

# [Notes john stuart mill - utilitarianism](https://assignbuster.com/notes-john-stuart-mill-utilitarianism/)

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NOTES — JOHN STUART MILL - UTILITARIANISM 1. John Stuart Mill — On Virtue and Happiness (1863)The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. What ought to be required of this doctrine, what conditions is it requisite that the doctrine should fulfill, to make good its claim to be believed? The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good, that each persons happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as one of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality. But it has not, by this alone, proved itself to be the sole criterion. To do that, it would seem, by the same rule, necessary to show; not only that people desire happiness, but those they never desire anything else. Now it is palpable that they do desire things which, in common language, are decidedly distinguished from happiness. They desire, for example, virtue, and the absence of vice, no less really than pleasure and the absence of pain. The desire of virtue is not as universal, but it is as authentic a fact, as the desire of happiness. And hence the opponents of the utilitarian standard deem that they have aright to infer that there are other ends of human action besides happiness, and that happiness is not the standard of approbation and disapprobation. But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself. Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue, however they may believe (as they do) that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue, yet this being granted, and it having been decided, from considerations of this description, what is virtuous, they not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognize as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it; and hold, that the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most - 2. conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner–as a thingdesirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce thoseother desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it isheld to be virtue. This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle. The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them isdesirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. Theprinciple of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or anygiven exemption from pain, as for example health, is to be looked upon as means to acollective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They aredesired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of theend. Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part ofthe end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it hasbecome so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part oftheir happiness. To illustrate this farther, we may remember that virtue is not the only thing, originally ameans, and which if it were not a means to anything else, would be and remainindifferent, but which by association with what it is a means to, comes to be desired foritself, and that too with the utmost intensity. What, for example, shall we say of the loveof money? There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heapof glittering pebbles. Its worth is solely that of the things which it will buy; the desiresfor other things than itself, which it is a means of gratifying. Yet the love of money is notonly one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to useit, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to becompassed by it, are falling off. It may, then, be said truly, that money is desired not forthe sake of an end, but as part of the end. From being a means to happiness, it has cometo be itself a principal ingredient of the individuals conception of happiness. The samemay be said of the majority of the great objects of human life: power, for example, orfame; except that to each of these there is a certain amount of immediate pleasureannexed, which has at least the semblance of being naturally inherent in them–a thingwhich cannot be said of money. Still, however, the strongest natural attraction, both ofpower and of fame, is the immense aid they give to the attainment of our other wishes; and it is the strong association thus generated between them and all our objects ofdesire, which gives to the direct desire of them the intensity it often assumes, so as insome characters to surpass in strength all other desires. In these cases the means havebecome a part of the end, and a more important part of it than any of the things whichthey are means to. What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment ofhappiness, has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake itis, however, desired as part of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be - 3. made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. Thedesire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the loveof music, or the desire of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of theelements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts. And the utilitarian standardsanctions and approves their being so. Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided withsources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which thingsoriginally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction ofour primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than theprimitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they arecapable of covering, and even in intensity. Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There wasno original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especiallyto protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a goodin itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good; and with thisdifference between it and the love of money, of power, or of fame–that all of thesemay, and often do, render the individual noxious to the other members of the society towhich he belongs, whereas there is nothing which makes him so much a blessing tothem as the cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue. And consequently, theutilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up tothe point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness thanpromotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to thegreatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness. It results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desiredexcept happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyonditself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is notdesired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because theconsciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united; as in truth thepleasure and pain seldom exist separately, but almost always together–the same personfeeling pleasure in the degree of virtue attained, and pain in not having attained more. Ifone of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desirevirtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himselfor to persons whom he cared for. We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle ofutility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true–ifhuman nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part ofhappiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no - 4. other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of humanaction, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; fromwhence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part isincluded in the whole.