

# “Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill

## Table of Contents

Ideas of Interest from “Utilitarianism” .....	2
The Reading Selection from “Utilitarianism” .....	4
Topics Worth Investigating .....	19
Index .....	24



*John Stuart Mill.* Adapted from photograph of a portrait by Sophus Williams. Library of Congress.

### **About the author...**

In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) depicts his extraordinarily rigorous early education under his father James Mill, a member of the utilitarian circle known as the “Philosophical Radicals.” At the age of fourteen, he studied chemistry, zoology, logic, and higher mathematics with the *Faculté de Sciences* at the *Université de Montpellier*, France. At twenty, Mill suffered an intense depression, ostensibly from exhaustion and stress from his work for the Philosophical Radicals, as he lost all interest in intellectual pursuits. Over the next three years, he found solace in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge as well as the Utopian vision of Saint-Simon. As an official at the British East India Company, he was introduced to Harriet Taylor, who in subsequent years Mill credits as the source of his focus on

“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill

the self-development of the individual in his influential writings in politics and ethics, including *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, and *On the Subjection of Women*. The work from which our reading is taken, *Utilitarianism*, deepens and strengthens the greatest happiness principle of Jeremy Bentham and his father, James Mill. In the final years of his life, Mill was elected to the honorary position of Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews while serving as a Member of Parliament.

### About the work...

Much as his father and Jeremy Bentham assumed, Mill also believes an action is right if and only if the action produces on balance more good than bad than any other action available to the person. Also, as well, with them, he identifies pleasure or happiness as the only intrinsic good.<sup>1</sup> Mill explicates and broadens this view in his *Utilitarianism*<sup>2</sup> where he avoids the limited hedonism of Bentham and the egoism of his father by noting first that pleasures of the mind are preferable to those of the body and second that helping others is one of the ways to maximize an individual's good. In general, Mill's ethics turns out to be positivistic and empirical: moral rules are justified in experience by their usefulness for human welfare. In particular, the moral rules of common sense, such as speaking truthfully, are gleaned from the recognition of their utility as founded on historical knowledge and experience. Although Mill's utilitarianism is roundly criticized by the British idealists T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, his ethics stands as perhaps the most influential philosophy of individual and social liberty in the nineteenth century.

### From the reading...

“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.”

1. Something is intrinsically good if it is desirable or valued in and of itself. A particular intrinsic good might also serve as good as a means, but never good merely as a means. For example, if person seeks happiness for the sake of someone that individual loves, the happiness is still a good in and for itself. *Eds.*

2. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, West Strand: 1863), 9-29; 51-60.

## Ideas of Interest from “Utilitarianism”

1. How does Mill define the greatest happiness principle? How does he respond to the charge that this principle is degrading to the dignity of persons?
2. How are qualities of pleasure distinguished from quantities of pleasure? What does Mill think establishes one quality of pleasure more valuable than another?
3. Construct Mill’s argument concerning the sense of dignity preventing some persons from pursuing sensual pleasure? Explain why this argument is not inconsistent with the greatest happiness principle.
4. If all persons naturally seek the benefit of their higher faculties, then how does Mill account for the common occurrence of young persons losing their fresh enthusiasm, their rich enjoyment, and noble character later in life? How would he account for persons who have no interest in their higher faculties?
5. What is Mill’s answer to the objection by some that happiness is a hindrance to the good life—that self-sacrifice and renunciation of pleasure is essential for virtue? Under what conditions does he think renunciation can lead to the best possible life? Explain whether or not Mill is an ethical egoist or a psychological egoist.<sup>3</sup>
6. Mill points out that “all desirable things . . . are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.” Explain whether this doctrine implies a virtuous action is not desirable if it results in less pleasure than other nonvirtuous actions available to the agent.
7. What does Mill mean by “the disinterested character” of utilitarianism? How is this disinterest related to the golden rule?
8. How does Mill answer the criticism that under utilitarianism, the motive or intention of an agent, indeed, even the good heart of the agent, is irrelevant to the ethical value of an action performed.
9. According to Mill, how can the claim be proved that the only thing desirable as an end or a purpose to life is happiness? Explain whether or not Mill thinks virtue can also be rightfully desirable in itself? Can pleasure

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3. Psychological egoism is the empirical doctrine that the determining motive of every voluntary action is a desire for one’s own welfare. Ethical egoism is the normative or prescriptive doctrine that each individual should seek as an end only that individual’s own welfare. The first doctrine is a description theory of how persons behave; the second is a prescriptive principle of how persons ought to behave. *Eds.*

and virtue be distinguished for Mill? Are there any virtues which are not pleasurable?

