



John Stuart Mill

CHAPTER 13

The Greatest Happiness Principle

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), the intellectual heir of the Utilitarian movement in England, dedicated himself to clarifying the teachings of his father, James Mill, and those of Jeremy Bentham. In his *Autobiography*, a history of his “intellectual and moral development,” John Stuart Mill describes the exacting “educational experiment” imposed on him from age three to age fourteen by his father. At the age of three, he studied Greek and arithmetic; at eight, he added Latin to his curriculum; and by the time he was twelve, Mill was reading extensively in logic, philosophy, and economic theory. His training, moreover, was never a mere exercise in memorization but was designed to produce an original thinker.

At the age of twenty-one, he reached an emotional crisis that he characterized as the result of a sudden loss of enthusiasm for the original goals of his life but that, in current parlance, might be called a nervous breakdown. However, after several years, with fresh stimulation of his emotions and feelings as well as his intellect, he resumed his career, fulfilling his early promise. When he was twenty-five, Mill met Mrs. Harriet Taylor, whom he later married. He believed that her character and ability wielded great influence in his life and helped to shape his thought. In 1823, after a brief period of legal study, Mill, on the advice of his father, accepted a position with the East India Company. For thirty years, he held this responsible post, while devoting his spare time to writing his books. Upon retirement, when he intended to devote himself exclusively to writing, Mill was proposed as a candidate for Parliament. Despite his refusal to campaign, he was elected to office. Of his political conduct, William Gladstone, British Prime Minister, said: “He had the good sense and practical tact of politics, together with the high independent thought of a recluse. He did us all good.”

Mill’s major works cover a variety of subjects, but his *System of Logic* (1843) is regarded as his most important philosophical contribution. In it he defends the inductive

method of logic, showing that general laws or universal principles must be derived from empirical facts. Other outstanding works are his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), which relates the application of Utilitarian principles to economics; his essays *On Liberty* (1859) and *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), which are classical statements of his social and political philosophy; and the essay *Utilitarianism* (1861), his only explicit contribution to ethics. During the last few years in his life, he wrote the very distinctive *Autobiography* and *Three Essays on Religion*, both published after his death.

Unlike most philosophers, John Stuart Mill did not attempt to originate an ethical theory but rather defended the ethical theory to which he was born. However, his intellectual depth and his intense desire to find an ethics that fits the facts of life led him to modify and extend the Utilitarian doctrine as it was propounded by his father and Jeremy Bentham. Bentham based his Utilitarian philosophy on the principle that the object of morality is the promotion of the greatest happiness of the maximum number of members of society. He proceeded on the premise that the happiness of any individual consists in a favorable balance of pleasures over pains. Consequently, those actions that tend to increase pleasure are called good, and those that tend to increase pain are called bad. For Bentham, however, Utilitarianism was less important as an ethical system than as a philosophical support for much-needed social legislation.

Bentham was motivated by the idea that “the *Public Good* ought to be the object of the legislator: *General Utility* ought to be the foundation of his reasonings. To know the true good of the community is what constitutes the science of legislation; the art consists in finding the means to realize that good.” To implement this social and political ideal, he constructed a “hedonistic calculus” by means of which pleasures and pains could be measured. In this way, good and bad acts, and consequently good and bad legislation, can be evaluated in terms of such factors as intensity, duration, and extent.¹

In his essay, Mill is concerned less with the political implications of Bentham’s doctrine than with the provision of a defensible statement of its underlying ethical principles. In addition to answering objections put forward by opponents of Utilitarianism and correcting misrepresentations of it, he also restates the doctrine. In his restatement, he goes beyond Bentham’s contention that the essential differences among pleasures and pains are quantitative, maintaining that they are also subject to significant qualitative differentiation. For example, anyone who has experienced the pleasure attendant upon the resolution of an intellectual problem will, Mill believes, attest to the fact that it is superior in kind to the pleasure of eating a meal.

¹Bentham composed the following verse to help the student remember the criteria of hedonistic measurement:

Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—
Such marks in *pleasures* and *pains* endure.
Such pleasures seek, if *private* be thy end:
If it be *public*, wide let them *extend*.
Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:
If pains *must* come, let them extend to few.

