

removed. So before I embark on the philosophical grounds that can be given for assenting to the utilitarian standard, I shall offer some illustrations of the doctrine itself; aiming to

- show more clearly what it is,
- distinguish it from what it is not, and
- dispose of such of the practical objections to it as

come from or are closely connected with mistaken interpretations of its meaning.

Having thus prepared the ground, I shall afterwards try to throw as much light as I can on the question, considered as one of philosophical theory.

## Chapter 2: What utilitarianism is

Some people have supposed that those who stand up for 'utility' as the test of right and wrong use that term in the restricted and merely colloquial sense in which 'utility' is opposed to pleasure. A passing remark is all that needs to be given to that ignorant blunder. [This is probably a protest against, among other things, a school-master in Dickens's fine novel *Hard Times*, whose approach to education insisted on what is 'useful' and flatly opposed any kind of pleasure.] I owe an apology to the philosophical opponents of utilitarianism for even briefly seeming to regard *them* as capable of so absurd a misunderstanding. The blunder is all the more extraordinary given that another of the common charges against utilitarianism is the *opposite* accusation that it bases everything on pleasure (understood very crudely). One able writer has pointedly remarked that the same sort of persons, and often the very same persons, denounce the theory 'as impracticably dry when the word "utility" precedes the word "pleasure", and as too practicably voluptuous when the word "pleasure" precedes the word "utility"! Those who know anything about the matter are aware that every writer from Epicurus to Bentham who maintained the theory of 'utility' meant

by it not •something to be contrasted with pleasure but •pleasure itself together with freedom from pain; and instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, they have always declared that 'useful' includes these among other things. Yet the common herd, including the herd of writers—not only in newspapers and magazines but in intellectually ambitious *books*—are perpetually falling into this shallow mistake. Having caught up the word 'utilitarian', while knowing nothing whatever about it but its sound, they habitually express by it keeping out or neglecting *pleasure* in some of its forms, such as beauty, ornament and amusement. And when the term 'utility' is ignorantly misused in this way, it isn't always in criticism of utilitarianism; occasionally it occurs when utilitarianism is being *complimented*, the idea being that utility is something •superior to frivolity and the mere pleasures of the moment, •whereas really it •includes them. This perverted use is the only one in which the word 'utility' is popularly known, and the one from which the young are now getting their sole notion of its meaning. Those who introduced the word, but who had for many years stopped using it as a doctrinal label, may well feel

themselves called upon to resume it, if by doing so they can hope to contribute anything towards rescuing it from this utter degradation.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine that the basis of morals is utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong in proportion as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By 'happiness' is meant pleasure and the absence of pain; by 'unhappiness' is meant pain and the lack of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more needs to be said, especially about what things the doctrine includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure, and to what extent it leaves this as an open question. But these supplementary explanations don't affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is based—namely the thesis that

pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things that are *desirable as ends*, and that

everything that is *desirable at all* is so either •for the pleasure inherent in it or •as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

(The utilitarian system has as many things that are desirable, in one way or the other, as any other theory of morality.)

Now, such a theory of life arouses utter dislike in many minds, including some that are among the most admirable in feeling and purpose. The view that life has (as they express it) no higher end —no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—than *pleasure* they describe as utterly mean and grovelling, a doctrine worthy only of pigs. The followers of

Epicurus were contemptuously compared with pigs, very early on, and modern holders of the utilitarian doctrine are occasionally subjected to equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English opponents.

### •Higher and Lower Pleasures•

When attacked in this way, the Epicureans have always answered that it is not they but their accusers who represent human nature in a degrading light, because the accusation implies that human beings are capable only of pleasures that pigs are also capable of. If this were true, there'd be no defence against the charge, but then it wouldn't be a *charge*; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same for humans as for pigs, the rule of life that is good enough for *them* would be good enough for *us*. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading precisely because a beast's pleasures do *not* satisfy a human's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have •higher faculties than the animal appetites, and once they become conscious of •them they don't regard anything as happiness that doesn't include •their gratification. Admittedly the Epicureans were far from faultless in drawing out the consequences of the utilitarian principle; to do this at all adequately one must include—which they didn't—many Stoic and some Christian elements. But every Epicurean theory of life that we know of assigns to the •pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than

<sup>1</sup> I have reason to believe that I am the first person who brought the word 'utilitarian' into •general• use. I didn't invent it, but adopted it from a passing expression in Mr. Galt's *Annals of the Parish*. After using it as a label for several years, he and others abandoned it because of their growing dislike for anything resembling a badge or slogan marking out a sect. But as a name for •one single opinion, not •a set of opinions—to stand for the recognition of utility as a standard, not any particular way of applying the standard—the term fills a gap in the language, and offers in many cases a convenient way of avoiding tiresome long-windedness.

to •those of mere sensation. But it must be admitted that when utilitarian writers have said that mental pleasures are better than bodily ones they have mainly based this on mental pleasures being more permanent, safer, less costly and so on—i.e. from their circumstantial advantages rather than from their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they *could*, quite consistently with their basic principle, have taken the other route—occupying the higher ground, as we might say. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. In estimating •the value of• anything else, we take into account •quality as well as •quantity; it would be absurd if the value of pleasures were supposed to depend on •quantity alone.

