
Henry R. West, *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, xii + 216 pp.

With this work, primarily intended as a textbook for students of philosophy, Henry R. West, professor of philosophy at Macalester College in Minnesota, has summed up his study of Mill's philosophy over the course of more than forty years. His Harvard doctoral thesis (1964) was on utilitarian ethics, and since that time he has continually published papers on this topic. This present volume is a clearly written and up-to-date account of the main ideas found in Mill's *Utilitarianism*, and can serve as a commentary to that text. It is also an extremely Mill-friendly account: West defends Mill against his critics, and misses no opportunity to emphasize his sympathy for Mill's position.

The book's structure is quite simple and user-friendly. The first chapter covers Mill's biography and development, while subsequent chapters correspond almost exactly to those of *Utilitarianism*. Mill's essay is the most widely read presentation of utilitarian ethics, and nearly all modern introductory courses on ethics include Mill, along with Aristotle and Kant, as one of the main classical theorists to be considered. In the appendix, West aids readers who are less familiar with Mill's work, reviewing the structure and arguments of *Utilitarianism* in detail.

In Chapter 1 (pp. 8–27) West gives a brief account of Mill's life and philosophical background. It is well known that Mill derived his utilitarianism from his father, James Mill, and from Jeremy Bentham. Despite obvious differences to Bentham, the younger Mill's debt to him cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, even in this brief description of Mill's intellectual background, West regards it as more important to highlight the similarities between Mill and Bentham than to point out their differences. Bentham's two main theses, which are often labeled ethical and psychological hedonism, are closely related, and Mill argued (e.g. in Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*) that psychological hedonism could provide a convincing basis for ethical hedonism. It would be mistaken to regard Bentham's conception of pleasure as restricted to any particular kind of sensation; it is, rather, a generic term comprising many specific forms. Regarding Harriet Taylor's alleged influence on Mill, or her co-authorship of some of his works, West is highly skeptical.

Chapter 2 (pp. 28–47) deals with Mill's criticism of other ethical theories. Although he generally devotes little attention to alternative theories, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, especially its Chapter 1, does contain some criticism of such theories, albeit most of these remarks are quite brief. In some of

his other writings, however, Mill goes into greater depth concerning the deficiencies of other views. In Chapter 1 of *Utilitarianism* he presents the main contending schools of thought regarding the basis of morality, namely, the intuitive or *a priori* school and the inductive or empirical school. In opposing the intuitive or *a priori* line of thinking, Mill simply claims that its advocates are not conscious of their own use of the principle of utility as the ultimate standard. In his other writings, however, Mill does not stick to this dichotomy, but instead directs his criticism at three alternative views: the divine command theory of morality; the natural law theory, which regards what is natural or in accordance with nature as the standard of morality; and the intuitionist theory. Mill argues resolutely against any natural sense of right and wrong. Yet he regards the intuitive or *a priori* school, with its theory of moral sense (attributed to Hume, among others), as his chief opponent.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 48–73) West analyzes Mill's controversial evaluation of pleasure and pain based on quality as well as quantity. One of the most contested claims in his utilitarian ethics is that certain pleasures are superior to others based on a difference of quality. West believes that Mill is correct to analyze pleasures and pains as differing in both quality and quantity, and that this represents a consistent hedonist position. It is a fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and valuable than others. But how can we know which are more desirable? Given two pleasures, if there is one to which all, or nearly all, who have experienced both of them give a decided preference, then that pleasure is the more desirable one. West argues that Mill is correct in distinguishing between pleasures and pains based on qualitative phenomenal differences, and that this does not constitute a desertion of the hedonist position. However, the judgment of those who are qualified by having experienced both pleasures is the only criterion available. Another important point is that a pleasure or pain may be detached from its sensation. Many critics assume that pleasure is a kind of sensation which feels the same regardless of its source. According to this view, only the intensity and duration of this one kind of sensation – called pleasure – can provide grounds for a preference. However, the real key to understanding Mill's position is his complex view of the human psyche. Mill's position is an anthropocentric one, and thus he considers qualitative superiority to be consistently correlated with the employment of higher, distinctively human faculties. Further, he believes that a sense of dignity influences the experience of pleasure. But a pleasure is not qualitatively superior because it is preferred; rather, it is preferred because it is qualitatively different.

