

Rules and their reasons: Mill on instrumentally rational action and the requirements of morality

It is often asked what role Mill regards rules as playing in the determination of morally permissible action. (This question is implicated, for example, in the dispute over whether Mill was an act or a rule utilitarian.) In my paper, I approach this question from the perspective of what Mill says about instrumentally rational action in the last book of *A System of Logic*. I argue that in that work, there is evidence that Mill believes that an agent should break rules that are justified entirely by their consequences when the agent believes, and is justified in believing, that breaking those rules would lead to better consequences than conforming to them would. I then explore the relation between this act-utilitarian-sounding thesis about instrumentally rational action and certain rule-utilitarian elements in Mill's moral theory. In particular, I argue that Mill's rule-based conception of morality, insofar as it contains norms not reducible to those of ordinary instrumental rationality as described by Mill, creates a tension in Mill's thought of the sort often voiced in the claim that rule utilitarianism is incoherent or guilty of rule worship.

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