J. Bowring, ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1838), vol. 1, p. 16, note.

Although Mill departs from Bentham's conception that all the significant differences among pleasures are quantitative, he accepts in principle Bentham's doctrines regarding the basic role of pleasures and pains in morality: *individual psychological hedonism* and *universal ethical hedonism*. According to the former, the sole motive of an action is an individual's desire for happiness—that is, for a balance of pleasure over pain. According to the latter, the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” *ought* to be the individual's goal and standard of conduct. Psychological hedonism is primarily a *descriptive* doctrine, because it purports to be an account of the actual motive of behavior. By contrast, universal ethical hedonism is a *normative* theory in that it stipulates what *ought* to be done. It is a principle by which actions are evaluated in terms of their *consequences*, irrespective of the nature of the motive.

However, there are two gaps between individual psychological hedonism and universal ethical hedonism: (1) If each individual is motivated solely by the desire for her or his own happiness, there is no reason to assume that personal actions will be at the same time always promote the interests of society. (2) The descriptive fact that people do desire their own happiness does not imply the normative principle that people *ought* to act in accordance with this desire. Mill recognizes that an adequate defense of Utilitarianism must show how the transition can be made from an interest in one's own happiness to that of others, and from a psychological theory to a moral theory. He endeavors to bridge the first of these two gaps by recourse to the concept of *sanctions*, the inducements to action that give binding force to moral rules. There is no general agreement that Mill or anyone else has bridged the second gap.

In Mill's system of ethics, sanctions are rooted in the hedonistic motive; that is, moral rules are acknowledged and obeyed by virtue of anticipated pleasures or pains. There are both “external” and “internal” sanctions. External sanctions are those forces of punishment and reward in the universe around us that control people's actions through their fear of pain and propensity for pleasure. For example, in our society, fear of social disapproval and imprisonment are both deterrents to crime. But, Mill cautions, conformity to the letter of the law in the presence of such external sanctions is not to be taken as a sign of a true sense of moral obligation: *The ultimate moral sanction must come from within.*

The force of an internal sanction derives from the feeling of pleasure that is experienced when a moral law is obeyed and the feeling of pain that accompanies a violation of it. That the “greatest happiness principle” can be sanctioned from within is attested to by observation. In some people at least, Mill holds, the feeling of sympathy for others is so well developed that the individual's happiness depends on the well-being of others. Thus, by means of the doctrine of internal sanctions, Mill is able to reconcile the psychological theory that people desire their own happiness with the moral theory that one ought to act to serve the public good.

However, Mill acknowledges that his argument in support of sanctions does not constitute a logical demonstration of the greatest happiness principle. In fact, he argues that *no direct proof of any first principle or ultimate end is possible*, and the problem of proof is in reality reduced to the problem of *rational assent*:

To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge as well as to those of our conduct. But the former, being matters of fact, may be the subject of a direct appeal to the faculties which judge of fact—namely, our senses, and our internal consciousness....

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. 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.^{a, 2}

1. Mill's first objective in defending Utilitarianism is to clarify the doctrine. He attempts this both by exposing misrepresentations and by straightforward exposition of the principle. He begins by opposing those who fail to associate "utility" with pleasure and pain.

A passing remark is all that needs to be given to the ignorant blunder of supposing that those who stand up for utility as the test of right and wrong, use the term in that restricted and merely colloquial sense in which utility is opposed to pleasure. An apology is due to the philosophical opponents of utilitarianism, for even the momentary appearance of confounding them with anyone capable of so absurd a misconception; which is the more extraordinary, inasmuch as the contrary accusation of referring everything to pleasure, and that too in its grossest form, is another of the common charges against utilitarianism: and, as has been pointedly remarked by an able writer, 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 contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain; and instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these, among other things. Yet the common herd, including the herd of writers, not only in newspapers and periodicals, but in books of weight and pretension, 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 the rejection, or the neglect, of pleasure in some of its forms; of beauty, of ornament, or of amusement. Nor is the term thus ignorantly misapplied solely in disparagement, but occasionally in compliment; as though it implied superiority to frivolity and the mere pleasures of the moment. And this perverted use is the only one in which the word is popularly known, and the one from which the new generation are acquiring their sole notion of its meaning. Those who

²As a formal proof, this would be fallacious: *Visible* is used in the sense of "can be seen," whereas *desirable* is used in the sense of "ought to be desired"; thus, the analogy is not a legitimate one. In addition, it does not follow from an admission that *each* individual desires *personal* happiness that *all* people desire the happiness of *all* people. Nevertheless, the argument, such as it is, bespeaks Mill's conviction that the evidence for an ethical theory is to be sought in the facts of human experience.

introduced the word, but who had for many years discontinued it as a distinctive appellation, 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.^b

2. Mill then states concisely the doctrine of utility.

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 ideas 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.^c

3. Even when the principle of utility is clearly understood to be directed to pleasures and pains, however, there remains the charge that it is a "swinish" doctrine. This misconception is due to the failure to recognize that pleasures vary in *kind* as well as in degree.