‘What do you mean by “difference of quality in pleasures”? What, according to you, makes one pleasure •more valuable than another, merely *as a pleasure*, if not its being •greater in amount?’ There is only one possible answer to this.

Pleasure  $P_1$  is more desirable than pleasure  $P_2$  if: all or almost all people who have had experience of both give a decided preference to  $P_1$ , irrespective of any feeling that they *ought* to prefer it.

If those who are competently acquainted with both these pleasures place  $P_1$  so far above  $P_2$  that •they prefer it even when they know that a greater amount of discontent will come with it, and •wouldn’t give it up in exchange for any quantity of  $P_2$  that they are capable of having, we are justified in ascribing to  $P_1$  a superiority in *quality* that so greatly outweighs *quantity* as to make quantity comparatively negligible.

Now, it is an unquestionable fact that the way of life that employs the higher faculties is strongly preferred •to the way of life that caters only to the lower ones• by people

who are equally acquainted with both and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both. Few human creatures would agree to be changed into any of the lower animals in return for a promise of the fullest allowance of animal pleasures;

- no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool,
- no educated person would prefer to be an ignoramus,
- no person of feeling and conscience would rather be selfish and base,

even if they were convinced that the fool, the dunce or the rascal is better satisfied with his life than they are with theirs. . . . If they ever think they *would*, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme that to escape from it they would exchange their situation for almost any other, however undesirable they may think the other to be. Someone with higher faculties •requires more to make him happy, •is probably capable of more acute suffering, and •is certainly vulnerable to suffering at more points, than someone of an inferior type; but in spite of these drawbacks he can’t ever really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. Explain this unwillingness how you please! We may attribute it to

- pride*, a name that is given indiscriminately to some of the *most* and to some of the *least* admirable feelings of which human beings are capable;
- the *love of liberty and personal independence* (for the Stoics, that was one of the most effective means for getting people to value the higher pleasures); or
- the *love of power*, or the *love of excitement*, both of which really do play a part in it.

But the most appropriate label is *a sense of dignity*. All human beings have this sense in one form or another, and how strongly a person has it is roughly proportional to how well endowed he is with the higher faculties. In those who have a strong sense of dignity, their dignity is so essential

to their happiness that they couldn't want, for more than a moment, anything that conflicts with it.

Anyone who thinks that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—anyone who denies that the superior being is, other things being anywhere near equal, happier than the inferior one—is confusing two very different ideas, those of *happiness* and of *contentment*. It is true of course that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied and thus of being contented; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness that he can look for, given how the world is, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they won't make him envy the person who isn't conscious of the imperfections only because he has no sense of the good that those imperfections are imperfections *of*—for example, the person who isn't bothered by the poor quality of the conducting because he doesn't enjoy music anyway. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig think otherwise, that is because they know only their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

'But many people who are capable of the higher pleasures do sometimes, under the influence of temptation, give preference to the lower ones.' Yes, but this is quite compatible with their fully appreciating the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men's infirmity of character often leads them to choose the *nearer* good over the *more valuable* one; and they do this just as much when •it's a choice between two bodily pleasures as when •it is between a bodily pleasure and a mental one. They pursue sensual pleasures at the expense of their health, though they are perfectly aware that health is the greater good, •doing this because the sensual pleasures are *nearer*.

'Many people who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they grow old sink into laziness and selfishness.' Yes, this is a very common change; but I don't think that those who undergo it voluntarily choose the lower kinds of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the lower pleasures they have already become incapable of the higher ones. In most people a capacity for the nobler feelings is a very tender plant that is easily killed, not only by hostile influences but by mere lack of nourishment; and in the majority of young persons it quickly dies away if their jobs and their social lives aren't favourable to keeping that higher capacity in use. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they don't have time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to lower pleasures not because they deliberately prefer them but because they are either •the only pleasures they can get or •the only pleasures they can still enjoy. It may be questioned whether anyone who has remained equally capable of both kinds of pleasure has ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower kind; though throughout the centuries many people have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to have both at once.

