

ground of this principle is this: *Rational nature exists as an end in itself*. This is the way in which a man necessarily conceives his own existence; it is therefore so far a principle of human actions. But it is also the way in which every other rational being conceives his existence on the same rational ground which is valid also for me; hence it is at the same time an *objective* principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws for the will. The practical imperative will therefore be as follows: *Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*

## 6 Happiness as the Foundation of Morality: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*\*

Theories of morality are nowadays often classified as either (a) consequentialist or (b) deontological, depending on whether they assess the worth of actions or classes of action (a) in terms of their results or consequences, or (b) on the basis of their conformity to some principle or principles of duty (the term 'deontological' comes from the Greek *deon*, obligatory). Kant's approach (see previous extract) is firmly deontological in character, while the extract that follows, by the celebrated nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, belongs squarely in the consequentialist tradition. Mill argues that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends not on any intrinsic worth (contrast Kant), but on the results it produces, or tends to produce. The standard of goodness which Mill employs for assessing those results is Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle: actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. Happiness is defined by Mill as pleasure and the absence of pain.

Mill did not invent utilitarianism. The notion that pleasure might provide a standard for evaluating action had been widely canvassed in ancient Greek philosophy (notably by Epicurus,

341–270 BC), and Mill's more immediate predecessor, Jeremy Bentham, had declared that pleasure and pain were the 'sovereign masters' determining what mankind ought to do.<sup>1</sup> While supporting Bentham's general approach, Mill was sensitive to the worry that such a doctrine might appear to advocate gross physical indulgence, and so be represented as a 'doctrine worthy of swine'. To counter this, he distinguishes 'higher' from 'lower' pleasures: some kinds of pleasure (those involving our more elevated intellectual faculties) are more valuable than others, and hence it is 'better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'. Though Mill tries to bolster his distinction by appeal to the verdict of 'competent judges' (those who have tried both kinds of pleasure), critics have objected that it is not strictly consistent with his principles of utility: if pleasure is the only ultimate standard, then it might have been more consistent to say (as Bentham did) that 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry'. Among other objections to utilitarianism addressed by Mill in the following extract is the worry that a consequentialist system of ethics may lead us to break important rules of conduct: if the overall balance of pleasure is the only standard, why should I not tell lies whenever

\* J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], ch. 2; abridged, punctuation occasionally modified. Many editions available, including that by R. Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), with introduction and notes.

<sup>1</sup> 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain. It is for them to determine what we ought to do, as well as what we shall do' (*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1789], ch. 1). See also introduction to Part IX, extract 6, below.

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I can maximize pleasure by doing so? Mill replies that utilitarians will want to instil a sense of veracity in the population, since truth-telling is generally productive of happiness. Here and later on in the extract he suggests that utilitarians will not try to make each individual decision by direct reference to the greatest happiness

principle, but instead will stick to rules or guidelines based on our experience of the kind of conduct that tends to maximize happiness. The resulting version of utilitarianism, now known as 'indirect' or 'rule' utilitarianism, has strongly influenced the subsequent development of moral philosophy.

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals Utility, or the Greatest Happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the idea of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded – namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.



Now such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable... 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 being's conception of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanence, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former – that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some *kinds* of pleasure are more

desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all others things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far out-weighting quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties... A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence... Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness – that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior – confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. 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, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides...

From this verdict of the competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgement respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogenous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgement of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgement declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the

question of intensity of faculties, is sufficient.

According to the end, with reference to which we are considered, as far as possible, quantity and quality of human action, defined [as] the existence such as to all mankind, whole sentient.

I must again acknowledge, that in conduct is not own happiness impartial as a Nazareth we not done by, and utilitarian morality would enjoin, (as speaking possible in human opinion, which as to establish own happiness.

The object of discreditable is just idea of its too high for human always act from is to mistake actions with time or by what test all we do shall actions are done condemn them right, whether speak only of principle: it is implying that society at large the world, but and the thought the particular benefiting the expectations,



question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard...

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and 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 exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality... This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined [as] the rules and precepts for human conduct by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation...