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 groveling; 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. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation: for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. 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 conceptions 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 permanency, 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 other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.^d

4. The superiority of one kind of pleasure over another is properly determined by those who have experienced both kinds. Such competent judges, Mill argues, do, in fact, prefer the pleasures of the higher faculties to those of the lower.

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 outweighing 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. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though

they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he, for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. 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. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer to it the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, through by no means exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them. 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, is 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.^e

5. Mill moves to discount the judgments of those who abandon the higher pleasures for the lower by explaining that they are incapable, either inherently or by lack of opportunity, of enjoying the higher kind. The only competent and final judges are those who have tested the entire spectrum of pleasures.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink to indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies

away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether anyone who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

From this verdict of the only 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 judgment 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 judgment 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 homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at a cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the 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.^f

6. The "greatest happiness principle" is restated to include the distinction drawn between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of pleasure.

I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility, or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

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; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, 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.⁸

7. The process of clarification is continued through stating various objections to the doctrine and answering them. For example, the argument that Utilitarianism is invalid because happiness cannot be attained is answered by Mill with a realistic description of happiness and a suggestion for the social means of achieving it.

When, however, it is thus positively asserted to be impossible that human life should be happy, the assertion, if not something like a verbal quibble, is at least an exaggeration. If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunted them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.

The objectors perhaps may doubt whether human beings, if taught to consider happiness as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it. But great numbers of mankind have been satisfied with much less. The main constituents of a satisfied life appear

to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquility and excitement. With much tranquility, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility in enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both; since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other. . . . When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind past and present, and their prospects in the future.^h

the general happiness, although they may deny individual happiness. Furthermore, this is not to be misinterpreted to mean that the happiness of one individual is less important than that of another.

Let utilitarians never cease to claim the morality of self-devotion as a possession which belongs by as good a right to them, as either to the Stoic or the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind.

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 one would be done by, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, 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; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct,

8. Another objection that Mill discounts is the claim that Utilitarian morality is incompatible with the acts of personal sacrifice that are so revered in our Christian culture. On closer analysis, those actions of self-sacrifice that we acknowledge to be good derive their value from their promotion of

negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes: so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the impugners of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it: what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.¹

9. To the objection that people are not so constituted as always to be motivated by social concern, Mill rejoins that this is indeed true but that it in no way invalidates his thesis. The greatest happiness principle is not essential as a motive for conduct, but it is essential as the rule by which conduct is judged and sanctioned. The psychological question of motivation is distinct from the ethical questions of obligation and evaluation. Moral evaluation is directed to actions and to the manner in which they affect the general happiness.

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 action 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 sole 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. It is the more unjust to utilitarianism that this particular misapprehension should be made a ground of objection to it, inasmuch as utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent. 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; he who betrays the friend that trusts him, is guilty of a crime, even if his object to be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations. 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 intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, 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 so 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 to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practiced 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 no greater than is demanded by every system of morals; for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society.^l

10. Having removed the major misconceptions about the principle of utility, Mill next proposes to investigate its ultimate sanction.

The question is often asked, and properly so, in regard to any supposed moral standard—What is its sanction? what are the motives to obey it? or more specifically, what is the source of its obligation? whence does it derive its binding force? It is a necessary part of moral philosophy to provide the answer to this question; which, though frequently assuming the shape of an objection to the utilitarian morality, as if it had some special applicability to that above others, really arises in regard to all standards. It arises, in fact, whenever a person is called on to *adopt* a standard or refer morality to any basis on which he has not been accustomed to rest it. For the customary morality, that which education and opinion have consecrated, is the only one which presents itself to the mind with the feeling of being *in itself* obligatory; and when a person is asked to believe that this morality *derives* its obligation from some general principle round which custom has not thrown the same halo, the assertion is to him a paradox; the supposed corollaries seem to have a more binding force than the original theorem; the superstructure seems to stand better without, than with, what is represented as its foundation. 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?^k

11. Mill argues that although the external sanctions, social and supernatural, enforce the Utilitarian principle, they do not obligate us to follow it. In and of themselves, they cannot bind us satisfactorily to any moral principle, because people are truly bound only when they feel inwardly that the principle is binding on them. It is our “feeling for humanity” that provides the ultimate sanction of the principle of utility, and this Mill calls the *internal sanction*.