I don't see that there can be any appeal against this verdict of the only competent judges! On a question as to which is the better worth having of two pleasures, or which of two ways of life is the more agreeable to the feelings (apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences), the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both must be admitted as final—or, if they differ among themselves, the judgment of the majority among them. And we can be encouraged to accept this judgment concerning the *quality* of pleasures by the fact that there is no other tribunal to appeal to even on the question of *quantity*. What means

## Optional Section

### •Happiness as an Aim•

According to the greatest happiness principle as I have explained it, the ultimate end. . . ., for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence as free as possible from pain and as rich as possible in enjoyments. This means rich in •quantity and in •quality; the test of •quality, and the rule for measuring it against •quantity, being the preferences of those who are best equipped to make the comparison—equipped, that is, by the range of their experience and by their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation. If the greatest happiness of all is (as the utilitarian opinion says it is) •the end of human action, it must also be •the standard of morality; which can therefore be defined as:

the rules and precepts for human conduct such that: the observance of them would provide the best possible guarantee of an existence such as has been described—for all mankind and, so far as the nature of things allows, for the whole sentient creation.

Against this doctrine, however, another class of objectors rise up, saying that the rational purpose of human life and action cannot be *happiness* in any form. For one thing, it is unattainable, they say; and they contemptuously ask ‘What right do *you* have to be happy?’, a question that Mr. Carlyle drives home by adding ‘What right, a short time ago, did you have even to *exist*?’. They also say that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and couldn’t have become noble except by learning the lesson of . . . *renunciation*. They say that thoroughly learning and submitting to that lesson is the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

do we have for deciding which is the more acute of two pains, or the more intense of two pleasurable sensations, other than the collective opinion of those who are familiar with both? •Moving back now from quantity to quality•: there are different kinds of pain and different kinds of pleasure, and every pain is different from every pleasure. What can decide whether a particular •kind of• pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular •kind of• pain, if not the feelings and judgment of those who are experienced •in both kinds•? When, therefore, those feelings and judgments declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable in kind, apart from the question of intensity, to those that can be enjoyed by animals that don’t have the higher faculties, their opinion on this subject too should be respected.

I have dwelt on this point because you need to understand it if you are to have a perfectly sound conception of utility or happiness, considered as the governing rule of human conduct. But you could rationally accept the utilitarian standard without having grasped •that people who enjoy the higher pleasures are happier than those who don’t•. That’s because the utilitarian standard is not •the agent’s own greatest happiness but •the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and even if it can be doubted whether a noble character is always happier because of its nobleness, such a character certainly makes other people happier, and the world in general gains immensely from its existence. So utilitarianism would achieve its end only through the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if

each individual got benefit only from the nobleness of others, with his own nobleness serving to *reduce* his own happiness.

But mere *statement* of this last supposition [the indented one just above] brings out its absurdity so clearly that there is no need for me to argue against it.

If the first of these objections were right, it would go to the root of the matter; for if human beings *can't* have any happiness, the achieving of happiness can't be the end of morality or of any rational conduct. Still, even if human beings couldn't be happy there might still be something to be said for the utilitarian theory, because utility includes not solely •the pursuit of happiness but also •the prevention or lessening of unhappiness; and if the •former aim is illusory there will be all the more scope for —*and need of*—the •latter. At any rate, that will be true so long as mankind choose to go on living, and don't take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by •the German poet •Novalis. But when someone positively asserts that 'It is impossible for human life to be happy', if this isn't something like a verbal quibble it is at least an exaggeration. If 'happiness' is taken to mean *a continuous state of highly pleasurable excitement*, it is obvious enough that *this* is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or—in some cases and with some interruptions—hours or days. Such an experience is the occasional •brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its •permanent and steady flame. The philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware of this as those who taunt them. The 'happiness' that they meant was not a life of rapture; but

a life containing some moments of rapture, a few brief pains, and many and various pleasures; a life that is much more active than passive; a life based on not expecting more from life than it is capable of providing.

A life made up of those components has always appeared worthy of the name of 'happiness' to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it. And even now many people have such an existence during a considerable part of their lives. The present wretched education and wretched social arrangements are the only real hindrance to its being attain-

able by almost everyone. [In Mill's day 'education' tended to have a broader meaning than it does today, and to cover every aspect of a young person's upbringing.]

