

Mill's Modesty

This paper argues for the claim that Mill was attempting to defend, in *Utilitarianism*, not a maximizing form of utilitarianism, but a much more modest form of welfarism, which insists that a conceptual limitation on the adequacy of a moral action, principle, or rule is that it should help to secure or uphold human well-being. To secure this conclusion, the paper pays special attention to the structure of Mill's 'proof' of the principle of utility. The three steps, as usually distinguished, are these: (1) individual happiness is desirable; (2) general happiness is desirable; (3) nothing except happiness is desirable. Leaving aside traditional worries about the adequacy of these steps, taken one by one, it is contended that the steps do nothing, in unison, to establish maximizing utilitarianism; rather, they establish only welfarism. This is no oversight on Mill's part. The paper also examines the parts of *Utilitarianism* that do suggest a maximizing theory, such as Mill's invocation of the 'Greatest Happiness Principle' in Chapter 2, and suggests that these parts of the text are more revealing of Mill's social optimism than of his fundamental commitments in philosophical ethics.

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