The principle of utility either has, or there is no reason why it might not have, all the sanctions which belong to any other system of morals. Those sanctions are either external or internal. Of the external sanctions it is not necessary to speak at any length. They are, the hope of favor and the fear of displeasure from our fellow creatures or from the Ruler of the Universe, along with whatever we may have of sympathy or affection for them, or of love and awe of Him, inclining us to do His will independently of selfish consequences. There is evidently no reason why all these motives for observance should not attach themselves to the utilitarian morality, as completely and as powerfully as to any other. Indeed, those of them which refer to our fellow creatures are sure to do so, in proportion to the amount of general intelligence; for whether there be any other ground of moral obligation than the general happiness or not, men do desire happiness; and however imperfect may be their own practice, they desire and commend all conduct in others towards themselves, by which they think their happiness is promoted. With regard to the religious motive, if men believe, as most profess to do, in the goodness of God, those who think that conduciveness to the general happiness is the essence, or even only the criterion of good, must necessarily believe that it is also that which God approves. The whole

force therefore of external reward and punishment, whether physical or moral, and whether proceeding from God or from our fellow men, together with all that the capacities of human nature admit, of disinterested devotion to either, become available to enforce the utilitarian morality, in proportion as that morality is recognized; and the more powerfully, the more the appliances of education and general cultivation are bent to the purpose.

So far as to external sanctions. The internal sanction of duty, whatever our standard of duty may be, is one and the same—a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral natures rises, in the more serious cases, into shrinking from it as an impossibility. This feeling, when disinterested, and connecting itself with the pure idea of duty, and not with some particular form of it, or with any of the merely accessory circumstances, is the essence of Conscience; though in that complex phenomenon as it actually exists, the simple fact is in general all encrusted over with collateral associations, derived from sympathy, from love, and still more from fear; from all the forms of religious feeling; from the recollections of childhood and of all our past life; from self-esteem, desire of the esteem of others, and occasionally even self-abasement. This extreme complication is, I apprehend, the origin of the sort of mystical character which, by a tendency of the human mind of which there are many other examples, is apt to be attributed to the idea of moral obligation, and which leads people to believe that the idea cannot possibly attach itself to any other objects than those which, by a supposed mysterious law, are found in our present experience to excite it. Its binding force, however, consists in the existence of a mass of feeling which must be broken through in order to do what violates our standard of right, and which, if we do nevertheless violate that standard, will probably have to be encountered afterwards in the form of remorse. Whatever theory we have of the nature or origin of conscience, this is what essentially constitutes it.

The ultimate sanction, therefore, of all morality (external motives apart) being a subjective feeling in our own minds, I see nothing embarrassing to those whose standard is utility, in the question, what is the sanction of that particular standard? We may answer, the same as of all other moral standards—the conscientious feelings of mankind. Undoubtedly this sanction has no binding efficacy on those who do not possess the feelings it appeals to; but neither will these persons be more obedient to any other moral principle than to the utilitarian one. On them morality of any kind has no hold but through the external sanctions. Meanwhile the feelings exist, a fact in human nature, the reality of which, and the great power with which they are capable of acting on those in whom they have been duly cultivated, are proved by experience. No reason has ever been shown why they may not be cultivated to as great intensity in connection with the utilitarian, as with any other rule of morals.¹

12. Regardless of whether this inner feeling for humanity is inborn or acquired, Mill contends that it can be a powerful force and a sound basis for Utilitarian morality.

It is not necessary, for the present purpose, to decide whether the feeling of duty is innate or implanted. Assuming it to be innate, it is an open question to what objects it naturally attaches itself; for the philosophic supporters of that theory are now agreed that the intuitive perception is of principles of morality, and not of the details. If there be anything innate in the matter, I see no reason why the feeling which is innate should not be that of regard to the pleasures and pains of others. If there is any principle of morals which is intuitively obligatory, I should say it must be that. If so, the intuitive ethics would coincide with the utilitarian, and there would be no further quarrel between them. Even as it is, the intuitive moralists, though they believe that there are other intuitive moral obligations, do already believe this to be one;

for they unanimously hold that a large *portion* of morality turns upon the consideration due to the interests of our fellow creatures. Therefore, if the belief in the transcendental origin of moral obligation gives any additional efficacy to the internal sanction, it appears to me that the utilitarian principle has already the benefit of it.