'If human beings are taught to consider happiness as the end of life, they aren't likely to be satisfied with such a moderate share of it.' On the contrary, very many people have been satisfied with much less! There seem to be two main constituents of a satisfied life, and each of them has often been found to be, on its own, sufficient for the purpose. They are *tranquillity* and *excitement*. Many people find that when they have much tranquillity they can be content with very little pleasure; and many find that when they have much excitement they can put up with a considerable quantity of pain. It is certainly possible that a man—and even the mass of mankind—should have both tranquillity and excitement. So far from being incompatible with one another, they are natural allies: prolonging either of them is a preparation for the other, and creates a wish for it. The only people who don't desire excitement after a restful period are those in whom laziness amounts to a *vice*; and the only ones who dislike the tranquillity that follows excitement—finding it •dull and bland rather than •pleasurable in proportion to the excitement that preceded it—are those whose need for excitement is a *disease*. When people who are fairly fortunate in their material circumstances don't find sufficient enjoyment to make life valuable to them, this is usually because they care for nobody but themselves. If someone has neither public nor private affections, that will greatly reduce the amount of excitement his life can contain, and any excitements that he *does* have will sink in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be cut off by death. On the other hand, someone who leaves after him objects of personal affection, especially if he has developed a fellow-feeling with the interests of mankind as a whole, will

retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of his death as he had in the vigour of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause that makes life unsatisfactory is lack of mental cultivation [= 'mental development']. I am talking here not about minds that are cultivated as a philosopher's is, but simply minds that have been open to the fountains of knowledge and have been given a reasonable amount of help in *using* their faculties. A mind that is cultivated in that sense will find inexhaustible sources of interest in everything that surrounds it—in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, human events in the past and present as well as their prospects in the future. It is *possible* to become indifferent to all this, even when one hasn't yet exhausted a thousandth part of it; but that can happen only to someone who from the beginning has had no •moral or human interest in these things, and has looked to them only to •satisfy his curiosity.

•These two prime requirements of happiness—•mental cultivation and •unselfishness—shouldn't be thought of as possible only for a lucky few. There is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of •mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in science, poetry, art, history etc. should not be the inheritance of everyone born in a civilised country; any more than there's any inherent necessity that any human being should be a •selfish egotist whose only feelings and cares are ones that centre on his own miserable individuality. Something far superior to this is, even now, common enough to give plenty of indication of what the human species may become. Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good are possible, though to different extents, for every rightly brought up human being. In a world containing so much to interest us, so much for us to enjoy, and so much needing to be corrected

and improved, everyone who has a moderate amount of these moral and intellectual requirements—•unselfishness and cultivation—is •capable of an existence that may be called *enviable*; and such a person will certainly •have this enviable existence as long as

- he isn't, because of bad laws or conditions of servitude, prevented from using the sources of happiness that are within his reach; and
- he escapes the positive evils of life—the great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as poverty, disease, and bad luck with friends and lovers (turning against him, proving to be worthless, or dying young).

So the main thrust of the problem lies in the battle against these calamities. In the present state of things, poverty and disease etc. can't be eliminated, and often can't even be lessened much; and it is a rare good fortune to escape such troubles entirely. Yet no-one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will (if human affairs continue to improve) eventually be reduced to something quite small. *Poverty*, in any sense implying suffering, could be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society combined with the good sense and generosity of individuals. Even that most stubborn of enemies, •*disease*, could be indefinitely reduced in scope by good physical and moral education and proper control of noxious influences [= 'air- and water-pollution']; while the progress of science holds out a promise of still more direct conquests over •this detestable foe. And every advance in that direction reduces the probability of events that would cut short our own lives or —more important to us—the lives of others in whom our happiness is wrapped up. As for ups and downs of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect of

gross foolishness, of desires that got out of control, or of bad or imperfect social institutions.

In short, all the large sources of human suffering are to a large extent—and many of them almost entirely—conquerable by human care and effort. Their removal is grievously slow, and a long succession of generations will perish in the battle before the conquest is completed and this world becomes what it easily *could* be if we had the will and the knowledge to make it so. Yet despite this, every mind that is sufficiently intelligent and generous to play some part (however small and inconspicuous) in the effort will draw a noble *enjoyment* from the contest itself—an enjoyment that he couldn't be induced to give up by any bribe in the form of selfish indulgence.

And this leads to the right response to the objectors who say that we can, and that we should, do without happiness. It is certainly *possible* to do without happiness; nineteen-twentieths of mankind are compelled to do without it, even in those parts of our present world that are least deep in barbarism. And it often happens that a hero or martyr forgoes it for the sake of something that he values more than his individual happiness. But what is this 'something' if it isn't the happiness of others or something required for *their* happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own share of happiness, or the chances of it; but no-one engages in self-sacrifice just so as to engage in self-sacrifice! He must have some end or purpose. You may say: 'The end he aims at in his self-sacrifice is not *anyone's* happiness; it is *virtue*, which is better than happiness.' In response to this I ask: Would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr didn't think it would spare others from having to make similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no result for any of his fellow creatures except to make

their situation like his, putting them in also in the position of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can give up for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by doing this they contribute worthily to increasing the amount of happiness in the world; but someone who does it, or claims to do it, for any *other* purpose doesn't deserve admiration any more than does the ascetic living on top of his pillar. He may be a rousing proof of what men *can* do, but surely not an example of what they *should* do.

