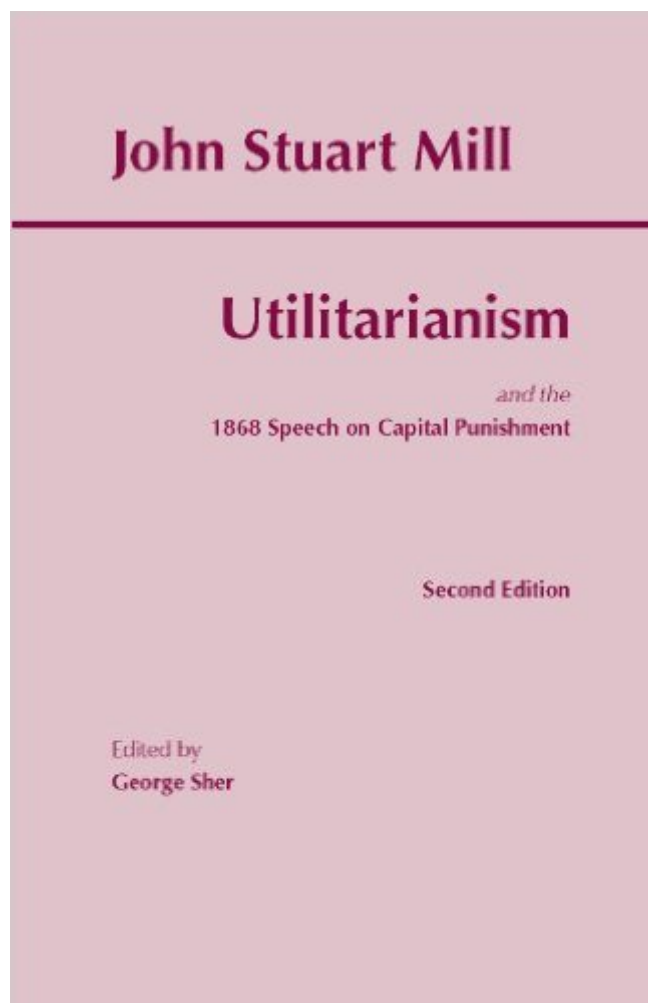


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Utilitarianism, 2nd Edition (Annotated)



Synopsis

#149; Edited by George Sher This expanded edition of John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism includes the text of his 1868 speech to the British House of Commons defending the use of capital punishment in cases of aggravated murder. The speech is significant both because its topic remains timely and because its arguments illustrate the applicability of the principle of utility to questions of large-scale social policy.

Book Information

File Size: 282 KB

Print Length: 92 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 087220605X

Publisher: Hackett Publishing Co.; 2 edition (April 10, 2010)

Publication Date: April 15, 2010

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B003GEKKZM

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #65,940 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Utilitarianism #4 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Utilitarianism #44 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Ethics & Morality

Customer Reviews

One of the Classical School economists explains and defends a system of ethics that counted among its adherents Ludwig von Mises, one of the great Austrian School economists and philosophers. Utilitarianism, in John Stuart Mill's day and our own, periodically comes under attack from the spokesmen of organized religion. But Mill holds that his philosophy is completely compatible with religious morals. Mill even writes that the founder of Christianity was a utilitarian. Makes sense when we realize that one of the main features of the early Christians was jettisoning

Judaism commandments that seem to have no obvious utility (usefulness). That attitude lead them to eventually discard the entire Torah. Mill imbibed Utilitarianism from his father -- British East India Co. executive and writer James Mill -- and their friend Jeremy Bentham. The two tablets of Utilitarianism are pleasure (acquisition of) and pain (avoidance of). Reduced to one it is the "greatest happiness principle." Mill argues persuasively that these things are more hard-wired into humans than almost everything else. The pursuit of virtue, which some in organized religion see as being at odds with Utilitarianism, is actually a form of the pursuit of happiness for the virtue-seeker, those around him/her, and/or future generations. This adds to the "public good," which is at the peak of Mill's values pyramid. Utilitarian concepts are all over America's founding documents, especially the Constitution. Interestingly, and ironically, Mill's essay was published at the time of the Constitution's greatest crisis -- the Civil War (1863). Mill makes no mention of the crisis or America's earlier successful marriage of Utilitarianism and federalism/limited government. Mill's "public good" and the U.S.

1. Overview John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism sets out a moral system that bases the good of any decision on the degree to which it promotes pleasure for the greatest number of people. By pleasure, Mill means not only those lower pleasures associated with the appetites, but also, the higher pleasures of "superior beings" that are associated with the enjoyment of understanding. The smallest amount of higher pleasure is greater than any amount of lower pleasure, for "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." For Mill, then, there is no inherent good in any particular object; goodness is based on each object's utility in creating pleasure. All values are thus based on feelings and sensations. There are no normative principles in human nature that we can explore as we seek to discover what creates human happiness. Rather, in determining the good, we are to determine the sums of pleasure and pain for the aggregate of society and thereby discover which of the array of options before any one decision-maker is the one that promotes the greatest amount of pleasure. The moral decision-maker will choose that course of action that leads to the greatest amount pleasure for the greatest number of people.

2. Critique of Mill Mill's theory on ethics is riddled with problems. One of them is the inherent difficulty involved in calculating the aggregate pleasures and pains of all of the people that will be affected by a particular decision. It is a burdensome and impractical way of coming to make decisions. Even if one could come up with general rules of conduct, the calculation as to when exceptions should be applied is similarly impractical.

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