

# Utilitarianism

How can we tell right from wrong? What makes right actions right and wrong actions wrong? The answer, many philosophers have held, is what makes people happy. Happiness, as Aristotle first noted, is intrinsically good. It is a small step to saying that right actions are right because they promote human happiness. Wrong actions are wrong because they detract from it. We can tell right from wrong by observing what makes people happy.

The most influential form of this answer is utilitarianism, a view implicit in various ancient and medieval thinkers, advocated explicitly by Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and William Paley (1743–1805) in the eighteenth century, and brought to full development by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), a prolific writer on law and public policy, was born in London. The most important utilitarian of the Enlightenment, Bentham was a contemporary of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, William Paley, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Like another contemporary, Mozart, Bentham was a prodigy; he entered Oxford at twelve and graduated at fifteen. He studied law and was admitted to the bar at nineteen. But Bentham was so appalled by English law that he never practiced it, even for a day. Instead, he devoted his life to legal reform. He wrote thousands of pages and founded a group of influential thinkers, the philosophical radicals, which included James Mill, economist David Ricardo, and legal theorist John Austin. They advocated representative democracy, universal suffrage, and a scientific approach to philosophy. Bentham also founded the *Westminster Review*, a political journal, and University College, London, where his embalmed body still rests, seated, in a glass case in the library.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), a contemporary of Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, and Leo Tolstoy, was the most influential philosopher of the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century. His father, James Mill (1773–1836), a friend and fellow “philosophical radical” of Jeremy Bentham, was the son of a Scottish shoemaker. He educated young John Stuart Mill at home, teaching him to read Greek by age three and Latin just a few years later. He was well-read in classical literature and history by eight, and studied philosophy, mathematics, and economics before reaching his teens. For thirty-five years he worked in the East India Company, which governed India under charter from the British government. In 1865 he won election to Parliament despite his refusal to campaign or defend his views.

Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* appeared in 1789, the year of the French Revolution. Bentham objects strongly to views of morality and politics that stress individual conscience or religious conviction; both, in his view, are little more than prejudice in disguise. Bentham also rejects doctrines of natural rights, such as those invoked by the French revolutionaries, calling them “nonsense on

stilts.”

Bentham proposes to base ethics and politics on a single principle, the principle of utility. Roughly, Bentham’s version of this principle says that a good action increases the balance of pleasure over pain in the community of people affected by it; a bad action decreases it. The principle of utility approves actions in proportion to their tendency to increase the happiness of the people affected. The best actions, then, are those that maximize happiness. From this principle, together with the facts about the effects of actions, Bentham maintains, all correct moral and political judgments follow. Bentham is an individualist: he holds that the good of the community is nothing but the sum of the goods of its members. We may calculate the effects on the community, therefore, by adding up the effects on its members. This holds for individual actions, for laws or other rules, and for other acts of government. Bentham outlines a method of computing the moral value of possible actions called the moral (or felicific) calculus.

Applying the moral calculus can be complicated. Utilitarianism, however, can be summarized in two words: Maximize good. Utilitarians hold that all of ethics and political philosophy reduces to that one maxim, the principle of utility. As Bentham outlines the principle in *The Constitutional Code*:

the greatest happiness of the whole community, ought to be the end or object of pursuit, in every branch of the law—of the political rule of action, and of the constitutional branch in particular. . . . The right and proper end of government in every political community, is the greatest happiness of all the individuals of which it is composed, say, in other words, the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

The principle seems simple, but it has a number of far-reaching consequences. Utilitarians evaluate actions by the extent to which they maximize good. They evaluate actions, therefore, solely in terms of their consequences. To determine whether an action is right or wrong, we need only to ask, Is it for the best? What effect does it have on the total amount of good? Utilitarians are thus consequentialists, who hold that the moral value of an action depends entirely on its consequences.