## READ THIS SECTION

### •Self-Sacrifice•

Only while the world is in a very imperfect state can it happen that anyone's best chance of serving the happiness of others is through the absolute sacrifice of his own happiness; but while the world *is* in that imperfect state, I fully admit that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue that can be found in man. I would add something that may seem paradoxical: namely that in this *present* imperfect condition of the world *the* conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of bringing about such happiness as is attainable. For nothing except that *consciousness* can raise a person above the chances of life by making him feel that fate and fortune—let them do their worst!—have no power to subdue him. Once he feels *that*, it frees him from excessive anxiety about the evils of life and lets him (like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire) calmly develop the sources of satisfaction that are available to him, not concerning himself with the uncertainty regarding how long they will last or the certainty that they will end.

Meanwhile, let utilitarians never cease to claim that they have as much right as the Stoic or the Transcendentalist to maintain the morality of *devotion to a cause* as something

that belongs to them. The utilitarian morality *does* recognise that human beings can sacrifice their own greatest good for the good of others; it merely refuses to admit that the sacrifice is *itself* a good. It regards as *wasted* any sacrifice that doesn't increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness. The only self-renunciation that it applauds is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means to happiness, of others. . . .

I must again repeat something that the opponents of utilitarianism are seldom fair enough to admit, namely that the happiness that forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not •the agent's own happiness but •that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. [Here and everywhere Mill uses 'disinterested' in its still-correct meaning = 'not self-interested' = 'not swayed by any consideration of how the outcome might affect *one's own* welfare'.] In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To

do as you would be done by, and to  
love your neighbour as yourself

constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the •practical• way to get as close as possible to this ideal, •the ethics of• utility would command two things. **(1)** First, laws and social arrangements should place the happiness (or what for practical purposes we may call the *interest*) of every individual as much as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole. **(2)** Education and opinion, which have such a vast power over human character, should use that power to establish in the mind of every individual an unbreakable link between •his own happiness and •the good of the whole; especially between •his own happiness and •the kinds of conduct (whether *doing* or *allowing*) that are

conducive to universal happiness. If **(2)** is done properly, it will tend to have two results: **(2a)** The individual won't be able to *conceive* the possibility of being personally happy while acting in ways opposed to the general good. **(2b)** In each individual a direct impulse to promote the general good will be one of the habitual motives of action, and the feelings connected with it will fill a large and prominent place in his sentient existence. This is the true character of the utilitarian morality. If those who attack utilitarianism see it as being like *this*, I don't know •what good features of some other moralities they could possibly say that utilitarianism lacks, •what more beautiful or more elevated developments of human nature any other ethical systems can be supposed to encourage, or •what motivations for action that aren't available to the utilitarian those other systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.

### •Setting the Standard too High?•

The objectors to utilitarianism can't be accused of always representing it in a •discreditable light. On the contrary, objectors who have anything like a correct idea of its disinterested character sometimes find fault with utilitarianism's standard as being •too high for humanity. To require people always to act from the •motive of promoting the general interests of society—that is demanding too much, they say. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confuse the •rule of action with the •motive for acting. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we can know them; but no system of ethics requires that our only motive in everything we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and *rightly*

so if the •rule of duty doesn't condemn them. It is especially unfair to utilitarianism to object to it on the basis of this particular misunderstanding, because utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost everyone in asserting that the motive has nothing to do with the *morality of the action* though it has much to do with the *worth of the agent*. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive is duty or the hope of being paid for his trouble; he who betrays a friend who trusts him is guilty of a crime, even if his aim is to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations.

Let us now look at actions that are done from the motive of duty, in direct obedience to the utilitarian principle: it is a misunderstanding of the utilitarian way of thinking to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds on anything as wide as *the world* or *society in general*. The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world but for *parts* of the good of the world, namely the benefit of individuals. And on these occasions the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not go beyond the particular persons concerned, except to the extent that he has to assure himself that in benefiting those individuals he isn't violating the rights (i.e. the legitimate and authorised expectations) of anyone else. According to the utilitarian ethics the object of virtue is to multiply happiness; for any person (except one in a thousand) it is only on exceptional occasions that he has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, i.e. to be a public benefactor; and it is only on these occasions that he is called upon to consider public utility; in every other case he needs to attend only to private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons. The only people who need to concern themselves regularly about so large an object as *society in general* are those few whose actions have an influence that extends that far. Thoughts about the

*general* welfare do have a place in everyone's moral thinking in the case of *refrainings*—things that people hold off from doing, for moral reasons, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial. The thought in these cases is like this: 'If I acted in that way, my action would belong to a class of actions which, if practised generally, would be generally harmful, and for that reason I ought not to perform it.' It would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware of such considerations. But the amount of regard for the public interest implied in this kind of thought is no greater than is demanded by every system of morals, for they all demand that one refrain from anything that would obviously be pernicious to society; so there is no basis here for a criticism of utilitarianism in particular.

