Dale E. Miller


The great virtue of this book is that it takes seriously Mill's utilitarianism. Too many accounts of Mill's thought have attempted to reinterpret Mill as anything but a utilitarian. This fashion was perhaps established by Isaiah Berlin's account of Mill in 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', where Mill's commitment to individual liberty is seen in terms of a retreat from the utilitarianism of Bentham and his father James Mill. Many studies of Mill take the view that, while his liberalism is to be applauded, his utilitarianism is to be regretted, and is, therefore, best written out of the account as something of an embarrassment. All this, presumably, is a result of the current obsession with intuitionism and so-called deontological ethics (I say so-called since it was Bentham who invented the term 'deontology'). Miller emphasizes the fact that Mill was never anything but a utilitarian throughout his career. He might have added that liberalism itself is a product of utilitarianism, and that this is something that contemporary liberals would do well to remember.

Miller presents a philosophical reconstruction of Mill's thought. He occasionally gives some historical context, for instance where Mill's views might otherwise appear puzzling to the contemporary reader, but his main focus is on providing the best systematic account of Mill's corpus, and on showing how it remains relevant to today's debates and concerns, both theoretical and practical. This is not, however, a mere apology for Mill, since Miller is not reticent in criticizing Mill where he thinks it appropriate, and in pointing out where Mill is ambiguous or inconsistent. While pitched at a level that makes it accessible to undergraduate students, there is much here that will prove insightful for the more advanced Mill scholar. The book is clearly written, finely nuanced in its interpretation, illustrated with apt examples, and leavened with a dry sense of humour (see the passage on philosophers and sex at pp. 64–5).

Miller begins with a brief account of Mill's life, including a succinct but convincing account of Mill's mental crisis in the late 1820s and its implications for the remainder of his career. Miller points out that Mill did not repudiate his utilitarianism as a result of this crisis, but was led to search for the true elements in opposing doctrines, and to try to incorporate them in his own. Miller goes on to discuss Mill's empiricism and the role of the association of ideas in his thought. I've already mentioned how welcome it is that Miller takes Mill's utilitarianism seriously: he is also to be commended for taking the role of the association of ideas seriously, given its importance in the utilitarian tradition.
Miller explains how Mill, following his father’s views, saw morality not as intuitive, but as learned through experience, in other words through sense perception.

In relation to the vexed question of how to categorize Mill’s utilitarianism, Miller, while admitting that Mill never addressed the question directly (nor should we expect him to do so, since the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism was a twentieth-century invention), comes down in favour of a rule utilitarian account. The main evidence for this view is Mill’s discussion of the art of life, which was divided into morality (doing the right action), prudence (doing the expedient action), and aesthetics (appreciating the beautiful or noble). Together, these elements contributed to the happy life, which was as much as to say a pleasurable life. Miller goes on to show that Mill’s utilitarianism was hedonistic, again despite attempts of some scholars to show that he was anything but. Having established that Mill accepted that sentient creatures were motivated by a desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain, Miller demonstrates how Mill combined hedonism with the doctrine of the association of ideas to show how individuals could expand their desires to encompass new objectives or ends, such as the love of virtue. Miller, however, recognizes that there is a difficulty in deciding, from the textual evidence, whether Mill takes an internalist or externalist view of pleasure, that is whether pleasure is to be equated with a recognizable sensation experienced within the brain, or is to be equated with whatever it is the individual happens to desire. Weighing up the competing passages, Miller finds the externalist reading more compelling. On the one hand, this interpretation does require some reworking of the most obvious reading of Mill’s ‘proof’ of utilitarianism, namely that there is an innate desire for pleasure, and that pleasure and nothing but pleasure is desirable as an end. On the other hand, in discussing Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures, Miller points out that, if Mill is seen as an internalist, the distinction between higher and lower – between quantity and quality – of pleasures collapses. If Mill were an internalist, he would have to accept that happiness would consist merely in the quantity of pleasure enjoyed. Miller then goes on to reject the view that Mill would expect an individual to sacrifice the largest quantity of lower pleasure possible in order to experience the smallest quantity of higher pleasure possible: Mill recognized that a happy life would consist in a mixture of higher and lower pleasures.

In relation to Mill’s liberty principle, Miller considers some of the prominent interpretations that have been advanced concerning the interpretation of ‘harm’. He rejects the view that harm should be understood as any action that caused pain, since this would include feelings of slight distaste. He also rejects, on similar grounds of its being too broad and too relativistic, the view of John