Introductory notes on J.S. Mill’s Utilitarianism

Although you are assigned Mill’s second chapter to begin with, there are still some interesting points for our discussion in his first chapter. This handout explains the most important ones.

One of Mill’s points in chapter one is his recognition that our understanding of ethics or morality, despite two thousand or more years of study, has not produced a unanimous judgment about what the standard of right and wrong actions is. Disagreement persists, and Mill is not naïve enough to think that his book is going to bring about consensus. Nonetheless, he DOES think that a careful and thoughtful reader of his book will make considerable progress in thinking about ethics, and will be better equipped to resist false theories of ethics. He believes that once Utilitarianism is understood properly, we will see that its fundamental principle—the Principle of Utility—is present at the center of any acceptable moral outlook. We will want to see if this claim by Mill is plausible.

His chief task in the book is to identify, explain and defend what he sometimes calls the 'first principle of ethics' or the criterion of right and wrong. In other words, he wants to tell us what THE correct basis is for our judgments about whether an action is right or wrong. Part of Mill’s argument is to identify what has been called since the ancient Greeks and Romans the *summum bonum*, or the 'highest good' for humans to pursue. Mill is very much influenced by the ancient Greeks and he follows them by identifying the highest good for humans as happiness, which he understands (though not all Greeks did so) to be identical to pleasure and the absence of pain. He suggests that NO theory of morality should be accepted that does not acknowledge that human happiness, interpreted as pleasure and the absence of pain, can be correct as the basis of determining whether actions are right or wrong.

Another task Mill accomplishes in his first chapter is to explain what he will do in his book. While his job is to identify and defend the principle of utility as the first or fundamental principle of ethics, he thinks that people will be able to judge properly whether he is right or not ONLY IF they properly understand just what the principle of utility is. In Mill’s day, the utilitarian ethic was already fairly well known at least by name (due to the work of Mill’s mentor, Jeremy Bentham). However, Mill saw that many people objected to Utilitarianism based on *misperceptions* of what the doctrine really amounted to. So Chapter Two is presented by Mill to explain the principle of utility indirectly. That is, instead of simply stating what it is and what reasons we have for adopting it, Mill explains the principle of utility by correcting popularly held false views of utility. So he is killing two birds with one stone, as it were. He is both responding to critics of utilitarianism (who Mill believed were mostly misunderstanding utilitarianism) and explaining it by showing what it is NOT.