### •Is Utilitarianism Chilly?• **Optional Section**

The same considerations dispose of another reproach against the doctrine of utility, based on a still grosser misunderstanding of the purpose of a standard of morality and of the very meanings of the words 'right' and 'wrong'. It is often said that utilitarianism •makes men cold and unsympathising; that it •chills their moral feelings towards individuals; that it •makes them attend only to

- the dry and hard consideration of the consequences of actions,

leaving out of their moral estimate

- the personal qualities from which those actions emanate.

If this means that they don't allow their judgment about the rightness or wrongness of an action to be influenced by their opinion of the qualities of the person who does it, this is a complaint not against utilitarianism but against having any standard of morality at all; for certainly no known ethical

standard declares that an action is good or bad because it is done by a good or a bad man, still less because it is done by a lovable, brave or benevolent man, or by an unfriendly, cowardly or unsympathetic one. These considerations of personal virtue are relevant to how we estimate *persons*, not *actions*; and the utilitarian theory in no way conflicts with the fact that there are other things that interest us in persons besides the rightness and wrongness of their actions. The Stoics, indeed, with the paradoxical misuse of language which was part of their system and by which they tried to raise themselves to a level at which their only concern was with *virtue*, were fond of saying that he who has virtue has everything; that it is the virtuous man, and *only* the virtuous man, who is rich, is beautiful, is a king. But the utilitarian doctrine doesn't make any such claim on behalf of the virtuous man. Utilitarians are well aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that •a right action doesn't necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that •actions that are blamable often come from •personal• qualities that deserve praise. When this shows up in any particular case, it modifies utilitarian's estimation not of the act but of the agent. They do hold that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions; and they firmly refuse to consider any mental disposition as good if its predominant tendency is to produce bad conduct. This, which I freely grant, makes utilitarians unpopular with many people; but this is an unpopularity that they must share with everyone who takes seriously the distinction between right and wrong; and the criticism is not one that a conscientious utilitarian need be anxious to fend off.

If the objection means only this:

Many utilitarians look on the morality of actions, as measured by the utilitarian standard, in too exclusive a manner, and don't put enough emphasis on the other beauties of character that go towards making a human being lovable or admirable,

this may be admitted. Utilitarians who have cultivated their moral feelings but not their sympathies or their artistic perceptions *do* fall into this mistake; and so do all other moralists under the same conditions. What can be said in excuse of other moralists is equally available for utilitarians, namely that if one is to go wrong about this, it is better to go wrong on that side, rather than caring about lovability etc. and ignoring the morality of actions. As a matter of fact, utilitarians are in this respect like the adherents of other systems: there is every imaginable degree of rigidity and of laxity in how they apply their standard of right and wrong: some are puritanically rigorous, while others are as forgiving as any sinner or sentimentalist could wish! But on the whole, a doctrine that highlights the interest that mankind have in the repression and prevention of conduct that violates the moral law is likely to do as good a job as any other in turning the force of public opinion against such violations. It is true that the question 'What *does* violate the moral law?' is one on which those who recognise different standards of morality are likely now and then to differ. But *that* isn't a point against utilitarianism; difference of opinion on moral questions wasn't first introduced into the world by utilitarianism! And that doctrine does supply a tangible and intelligible way—if not always an easy one—of deciding such differences.

## READ THIS SECTION

### •Utilitarianism as ‘Godless’•

It may be worthwhile to comment on a few more of the common misunderstandings of utilitarian ethics, even those that are so obvious and gross that it might appear impossible for any fair and intelligent person to fall into them. It might *appear* impossible but unfortunately it *isn’t*: the crudest misunderstandings of ethical doctrines are continually met with in the deliberate writings of persons with the greatest claims both to high principle and to philosophy. That is because people—even very able ones—often take little trouble to understand the likely influence of any opinion against which they have a prejudice, and are unaware of this deliberate ignorance as a defect. We quite often hear the doctrine of utility denounced as a godless doctrine. If this mere *assumption* needs to be replied to at all, we may say that the question depends on what idea we have formed of the moral character of the Deity. If it is true that God desires the happiness of his creatures above all else, and that this was his purpose in creating them, then utilitarianism, far from being a godless doctrine, is the most deeply religious of them all. If the accusation is that utilitarianism doesn’t recognise the *revealed* will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer that a utilitarian who believes in the perfect goodness and wisdom of God has to believe that whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals must fulfil the requirements of utility in a supreme degree. Others besides utilitarians have held this:

The Christian revelation was intended (and is fitted) to bring into the hearts and minds of mankind a spirit that will enable them to find *for themselves* what is right, and incline them to do right when they have found it; rather than to tell them—except in a very general way—what it is. And we need a doctrine of

ethics, carefully followed out, to know what the will of God is.