10. Does Mill believe valued means such as health, virtue, money, power, sex, and fame should not be sought for themselves? Are these desires different in kind or different in degree from the desire for happiness?

## **The Reading Selection from “Utilitarianism”**

### **What Utilitarianism Is**

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 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. 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 recognise 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.

**From the reading...**

“[N]o 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.”

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, occa-

sionally, 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.

**From the reading...**

“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?”

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.

Against this doctrine, however, arises another class of objectors, who say that happiness, in any form, cannot be the rational purpose of human life and action; because, in the first place, it is unattainable: and they contemptuously ask, what right hast thou to be happy? a question which Mr. Carlyle clenches by the addition, What right, a short time ago, hadst thou even to be? Next, they say, that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and could not have become noble but by learning the lesson of *Entsagen*,<sup>4</sup> or renunciation; which lesson, thoroughly learnt and submitted

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4. “This word which so often occurs in Carlyle's letters means briefly a resolution fixedly



to, they affirm to be the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

The first of these objections would go to the root of the matter were it well founded; for if no happiness is to be had at all by human beings, the attainment of it cannot be the end of morality, or of any rational conduct. Though, even in that case, something might still be said for the utilitarian theory; since utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness; and if the former aim be chimerical, there will be all the greater scope and more imperative need for the latter, so long at least as mankind think fit to live, and do not take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by Novalis. 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: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, 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. It is only those in whom indolence amounts to a vice, that do not desire excitement after an interval of repose: it is only those in whom the need of excitement is

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and clearly made to do without the various pleasant things—wealth, promotion, fame, honour and the other prizes with which the world rewards the services which it appreciates.” J. A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle. A History of the First Forty Years of His Life*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896), vol. 2, 355.

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

a disease, that feel the tranquillity which follows excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement which preceded it. 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 vigour 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. It is possible, indeed, to become indifferent to all this, and that too without having exhausted a thousandth part of it; but only when one has had from the beginning no moral or human interest in these things, and has sought in them only the gratification of curiosity...

**From the reading...**

“All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar.”

And this leads to the true estimation of what is said by the objectors concerning the possibility, and the obligation, of learning to do without happiness. Unquestionably it is possible to do without happiness; it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of mankind, even in those parts of our present world which are least deep in barbarism; and it often has to be done voluntarily by the hero or the martyr, for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness. But this something, what is it, unless the happiness of others or some of the requisites of happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

it would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men can do, but assuredly not an example of what they should.



*East India House in Leadenhall Street, London as drawn by Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, c. 1817. 1823-1868, J. S. Mill worked at East India House becoming Chief Examiner. Jones & Co, Kingland Road, London July 28, 1827.*

Though it is only in a very imperfect state of the world's arrangements that any one can best serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own, yet so long as the world is in that imperfect state, I fully acknowledge that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue which can be found in man. I will add, that in this condition the world, paradoxical as the assertion may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realising, such happiness as is attainable. For nothing except that consciousness can raise a person above the chances of life, by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not power to subdue him: which, once felt, frees him from excess of anxiety concerning the evils of life, and enables him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

Empire, to cultivate in tranquillity the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end.

Meanwhile, 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 to the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognise 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 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.

**From the reading . . .**

“[U]tilitarian 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 . . .”

