

How is Mill's 'proof' of Utilitarianism supposed to work? Does it **succeed**?

In this essay, I will argue that Mill is successful at proving Utilitarianism. Specifically, I will do this by looking at Mill's argument through an evolutionary lens. I will argue that Darwinism – the theory that evolution is the process by which species change over time through natural selection, where genetic variations that improve survival and reproduction become more common in a population – strengthens Mill's argument. I will do this by outlining the three stages of Mill's argument and demonstrating how the theory of evolution supports each of them. For the first stage of Mill's argument, I will show that Darwinism supports the claim that humans desire happiness. For the second stage, I will argue that some of the assumptions required to make Mill's argument hold, are not strictly necessary. And for the last stage, I will explain how the theory of evolution supports Mill's version of psychological hedonism – the idea that ultimately, human beings only act for the sake of pleasure.

Mill begins [Chapter 4 of Utilitarianism](#) by [arguing](#) that ultimate ends cannot be proved. [Furthermore](#), [he](#) cannot prove that happiness is the ultimate end in the same way that one can prove hospitals are good under the assumption that health is good. There is no such assumption for happiness precisely because of the fact that it is the ultimate end. Therefore, as Mill is an empiricist, he tries to prove it in the same way that one can prove that it is raining outside, by opening the curtains and showing that it is raining outside.¹

"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."
(Mill, 1998, p. 81)

Because people desire happiness, Mill argues, people recognize happiness as being an end. Mill is not trying to prove [in a logical or deductive sense](#), that happiness is the ultimate end, he is only trying to *persuade* the reader that it is the ultimate end. This is exactly what Moore gets wrong in his famous counterargument [to Mill](#), and [this argument, in turn, illustrates](#) why the theory of evolution [can be](#) applied to Mill's argument. [In Moore's words](#),

"There, that is enough. That is my first point. Mill has made as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire. 'Good', he tells us, means 'desirable', and you can only find out what is desirable by seeking to find out what is

Met opmerkingen [ER1]: Overall comments:

Well done, good exposition of arguments, use of quotes and scholarship, you've also evidenced independent thought really well.

Some things to work on:

- Philosophically: I think your evolutionary argument is interesting, but it needs some more motivating and connecting to the question: why do we need to introduce Darwinian explanation? E.g., without Darwin, is Mill's proof badly supported? Why does reducing the amount of arguments or steps in Mill's argument in favour of an evolutionary account improve his argument? See my comments below.

- Stylistically: Have a look where I've added little details that help to clarify/make more specific what part of an argument, or which philosophers you are critiquing. This is a small thing but it's good to get into the habit of it.

You might find this article interesting:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology/>
(The Stanford Encyclopedia is a great peer reviewed resource you can use in your essays)

heeft verwijderd: This essay should be seen as just an introduction to these points, as any single one of them could easily take an entire book to explain.

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Met opmerkingen [ER2]: Should be? Motivate your use of evolution here e.g., "by introducing the theory of evolution, Mill can provide a stronger defence of (the first stage of) his proof than would otherwise be available to him"

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¹ (Crisp, 2009, pp. 72-73)

actually desired...The important step for Ethics is this one just taken, the step which pretends to prove that 'good' means 'desired'. Well, the fallacy in this step is so obvious, that it is quite wonderful how Mill failed to see it. The fact is that 'desirable' does not mean 'able to be desired' as 'visible' means 'able to be seen'. The desirable means simply what ought to be desired or deserves to be desired; just as the detestable means not what can be but what ought to be detested and the damnable what deserves to be damned." (Moore, 1903, pp. 118-119)

However, [\[as Crisp/Hall point out\]](#), Mill does not try to define "good" as "desirable", he does not try to *prove* that happiness is the ultimate end. He only argues that it can be found out what people recognize as ultimate ends by finding out what they desire. And because people find happiness desirable, humans recognize that is an end.²

Here, the theory of evolution can support Mill's [response to Moore](#). [Why do humans feel happiness?](#) This question can be answered with evolution. Happiness is a tool to incentivise humans to do actions that increase their fitness, their capability to survive and conceive offspring. For instance, the pleasure gained from having sex incentivises humans to have sex and therefore conceive offspring. Another example is the fact that humans feel loneliness, loneliness incentivises humans to repair and maintain social connections. During our hunter-gatherer times, this was essential, as being ostracised from your group almost always meant certain death.³ [This proves, from an evolutionary point of view, that humans desire happiness, as that is precisely why humans developed happiness in the first place.](#) Therefore, Moore's objection does not make sense, as Mill is not defining "good" as "desirable", he is just saying that humans desire happiness. And therefore that humans see happiness as an end.

In the second stage of Mill's argument, he extends the claim that people desire their own happiness to argue that the general happiness [of the greatest number of people](#) is also desirable. [As he puts it in Chapter 4,](#)

"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 person's 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." (Mill, 1998, p. 81)

heeft verwijderd: argument

Met opmerkingen [ER3]: Ways to motivate your use of evolution here:

"At this point, Moore may double-down on his criticism, and ask *why* do humans feel happiness..."

"Mill's claim that humans in fact desire happiness may still appear weak (give a reason why), one way to resolve this worry is to introduce an evolutionary justification..."

Met opmerkingen [ER4]: Hmmm. Surely the evolutionary theorist would have to say that humans desire happiness because it leads to the survival of the fittest?

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² (Warnock & Schneewind, 1968, p. 200)

³ (Cacioppo et al., 2013)

However, as Crisp points out, Mill's argument here relies on several assumptions. Crisp points out the *moral assumption* and the *impartiality assumption*. He also points out the *ideological assumption* and the *aggregative assumption*, but Darwinism cannot support Mill with these.⁴

Met opmerkingen [ER5]: Good use of scholarship.