We needn’t discuss here whether this is right; because whatever aid religion—either natural or revealed—can provide to ethical investigation is as open to the utilitarian moralist as to any other. He is as entitled to cite it as God’s testimony to the usefulness or hurtfulness of a course of action as others are to cite it as pointing to a transcendental law that has no connection with usefulness or happiness.

### •Expediency•      Optional Section

Again, utilitarianism is often slapped down as an immoral doctrine by giving it the name ‘Expediency’, and taking advantage of the common use of that term to contrast it with ‘Principle’. But when ‘expedient’ is opposed to ‘right’, it usually means *what is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself*, as when a high official sacrifices the interests of his country in order to keep himself in place. When it means anything better than this, it means *what is expedient for some immediate temporary purpose, while violating a rule whose observance is much **more** expedient*. The ‘expedient’ in *this* sense, instead of being the same thing as the •useful, is a branch of the •hurtful. For example, telling a lie would often be *expedient* for escaping some temporary difficulty or getting something that would be immediately useful to ourselves or others. But **(1)** the principal support of all present social well-being is people’s ability to trust one another’s assertions, and the lack of that trust does more than anything else to keep back civilisation, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends. Therefore **(2)** the development in ourselves of a sensitive feeling about truthfulness is one of the most useful things that our conduct can encourage, and the weakening of

that feeling is one of the most harmful. Finally, (3) any deviation from truth—even an unintentional one—does something towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion. For these reasons we feel that (4) to obtain an immediate advantage by violating such an overwhelmingly expedient rule is *not expedient*, and that someone who acts in that way does his bit towards depriving mankind of the good, and inflicting on them the harm, involved in the greater or less reliance that they can place in each other's word, thus acting as though he were one of mankind's worst enemies. Yet all moralists agree that even this rule about telling the truth, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions. The chief one is the case where the withholding of some fact from someone would save an individual (especially someone other than oneself) from great and undeserved harm, and the only way of withholding it is to lie about it. (Examples: keeping information about the whereabouts of a weapon from a malefactor, keeping bad news from a person who is dangerously ill.) But in order that this exception to the truth-telling rule doesn't extend itself beyond the need for it, and has the least possible effect of weakening reliance on truth-telling, it ought to be *recognised*, and if possible its limits should be defined; and if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another, and marking out the region within which one or the other dominates.

### •Time to Calculate?•

Again, defenders of utility often find themselves challenged to reply to such objections as this: 'Before acting, one doesn't have *time* to calculate and weigh the effects on the general happiness of any line of conduct.' This is just like saying: 'Before acting, one doesn't have time on each occasion to read

through the Old and New Testaments; so it is impossible for us to guide our conduct by Christianity.' The answer to the objection is that *there has been plenty of time*, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time, mankind have been learning by •experience what sorts of consequences actions are apt to have, this being something on which all the morality of life depends, as well as all the prudence [= 'decisions about what will further one's own interests']. The objectors talk as if the start of this course of •experience had been put off until now, so that when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of someone else he has to start at that moment considering *for the first time* whether murder and theft are harmful to human happiness! Even if that were how things stand, I don't think he would find the question very puzzling. . . .

If mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would *of course*—it would be merely fanciful to deny it—reach some agreement about what is useful, and would arrange for their notions about this to be taught to the young and enforced by law and opinion. Any ethical standard whatever can easily be 'shown' to work badly if we suppose •*universal idiocy* to be conjoined with it! But on any hypothesis short of •that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs that have thus come down to us from the experience of mankind are *the rules of morality* for the people in general—and for the philosopher until he succeeds in finding something better. I admit, or rather I strongly assert, that

- philosophers might easily find something better, even now, on many subjects; that
- the accepted code of ethics is not God-given; and that
- mankind have still much to learn about how various kinds of action affect the general happiness.

The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the rules of every practical art, can be improved indefinitely, and while the human mind is progressing they are constantly improving.