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 authorised 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 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 no greater than is demanded by every system of morals, for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society. The same considerations dispose of another reproach against the doctrine of utility, founded on a still grosser misconception of the purpose of a standard of morality, and of the very meaning of the words right and wrong. It is often affirmed that utilitarianism renders men cold and unsympathising; that it chills their moral feelings towards individuals; that it makes them regard only the dry and hard consideration of the consequences of actions, not taking into their moral estimate the qualities from which those actions emanate. If the assertion means that they do not allow their judgment respecting the rightness or wrongness of an action to be influenced by their opinion of the qualities of the person who does it, this is a complaint not against utilitarianism, but against having any standard of morality at all; for certainly no known ethical standard decides an action to be good or bad because it is done by a good or a bad man, still less because done by an amiable, a brave, or a benevolent man, or the contrary. These considerations are relevant, not to the estimation of actions, but of persons; and there is nothing in the utilitarian theory inconsistent with the fact that there are other things which interest us in persons besides the rightness and wrongness of their actions. The Stoics, indeed, with the paradoxical misuse of language which was part of their system, and by which they strove to raise themselves above all concern about anything but virtue, were fond of saying that he who has that has everything; that he, and only he, is rich, is beautiful, is a king. But no claim of this description is made for the virtuous man by the utilitarian doctrine. Utilitarians are quite aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable, often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. When this is apparent in any particular case, it modifies their estimation, not certainly of the act, but of the agent. I grant that they are, notwithstanding, of opinion, that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions; and resolutely refuse to consider any mental disposition as good, of which the predominant tendency is to produce bad conduct. This makes them unpopular with many people; but it is an unpopularity which they must share with every one who regards the distinction between right and wrong in a serious light; and the reproach is not one which a conscientious utilitarian need be anxious to repel...

## [Can the Principle of Utility Be Proved?]

Questions about ends are, in other words, questions what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. What ought to be required of this doctrine—what conditions is it requisite that the doctrine should fulfil—to make good its claim to be believed?

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. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as one of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality.

But it has not, by this alone, proved itself to be the sole criterion. To do that, it would seem, by the same rule, necessary to show, not only that people desire happiness, but that they never desire anything else. Now it is palpable that they do desire things which, in common language, are decidedly distinguished from happiness. They desire, for example, virtue, and the absence of vice, no less really than pleasure and the absence of pain. The desire of virtue is not as universal, but it is as authentic a fact, as the desire of happiness. And hence the opponents of the utilitarian standard deem that they have a right to infer that there are other ends of human action besides happiness, and that happiness is not the standard of approbation and disapprobation.

**From the reading...**

“[A] right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable, often proceed from qualities entitled to praise.”

But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself. Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue; however they may believe (as they do)

that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue; yet this being granted, and it having been decided, from considerations of this description, what is virtuous, they not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognise as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it; and hold, that the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner—as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle. The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, is to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end. Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness.

To illustrate this farther, we may remember that virtue is not the only thing, originally a means, and which if it were not a means to anything else, would be and remain indifferent, but which by association with what it is a means to, comes to be desired for itself, and that too with the utmost intensity. What, for example, shall we say of the love of money? There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles. Its worth is solely that of the things which it will buy; the desires for other things than itself, which it is a means of gratifying. Yet the love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off. It may, then, be said truly, that money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end. From being a means to happiness, it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual's conception of happiness. The same may be said of the majority of the great objects of human life—power, for example, or fame; except that to each of these there is a certain amount of immediate pleasure annexed, which has at least the semblance of being naturally inherent in them; a thing which cannot be said of money. Still, however, the strongest natural attraction, both of power and of fame, is the immense aid they give to the attainment of our other wishes; and it is the strong association thus generated between them and all our objects of desire, which gives to the direct desire of them the in-



tensity it often assumes, so as in some characters to surpass in strength all other desires. In these cases the means have become a part of the end, and a more important part of it than any of the things which they are means to. What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as part of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the love of music, or the desire of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts. And the utilitarian standard sanctions and approves their being so. Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity.

**From the reading...**

“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.”

Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good; and with this difference between it and the love of money, of power, or of fame, that all of these may, and often do, render the individual noxious to the other members of the society to which he belongs, whereas there is nothing which makes him so much a blessing to them as the cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue. And consequently, the utilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up to the point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness than promotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness.

It results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united; as in truth the pleasure and pain seldom exist separately, but almost always together, the same person feeling pleasure in the degree of virtue attained, and pain in not having attained more. If one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for. We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true—if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole.

And now to decide whether this is really so; whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain; we have evidently arrived at a question of fact and experience, dependent, like all similar questions, upon evidence. It can only be determined by practised self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others.

**From the reading...**

“Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation.”