I must again repeat what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which 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. 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 means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole...

The objectors to utilitarianism cannot always be charged with representing it in a discreditable light. On the contrary, those among them who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confound the rule of actions with the motive of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them, but no system of ethics requires that the motive of all 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 done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them... He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble... But to speak only of actions done from the motive of duty, and in direct obedience to principle: it is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large. The great majority of good actions are directed not for the benefit of the world, but for that of the individual, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except as far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is, the legitimate and authorized expectations, of anyone else. The multiplication of happiness is, according to the

utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to. Those alone, the influence of whose actions extends to society in general, need concern themselves habitually about so large an object. In the case of abstinences indeed – of things which people forbear to do from moral considerations, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial – it would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practised generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the obligation to abstain from it. The amount of regard for the public interest implied in this recognition is not greater than is demanded by every system of morals, for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society...

Again, Utility is often summarily stigmatized as an immoral doctrine, by giving it the name of Expediency, and taking advantage of the popular use of that term to contrast it with Principle. But the Expedient, in the sense in which it is opposed to the Right, generally means that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself; as when a minister sacrifices the interest of his country to keep himself in place. When it means anything better than this, it means that which is expedient for some immediate object, some temporary purpose, but which violates a rule whose observance is expedient in a much higher degree. The Expedient, in this sense, instead of being the same thing with the useful, is a branch of the hurtful. Thus it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth does that much towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilization, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends; we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of a convenience to himself or some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies. Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a malefactor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would save an individual (especially an individual other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial. But in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognized, and, if possible, its limits 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 regions within which one or the other preponderates.

Again, defenders of utilitarianism have met with objections as this, weighing the effect of the objection is the human species. Do tendencies of action of life are dependent right; and that in general happiness principle of utility improvement, and perpetually going to pass over the individual action the acknowledged secondary ones. This is not to forbid that happiness is laid down to that direction rather founded on astrology. Being rational creatures go out questions of right wise and foolish. they will continue

## 7 Utility Sidgwick

The ideas behind the utilitarianism propounded (in the extract) were further developed later in the nineteenth century by the philosopher Henry Sidgwick. He is often classified as a utilitarian. Some of the ideas of utilitarianism are outlined below. This provides a critical account of utilitarianism and its relation to common-sense morality. It examines first of all the

\* H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 4, § 1; ch. 5, §§ 1–

Again, defenders of Utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this – that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness... The answer to the objection is that there has been ample time, namely the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time, mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions, on which experience all the prudence as well as all the morality of life are dependent... [T]hat the received code of ethics is by no means of divine right; and that mankind have still much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness, I admit, or rather, earnestly maintain. The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and in a progressive state of the human mind, their improvement is perpetually going on. But to consider the rules of morality as improvable is one thing; to pass over the intermediate generalizations entirely, and endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgement of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveller respecting the place of his ultimate destination is not to forbid the use of landmarks and direction-posts on the way. The proposition that happiness is the end and aim of morality does not mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that persons going thither should not be advised to take one direction rather than the other... Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the National Almanack. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. And this, as long as foresight is a human quality, it is to be presumed they will continue to do.

## 7 Utility and Common-sense Morality: Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*\*

The ideas behind the 'indirect' version of utilitarianism propounded by J. S. Mill (see previous extract) were further examined and developed later in the nineteenth century by the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick. Though Sidgwick is often classified as a utilitarian, his discussions of utilitarianism are concerned in the main to provide a critical account of the relationship between utilitarian theory and ordinary common-sense morality. In the following extract he examines first of all the hypothesis that common

sense, based on the long experience of mankind, can be expected to be a reliable guide to those rules and practices which promote happiness. There may be all sorts of reasons, Sidgwick argues, why the prevailing code in any given society may not be an ideal maximizer of utility (such reasons include the limited sympathy and limited intelligence of the human beings involved). Given that the set of rules that has evolved over the ages is likely to be only a very imperfect guide to the general happiness,

\* H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* [1874] (7th edn, London: Macmillan, 1907), extracts from Bk IV, ch. 4, § 1; ch. 5, §§ 1–3.