On the other hand, if, as is my own belief, the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason the less natural. It is natural to man to speak, to reason, to build cities, to cultivate the ground, though these are acquired faculties. The moral feelings are not indeed a part of our nature, in the sense of being in any perceptible degree present in all of us; but this, unhappily, is a fact admitted by those who believe the most strenuously in their transcendental origin. Like the other acquired capacities above referred to, the moral faculty, if not a part of our nature, is a natural outgrowth from it; capable, like them, in a certain small degree, of springing up spontaneously; and susceptible of being brought by cultivation to a high degree of development. Unhappily it is also susceptible, by a sufficient use of the external sanctions and of the force of early impressions, of being cultivated in almost any direction: so that there is hardly anything so absurd or so mischievous that it may not, by means of these influences, be made to act on the human mind with all the authority of conscience. To doubt that the same potency might be given by the same means to the principle of utility, even if it had no foundation in human nature, would be flying in the face of all experience.

But moral associations which are wholly of artificial creation, when intellectual culture goes on, yield by degrees to the dissolving force of analysis: and if the feeling of duty, when associated with utility, would appear equally arbitrary; if there were no leading department of our nature, no powerful class of sentiments, with which that association would harmonize, which would make us feel it congenial, and incline us not only to foster it in others (for which we have abundant interested motives), but also

to cherish it in ourselves; if there were not, in short, a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality, it might well happen that this association also, even after it had been implanted by education, might be analyzed away.

But there *is* this basis of powerful natural sentiment; and this it is which, when once the general happiness is recognized as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality. This firm foundation is that of the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, form the influences of advancing civilization.^m

13. Mill's moving description of the origin and nature of the feeling for humanity may serve as a fitting conclusion to his exposition of the greatest happiness principle.

The deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feeling and aims and those of his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture make it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings—perhaps make him denounce and defy those feelings—he still needs to be conscious that his real aim and theirs do not conflict; that he is not opposing himself to what they really wish for, namely, their own good, but is, on the contrary, promoting it. This feeling in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But to those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education, or a law despotically imposed by the power of society, but as an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality. This it is which makes any mind, of

well-developed feelings, work with, and not against, the outward motives to care for others, afforded by what I have called the external sanctions; and when those sanctions are wanting, or act in an opposite direction, constitutes in itself a powerful internal binding force, in proportion to the sensitiveness and thoughtfulness of the character; since few but those whose mind is a moral blank, could bear to lay out their course of life on the plan of paying no regard to others except so far as their own private interest compels.ⁿ

Questions

1. What is the "principle of utility"? Why does Mill feel called on to defend the doctrine in such detail?
2. In what respects is Mill's conception of Utilitarianism different from that of Bentham?
3. What is Mill's reply to the objection that the greatest happiness principle is a "swinish doctrine"?
4. Distinguish between "psychological hedonism" and "ethical hedonism." Is it necessary to maintain both if you subscribe to either? Is it necessary to reject one if you subscribe to the other?
5. Why does Mill distinguish different kinds of pleasure? What criterion does he set up to judge differences in the quality of pleasures?
6. Discuss the role of sanctions in Mill's ethical theory, paying special attention to the "feeling for humanity."
7. Elaborate on Mill's distinction between a *motive for conduct* and a *rule of conduct*. What does he mean by his assertion that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of an action?
8. Discuss Mill's statement that it is not possible to prove first principles or ultimate goals. Do you agree with him? Can you name at least two moral philosophers who would disagree with this position?
9. Reconstruct Mill's replies to (a) the accusation that the Utilitarian doctrine is incompatible with the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice and (b) the argument that the doctrine is invalid because it is not possible for people to achieve happiness.
10. Do you believe that the Utilitarian doctrine, as Mill presents it, has value for our times?

Key to Selections

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, London, Longmans, Green, 1897.

^aCh. IV, pp. 52–53.

^bCh. II, pp. 8–9.

^cCh. II, pp. 9–10.

^dCh. II, pp. 10–12.

^eCh. II, pp. 12–14.

^fCh. II, pp. 14–16.

^gCh. II, pp. 16–17.

^hCh. II, pp. 18–20.

ⁱCh. II, pp. 24–25.

^jCh. II, pp. 26–28.

^kCh. III, pp. 39–40.

^lCh. III, pp. 40–43.

^mCh. III, pp. 44–46.

ⁿCh. III, pp. 50–51.

Guide to Additional Reading

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