Another implication of utilitarianism is universalism: We must consider the consequences of an action on everyone it affects. We cannot consider ourselves alone, or just our friends, or the people in our community, or our fellow citizens; we must consider everyone. Fortunately, most decisions affect only a small number of people. Political decisions, however, may affect millions or even billions of people. Nevertheless, we must take the good of everyone affected into account. Moreover, we cannot show favoritism; we must consider everyone equally. To evaluate an action, we must judge its effects on the total amount of good in the universe. It makes no difference in the calculation who in particular has what amount of good; only the total matters.

Common sense ethical reasoning does not appear to be universalist in this sense. We typically show favoritism toward our friends, our family, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens. Parents support their children, buy them gifts, pay for their educations, etc., not because they think that doing these things for their children just happens to maximize the amount of good in the universe but because they want to do good for their children. In short, parents care more about their children’s welfare than they care

about the welfare of others. On the face of it, at least, this violates utilitarianism, which implies that everyone's good should be considered equally.

Some utilitarians are revisionists, holding that we ought to revise common sense moral thinking to accord with the principle of utility. More, however, hold that the principle in fact supports common sense. It is good, they maintain, that parents show favoritism toward their children, that friends show favoritism toward friends, and so on. Family relationships, friendship, and love make us all better off. There are thus good utilitarian, universalist reasons for people not to treat everyone's good as equally valuable to them in their personal lives. Utilitarianism, in short, explains why most people, in most situations, should not think like utilitarians. They can act in accordance with the principle of utility without consciously meaning to do so.

Finally, utilitarianism requires an independent theory of the good. The principle of utility tells us to maximize good, but it does not tell us what the good is. What should we maximize? The most common answer—the answer many take to define utilitarianism—is happiness. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are, more specifically, hedonists: they believe that pleasure and pain are the only sources of value. The good, for both, is happiness, and happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. In their view, the principle of utility tells us to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain—in short, to maximize happiness.

Mill's version of utilitarianism remains very close to Bentham's. Mill highlights, however, several aspects of the theory. Mill stresses that pleasures and pains differ in quality as well as quantity. Thomas Carlyle had called Bentham's utilitarianism "a philosophy fit for swine," contending that it encouraged people to live like pigs, pursuing pleasure by any means possible. If the only good is feeling good, Carlyle had argued, human beings are no better than pigs. Mill answers, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied," for human beings are capable of much better pleasures than pigs are. How can we rank pleasures in quality? How can we tell whether the pleasure of a cold beer on a summer's day is of higher or lower quality than the pleasure of a beautiful sunset, or a good conversation with a friend, or a good book? We consult those who are familiar with the pleasures in question and see what they prefer.

Even if some pleasures were not intrinsically more valuable than others, however, utilitarianism would not be "pig philosophy"; the development and use of our higher faculties would be virtuous solely by virtue of their benefits to others.

Mill emphasizes that the principle of utility justifies right actions. It explains what makes them right. But it does not have to be a conscious motive; it does not even have to be a practical test of what is right or wrong. Most right acts are done from other motives. And most people facing moral decisions rely on common-sense moral rules rather than utilitarian calculation.

Mill stresses the importance of secondary principles, common-sense rules such as "Do not murder," "Do not steal," and so on, that give us moral guidance. There is not time to do the moral calculus in the face of every decision. Nor is there any need to, for we can rely on tradition, "the whole past duration of the human species," as Mill puts it, to have determined, in general, the tendencies of certain kinds of actions to produce good or ill effects. "Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by." These secondary, common-sense moral

principles are the core of ordinary moral decision-making and moral education. They are justified by the principle of utility; following them maximizes the good. Utility thus also gives us a basis for reforming tradition, for we may find, in some cases, that traditional rules need to be modified or rejected outright. We need to appeal to the principle of utility directly only when secondary principles conflict.

Plato describes a classic case of moral conflict. You've borrowed a knife from a friend, offering to return it whenever he needs it. He shows up at your door, crazed with anger, and says he needs the knife to kill a neighbor who insulted him. Do you return it? Your obligation to keep your promise conflicts with your obligation to save a life.

Plato and Confucius each discuss another sort of conflict: You learn that your father has done something criminal. Do you turn him in? Your obligation to a family member conflicts with your obligation as a citizen.