Chapter 4 (pp. 74–95) focuses on whether Mill may properly be interpreted as an act-utilitarian, or, rather, as a rule-utilitarian. Neither for-

mulation, however, captures the essence of his position. In a letter to John Venn, Mill rejected utilitarian generalization in theory; yet this does not make him exclusively an act-utilitarian. West proposes a distinction between criteria for right action and criteria for making a correct decision. Maximizing utility in each particular case is one criterion for right action. While Mill could be interpreted as an act-utilitarian as far as this criterion is concerned, he could also be seen to hold a multilevel view of the decision-making procedures that agents should adopt. There are other passages in Mill which point to a stronger conception of rules, e.g. in Chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism*, where he introduces a criterion for distinguishing moral duty from general expediency, thereby making it clear that he is no act-utilitarian. The strongest case for interpreting Mill as a pure rule-utilitarian is found at the end of Chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism*. In West's interpretation, Mill's position is neither purely act-utilitarian nor purely rule-utilitarian; rather, it contains elements of both act-utilitarian and rule-utilitarian moral reasoning and practice. In other words, rule-utilitarian and act-utilitarian criteria converge. Mill's basic formula states that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness" (2.2). By "tend" he means the probability that actions of a certain kind have been found to promote happiness. West emphasizes that Mill does not think of morality from a first-person point of view only, i.e. in answer to the question "What ought I to do?" He also thinks of morality from a social point of view, and therefore believes that rules should be taught and enforced by law, public opinion, and conscience. But what makes this a genuinely utilitarian point of view is the recognition that the principle of utility requires one to be sensitive to the consequences of particular actions covered by such rules.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 96–117) West discusses Mill's theory of the sanctions that motivate moral behavior. Mill uses the word "sanctions" to refer to sources of motivation, classifying these as external or internal. Interestingly, only the internal sanctions really concern Mill; hence his understanding of conscience as a feeling of pain attendant on the violation of duty. He regards conscience as acquired – it derives from sympathy, love, fear, religious feeling, recollections of childhood, and so on. Thus conscience is an internalization of external sanctions, complicated by various other associated feelings. In Mill's view, all moral feelings are acquired. In Chapter 3 of *Utilitarianism* we can trace some of the elements of his moral psychology. The background to this chapter, in which he adopts a third-person point of view, is an associationist psychological theory. Like Bentham and his father James, Mill believed that complex motivations could be reduced to a small number of primitive sources. Although he is a psychological hedonist, Mill is not a psychological egoist like his predecessors. In addition, he is more convinced than they of the role of moral

feelings as motives, and of social feelings as a basis for moral feeling. In contrast to modern moral epistemology, it is important to emphasize that Mill's distinction between external and internal sanctions is a matter of moral psychology, and not an analysis of moral judgments. As there is no logical relation between judgments of obligation and motivation in his account, Mill's theory could be called externalist. This is confirmed by the fact that he analyzes moral motivation without appealing to reason. He also rejects the doctrine of free will as metaphysical. Free will is based on a distinction between a present fact and a possible future fact: after choosing one course of action, I know that I could have chosen another, had I preferred. Mill rejects this view, yet he does not embrace some kind of fatalism as an alternative. He believes that our actions are determined by our will, our will by our desires, our desires by our motives, and our motives by our individual character – which, however, we have the power to improve.

In Chapter 6 (pp. 118–145) West is concerned with Mill's proof of the Principle of Utility. He rejects the very common opinion that Mill commits a number of fallacies in Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*. In the first full-length book on Mill's ethics (1870), John Grote accused Mill of ambiguity in shifting from the actually desired to the ideally desirable (the fallacy of equivocation); Joseph Mayor charged him with the fallacy of composition, using the word “all” distributively in one place and collectively in another; and G. E. Moore accused Mill of the naturalistic fallacy. Such criticisms have led to a common view that Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism* is a complete failure. West, however, claims that Mill's argument in this chapter is a persuasive one, examining it in detail and giving particularly serious consideration to the end of Chapter 4, where Mill declares the principle of utility to have been proved. According to West, Mill's proof aims only at the conclusion that happiness is desirable and, indeed, the only desirable end. His analysis of this argument is a subtle one, drawing evidence from Mill's texts to counter the aforementioned charges. In his *System of Logic*, Mill is quite explicit in delimiting factual from normative propositions. He does not say that that which is “desirable” or “good” is actually “desired”, for he does not regard what is desirable as a matter of fact. His critics often forget that Mill is an empiricist. As West rightly points out:

