, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham developed the now famous moral theory known as utilitarianism, which is based upon the pleasure principle - a concept whose history can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and to Hedonism. In his acclaimed essay *Utilitarianism* (1863), John Stuart Mill, the intellectual creation of his father (James Mill) and Jeremy Bentham, discusses in considerable detail this powerful and influential principle that grounds the judgment of human action on the extent to which it would result in pleasure or happiness for the greatest number of people. In doing so, Mill not only analyzes objections to the principle of utility, but also distinguishes his own unique interpretation of the principle, thus beginning a self-critical approach to the development and refinement of utilitarian moral theory that remains vigorous to this day.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Anybody hoping that this book will answer the challenges put to utilitarians today will be disappointed. There is no answer to questions such as whether a terrorist can legitimately be tortured to reveal the location of a bomb or whether an innocent life can be sacrificed to save many lives. What the book does have, however, is Mill's revised version of utilitarianism that is important

because it plays a major role in his other works such as "Liberty" and "Representative Government". Most of the book explains and agrees with Bentham's version of utilitarianism that has no place for rights and replaces the concept of good/evil with pleasure/pain, but Mill's version of utilitarianism has an important difference - the claim that some pleasures are of higher quality than others, and if this is so then utilitarianism should strive to enable everybody to enjoy the superior pleasures. Mill defines utilitarianism as the "Greatest Happiness Principle" that judges "that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." In this he is following Bentham's definition, but Bentham had devised a "felicific calculus" to determine the amount of pleasure (and hence moral worth) arising from any given action. It depended on things such as the intensity, duration and number of people affected. Bentham did not believe that one pleasure is in any way better than another except in terms of quantity. He wrote, for example, that "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry." Mill disagrees with this relativism, arguing that "some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." In other words, quality is more important than quantity.

J. S. Mill's book "Utilitarianism" is a classic exposition and defense of utilitarianism in ethics. The essay first appeared as a series of three articles published in Fraser's Magazine in 1861; the articles were collected and reprinted as a single book in 1863. Mill's aim in the book is to explain what utilitarianism is, to show why it is the best theory of ethics, and to defend it against a wide range of criticisms and misunderstandings. Though heavily criticized both in Mill's lifetime and in the years since, "Utilitarianism" did a great deal to popularize utilitarian ethics and is probably the most influential philosophical articulation of a liberal humanistic morality that was produced in the 19th century. Largely owing to Mill, utilitarianism rapidly became the dominant ethical theory in Anglo-American philosophy for the better part of a century. Though few contemporary ethicists today would agree with all elements of Mill's hedonistic moral philosophy, utilitarianism remains a live option in ethical theory today, and Mill's book is unquestionably the most famous defense of the utilitarian view ever written and is still widely assigned in university ethics courses around the world. Mill took many elements of his version of utilitarianism from Jeremy Bentham, the great 18th-century legal reformer, who along with William Paley were the two most influential English utilitarians prior to Mill. Like Bentham, Mill believed that happiness (or pleasure, which both Bentham and Mill equated with happiness) was the only thing humans do and should desire for its own sake. Since happiness is the only intrinsic good, and since more happiness is preferable to

less, the goal of the ethical life is maximize happiness.

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