Firstly, the *moral assumption* assumes that the readers of "Utilitarianism" are not egoists. Mill does not argue that people *should* care about each other. He only argues *how* people, who have already accepted the premiss that they *should* (that they want to be moral), should care about each other. Namely, by maximizing their happiness. However, I will show that this assumption is not necessary by proving that humans have an innate tendency to care about each other. There has obviously been a fierce debate in philosophy whether humans are inherently egoistic or altruistic. But I will argue that this question can – and should – be answered through evolution.⁵ For this I will use the example of blushing.⁶ Why are humans the only animals who uncontrollably show that they are ashamed? It is because showing other people that we are ashamed shows that we care about them. Shame incentivises us to exhibit positive behaviour towards others and be more altruistic, and signalling to others that we care about them and that we are ashamed makes it less likely that we are exiled from the hunter-gatherer pack.⁷ Therefore, one does not have to assume that humans are care about each other, as Mill does, on the basis of an argument from evolution.⁸

Met opmerkingen [ER6]: This feels a little ad hoc. Is this an issue for your reading? Does it suggest that perhaps Mill's utilitarianism cannot be mapped onto an evolutionary ethic?

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Secondly, the *impartiality assumption* is that when one tries to maximize happiness, it is irrelevant which person experiences the happiness. The happiness of one person is not more important than the happiness of another. In other words, you should be *impartial* to who experiences the happiness. Although Mill might argue that the *impartiality assumption* is already dealt with by the *moral assumption* and the *aggregative assumption*,⁹ one could also argue that this assumption is not necessary because, again, humans have an innate tendency to be – to an extent – impartial to who experiences the happiness. Take the example of self-sacrifice to save others.¹⁰ At first sight, one could say that this is a counterexample to evolution, people are no longer prioritizing their own fitness, so then why do humans do this? One theory is that, because people used to live in groups with people who have very similar genes to them, sacrificing yourself can actually increase your chances of passing on

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⁴ (Crisp, 2009, pp. 79-80)

⁵ "Should" because it is the empirical way to do it, I guess this whole essay requires one to accept the premiss of empiricism.

⁶ This example must by no means be interpreted as final, there are plenty of counterarguments and counterexamples against this argument. There is no consensus yet about this debate. However, I hope that it explains the idea that this question can be answered through evolution.

⁷ The same is of course true for the example of loneliness that I gave above.

⁸ (Rutger Bregman, 2020, pp. 49-72)

⁹ See (Crisp, 2009, p. 80)

¹⁰ An example of this could be a soldier jumping on a grenade, he saves the other soldiers by sacrificing his own life.

your genes.¹¹ Because in the end, if more people with your genes – or at least with genes very similar to your genes – survive, your genes have a higher fitness. Therefore, there also is an innate tendency to be impartial to who experiences the happiness.¹²

Finally, in the last stage of Mill's argument, he tries to prove that nothing other than happiness is desirable. People might, for instance, say that they also desire virtue or justice as ends, regardless of whether they produce happiness. Should this then also be an ultimate end, as the first two stages of Mill's argument seem to suggest? To fix this problem, Mill introduces *associationism*, the idea that people only desire things other than happiness, because they *associate* it with happiness. People have been conditioned to desire virtue, because it usually provides them with happiness. With this, it seems like Mill is trying to get at exactly the same as I was in the beginning of this essay. That people desire things because they increase their fitness, and humans have evolved this capability of feeling pleasure to incentivise us to do those things. And as a result, things that are good for us and our fitness go hand in hand with pleasure, they are inextricably linked. And so, we associate pleasure with those things. The only potential difference between this idea and Mill is that Mill did not believe that internal sanctions, the pleasures and pains which incentivise us to act, were innate.¹³ However, even though Mill might have been wrong here, the fact does not change that *associationism* can be supported on evolutionary grounds.

In this essay I have showed that Darwinism and Mill's proof of Utilitarianism go hand in hand. With every single stage of Mill's proof and further, shown that Darwinism strengthens Mill's argument. It explains *why* humans desire happiness, it explains why some of the assumptions for Mill's argument are unnecessary, and it explains why pleasure and desires are inextricably linked.

One obvious counterargument is clear. Perhaps, however, this means that the ultimate goal is not happiness as it is just a tool that evolution uses to incentivise us to do things, and therefore there would not really be an ultimate goal. However, this does not practically change anything, because precisely the fact that we have evolved to feel pleasure and happiness, means that humans enjoy it very much. And that, in of itself, should be the reason that we have to promote it.

¹¹ (Krupp & Maciejewski, 2022)

¹² One could of course object here and say that there are a few problems with generalising like this. Perhaps this only applies to people who are similar to us (as only their genes are similar to our genes, an example of this could be racism)? Or perhaps it is only when preventing other people's death (as that is the only scenario when you can prevent genes similar to yours from being lost)? That being said however, this argument at the very least makes it more plausible that the *impartiality assumption* should be accepted.

¹³ (Crisp, 2009, p. 91)

Met opmerkingen [ER7]: Good explanation.

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Met opmerkingen [ER8]: Interesting and good to deal directly with the obvious counter-argument! But don't leave this to you conclusion, if there is an obvious issue raise and respond in the body of the essay.

Questions: would Mill ever accept a evolutionary ethic? Are they compatible with one another? (I mean these are huge questions, but relevant)

One way you could get around this: be an error theorist about morality but argue that in practise, the best theory to pursue is Utilitarianism (you'd have to give arguments for this, but it would strengthen your case.)

Here is an article that looks relevant:
https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/44OXF_INST/ao2p7t/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_743813200

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