The analogy is that as judgments of matters of fact are based on the evidence of the senses and corrected by further evidence of the senses, so judgments of what is desirable are based on what is desired and corrected by further evidence of what is desired. The only evidence on which a recommendation of an ultimate end of conduct can be based is what is found to be appealing to the desiring faculty. (p. 126)

Mill's famous claim that "[t]he sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it", is primarily negative, in that it denies the existence of any intellectual intuition of the normative ends of conduct. We cannot directly intuit what is intrinsically good; thus we must appeal to actual desires as criteria for the ends of conduct. That which is non-hedonistic and desired as an end, such as virtue, is desired as tending to happiness: "once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, [it] has come to be desired for its own sake" (*Utilitarianism* 4.6). Thus the possession of virtues is usually desired independently of pleasure. What, then, is general happiness? It is simply the sum of the happiness of all individuals. Mill denies that there is any happiness, or any value, that cannot be analyzed without remainder as the happiness or value of some individual or individuals.

Chapter 7 deals with the relationship between utility and justice, addressing the question of whether the role of rights and justice in Mill's system is consistent with his utilitarianism. Mill himself acknowledges that one of the strongest objections to utilitarianism is the apparent independence of the idea of justice and the notion of what produces the greatest happiness. Should this independence prove to be real, utility and justice could come into conflict. A similar problem arises from the common view that utilitarianism, with its aggregative approach to happiness, cannot support distributive justice. West believes that both these problems may be solved by properly analyzing the principal utilitarian argument. If we assume that distribution has an instrumental value, then principles requiring a certain pattern of distribution may be justified by the principle of utility, and thus become subordinate to it. In this way, principles of distributive justice produce the greatest overall utility in the long run. Such principles appear to be independent of utility because they directly require certain patterns of distribution in particular cases, regardless of the total which is to be distributed. Thus utility may come into conflict with some particular principle of justice, but not with any allegedly competing general principle of justice. Mill took rights very seriously, and intended general utility to provide their foundation. But then why is it that, in particular cases, rights tend to take precedence over considerations of general utility? Rights involve the most important kind of utility, namely, security. According to Mill, any other benefit may be required by one person, and not by another, whereas security is something that no human being can possibly do without.

In this book West has provided an excellent introduction to Mill's utilitarian ethics. Readers critical of utilitarianism may, of course, frown upon West's apologetic approach to Mill. Yet anyone interested in classical utilitarianism will welcome this introduction for the simple reason that

it takes us back to Mill's text and his original argument. West's presentation is clear, and is supported by good argumentation. I do not hesitate to recommend this book to everyone who is interested in Mill's philosophy.

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Neven Sesardić, *Making Sense of Heritability*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 267 pp.

“The heritability of a trait in a given population tells us what proportion of differences in that trait is due to genetic differences. It provides an answer to the main question in the nature-nurture controversy” (p. 1). Reading this textbook-like definition of heritability in the introduction to *Making Sense of Heritability* by Neven Sesardić, associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, one could hardly imagine the scientific turmoil heritability has produced over the last thirty years. Yet it is true that the concept of heritability was (and still is) at the center of the fierce debate about the nature-nurture impact on human behavioral traits, since it represents the key concept in the scientific discipline of behavioral genetics. The core of this debate is the question of whether human behavioral traits are determined (or highly influenced) by the genetic makeup or by environmental factors present during human development. Although genetic causes are widely recognized as the determinants of many animal behavioral traits, the notion that this same explanation could be applied to humans was only rarely and quite hesitantly verbalized by geneticists, with (as expected) vociferous opposition from social scientists and philosophers. However, some of the strongest opponents of the hereditarian viewpoint are to be found among biologists and geneticists themselves. The reason for this peculiar situation lies in the fact that the concept of heritability has often been obfuscated by political misconceptions, and is automatically linked with racist ideology. Furthermore, understanding this concept requires some level of proficiency in statistics, genetics and cognitive psychology. So it is not surprising that it has provided fertile ground for misunderstandings and misuses. Neven