Kant describes yet another case. A child knocks on your door, and says an ax-wielding madman is chasing her. You let her in and hide her in a closet. A moment later the madman bangs on the door and demands to know where the child is. Do you tell him? This time, your obligation to tell the truth conflicts with your obligation to save a life.

Normally, Mill says, we can rely on secondary principles such as "Keep your promises," "Tell the truth," "Report crimes," and "Save lives," which the principle of utility justifies as maximizing happiness. When they conflict, however, we must appeal directly to utility, looking in detail at the consequences. You should probably break your promise (in Plato's case) and tell a lie (in Kant's case), since the consequences of keeping the promise and telling the truth include an innocent person's death.

Bentham generalizes this into an argument for utilitarianism. Traditional moral rules, whether advanced by religion or common sense, have exceptions. "Thou shalt not kill"—but would the assassination of Hitler been an immoral act? "Thou shalt not steal"—but would it be wrong to steal bread to feed your starving family? That, he thinks, is evidence that they are not fundamental principles. When we face a conflict between two or more such principles, traditional theories provide no guidance. But we still think there is a right way and a wrong way to resolve such conflicts; we think the knife should not be returned, even if it means breaking a promise, and the child should be hidden, even if it means telling a lie. There must be a fundamental principle that allows us to weigh the competing considerations in cases of moral conflict—a principle that does not have exceptions and allows us to compare different kinds of moral factors. That, of course, is the principle of utility.

## **1 John Stuart Mill, from *Utilitarianism***

*Source:* John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*. London : Parker, Son and Bourn, 1863.

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.

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.

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 it to 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, though by no means in 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, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides. 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 into 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 favourable 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 any one 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 the 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.

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.

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; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, 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.

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 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 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 any one 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 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.

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. This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which anything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments. 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. People talk as if the commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness. Even then I do not think that he would find the question very

puzzling; but, at all events, the matter is now done to his hand. It is truly a whimsical supposition that, if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young, and enforced by law and opinion. There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill, 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 which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better. That philosophers might easily do this, even now, on many subjects; that 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 improveable, 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 acknowledgment of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveler 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 another. Men really ought to leave off talking a kind of nonsense on this subject, which they would neither talk nor listen to on other matters of practical concernment. Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanac. 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. Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by; the impossibility of doing without them, being common to all systems, can afford no argument against any one in particular; but gravely to argue as if no such secondary principles could be had, and as if mankind had remained till now, and always must remain, without drawing any general conclusions from the experience of human life, is as high a pitch, I think, as absurdity has ever reached in philosophical controversy.

The remainder of the stock arguments against utilitarianism mostly consist in laying to its charge the common infirmities of human nature, and the general difficulties which embarrass conscientious persons in 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, when under temptation, will see a utility in the breach of a rule, greater than he will see in its observance. But is utility the only creed which is able to furnish us with excuses for evil doing, and means of cheating our own conscience? They are afforded in abundance by all doctrines which recognize as a fact in morals the existence of conflicting considerations; which all doctrines do, that have been believed by

sane persons. It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable. There is no ethical creed which does not temper the rigidity of its laws, by giving a certain latitude, under the moral responsibility of the agent, for accommodation to peculiarities of circumstances; and under every creed, at the opening thus made, self-deception and dishonest casuistry get in. There exists no moral system under which there do not arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligation. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points both in the theory of ethics, and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. They are overcome practically, with greater or with less success, according to the intellect and virtue of the individual; but it can hardly be pretended that any one will be the less qualified for dealing with them, from possessing an ultimate standard to which conflicting rights and duties can be referred. If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible. Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all: while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority, there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them; their claims to precedence one over another rest on little better than sophistry, and unless determined, as they generally are, by the unacknowledged influence of considerations of utility, afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities. We must remember that only in these cases of conflict between secondary principles is it requisite that first principles should be appealed to. There is no case of moral obligation in which some secondary principle is not involved; and if only one, there can seldom be any real doubt which one it is, in the mind of any person by whom the principle itself is recognized.