But to consider the intermediate rules of morality as unprovable is one thing; to pass over them entirely, trying to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. It is a strange notion that having a •first principle is inconsistent with having •secondary ones as well. When you tell a traveller the location of the place he wants to get to, you aren't forbidding him to use landmarks and direction-posts along the way! The proposition that *happiness is the end and aim of morality* doesn't mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that people going to it shouldn't be advised to take one direction rather than another. Men really ought to stop talking a kind of *nonsense* on this subject –nonsense that they wouldn't utter or listen to with regard to any other practically important matter. Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not based on astronomy because sailors can't wait to calculate the Nautical Almanack. Because they are rational creatures, sailors go to sea with the calculations already done; and *all* rational creatures go out on the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of *right and wrong*, as well as on many of the much harder questions of *wise and foolish*. And we can presume that they will continue to do so long as foresight continues to be a human quality. Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we need subordinate principles through which to apply it; the absolute need for them is a feature of *all* •moral• systems, so it doesn't support any argument against any one system in particular. To argue solemnly in a manner that presupposes this:

No such secondary principles can be had; and mankind never did and never will draw any general

conclusions from the experience of human life is as totally absurd, I think, as anything that has been advanced in philosophical controversy.

### •Bad Faith•

The remainder of the standard arguments against utilitarianism mostly consist in blaming it for •the common infirmities of human nature and •the general difficulties that trouble conscientious persons when they are shaping their course through life. We are told that a utilitarian will be apt to make his own particular case an exception to moral rules; and that when he is tempted •to do something wrong• he will see more utility in doing it than in not doing it. But is utility the only morality that can provide us with excuses for evil doing, and means of cheating our own conscience? •Of course not! Such excuses are provided in abundance by •all doctrines that recognise the existence of conflicting considerations as a fact in morals; and this is recognized by every doctrine that any sane person has believed. It is the fault not •of any creed but •of the complicated nature of human affairs that rules of conduct can't be formulated so that they require no exceptions, and hardly any kind of action can safely be stated to be either always obligatory or always condemnable.

*Every* ethical creed softens the rigidity of its laws by giving the morally responsible agent some •freedom to adapt his behaviour to special features of his circumstances; and under every creed, at the •opening thus made, self-deception and dishonest reasoning get in. *Every* moral system allows for clear cases of conflicting obligation. These are real difficulties, knotty points both in the •theory of ethics and in the •practical personal matter of living conscientiously. In practice they are overcome, more or less successfully, according to the person's intellect and virtue; but it can't

be claimed that having an ultimate standard to which conflicting rights and duties can be referred will make one *less* qualified to deal with them! If utility is the basic source of moral obligations, utility can be invoked to decide between obligations whose demands are incompatible. The utility-standard may be hard to apply, but it is better than having no standard. In other systems, the moral laws all claim independent authority, so that there's no common umpire entitled to settle conflicts between them; when one of them is

claimed to have precedence over another, the basis for this is little better than sophistry, allowing free scope for personal desires and preferences (unless the conflict is resolved by the unadmitted influence of considerations of utility). It is only in these cases of conflict between secondary principles that there is any need to appeal to first principles. In every case of moral obligation some secondary principle is involved; and if there is only one, someone who recognizes that principle can seldom be in any real doubt as to which one it is.

### Chapter 3: What will motivate us to obey the principle of utility?

The question is often asked, and it is a proper question in relation to any supposed moral standard,

What is its sanction? [= 'What is the reward for conforming to it and/or the punishment for not doing so?']

What are the motives to obey it?

or more specifically,

What is the source of its obligation? Where does it get its binding force from?

It is a necessary part of moral philosophy to provide the answer to this question. It often takes the shape of an objection to the utilitarian morality in particular, as though it were specially applicable to that; but really it arises in regard to *all* standards. It arises, in fact, whenever someone is called on to adopt a standard that is new to him, or to put morality on some basis on which he hasn't been accustomed to rest it. The only morality that presents itself to the mind with the feeling of being *in itself obligatory* is the customary morality, the one that education and opinion have

•consecrated; and when a person is asked to believe that *this* morality derives its obligation from some general principle around which custom has not thrown the same •halo, he finds the demand paradoxical; the supposed corollaries seem to have a more binding force than the original theorem; the superstructure seems to stand better without its supposed foundation than with it. He says to himself, 'I feel that I am bound not to rob or murder, betray or deceive; but why am I bound to promote the general happiness? If my own happiness lies in something else, why may I not give *that* the preference?'

If the utilitarian philosophy's view of the nature of the moral sense is correct, this difficulty will always present itself, until the influences that form moral character have taken the same hold of the •principle that they have taken of some of its •consequences. That will be the time when the improvement of education brings about something that Christ certainly intended should come about, namely that