*S. Salvator's Quad, University of St. Andrews* From 1865-1869 Mill held the post of Lord Rector of St. Andrews. *Oliverkeenan*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Does Mill's criterion distinguishing the quality of pleasure lead to ethical relativism?<sup>5</sup>
2. Compare Mill's assertion, "Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both [mental and bodily pleasure] do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties" with that of Paul, "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do"(Romans 7:15). Isn't it true individuals many times prefer to do that which they know is not either for the good of them or for the good of others as an assertion of our freedom?<sup>6</sup> In this regard, doesn't Mill overlook the distinction between practical knowledge and
5. Ethical Relativism is the prescriptive view that (1) different groups of people ought to have different ethical standards for evaluating acts as right or wrong, (2) these different beliefs are true in their respective societies, and (3) these different beliefs are not instances of a basic moral principle. *Eds.*
6. As Dostoevsky writes, "Oh, tell me, who was it first announced, who was it first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if he eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would

“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill

theoretical knowledge? Does he contradict himself when he soon after acknowledges,

“A being of higher faculties . . . can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. . . . [W]e may attribute it . . . to the love of liberty and personal independence.”

However, doesn't “the love of liberty and personal independence” more often result in selfish and base pleasure?

3. Explain the differences Mill draws between active and passive pleasure. Why do you think happiness depends upon “the predominance of the active over the passive”? What are some examples of active pleasure and passive pleasure? Is Mill's distinction relevant to the fact that we do not seek the pleasures of a drug induced state or a happily deluded insanity?
4. Mill's qualitative distinction among pleasures, namely, the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, has often been criticized on the grounds that some standard other than pleasure is necessary to mark the difference. But utilitarianism presupposes pleasure is the only standard of what is good.

Can a reasonable argument be developed that Mill overcomes this charge of vicious circularity by using a standard of what it is to be human, i.e., as he writes, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied”?

5. Does Mill commit the fallacy of composition<sup>7</sup> when he argues from the fact that seeking pleasure or happiness is part of human nature, we can infer that in order for each individual to obtain individual pleasure, human beings ought seek the pleasure or happiness of all. As Mill writes, “Each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”<sup>8</sup>
6. T. H. Green points out the object of desire and the pleasure resulting from the satisfaction of the desire are two different things:

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at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else, and we all know that not one man can, consciously, act against his own interests, consequently, so to say, through necessity, he would begin doing good? Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child!”Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (Plain Label Books, 1980) 35-6.

7. Composition is the fallacy committed by reasoning from the fact one or more parts of a whole have one or more specific characteristics, we can logically conclude the whole has those one or more specific characteristics as well. For example, from the fact each player on a volleyball team is good, the inference is drawn the team must be good. *Eds.*

8. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, West Strand: 1863), 80-1.

It may seem presumptuous to charge clear-headed moralists with the mistake of supposing that a desire can be excited by the anticipation of its own satisfaction. But such a mistake certainly seems to be accountable for the acceptance of the doctrine that pleasure is the sole object of desire by so powerful a writer as J. S. Mill. . . . When philosophers of the “selfish school” represented benevolence as ultimately desire for some pleasure to oneself, Butler and others met them by showing that this was the same mistake as to reckon hunger a desire for the pleasure of eating. The appetite of hunger must precede and condition the pleasure which consists in its satisfaction. It cannot therefore have that pleasure for its exciting object.<sup>9</sup>

For example, when hungry or thirsty a person seeks food or drink, not pleasure. Pleasure is not the object desired. How do you think Mill can respond to Green’s objection? Consider the evidence of molecular-imaging of neural mechanisms:

Carefully controlled studies have found specific effects for two neurotransmitter systems: dopamine increases motivation for, but not the pleasure of, eating palatable foods, whereas the opioid system influences motivation indirectly by modulating subjective emotional feelings of pain and reward. In summary, opioids are necessary for hedonic experience (‘liking’) but dopamine motivates you to get ready for it (‘wanting’).<sup>10</sup>

Would these data support Mill’s analysis of the object of desire over that of Green’s?

7. In a manner reminiscent of Aristotle<sup>11</sup> J. S. Mill broadens the scope of Bentham’s utilitarianism by emphasizing morality is founded in “the social feelings of mankind.”<sup>12</sup> First, in what manner do you think Mill avoids the conclusion that human nature is essentially conflicted: on the one hand, each person seeks individual happiness, and on the other, each person seeks approval of others? Second, how might this conflict reflect Freud’s assertion:

For the consideration of the causes of neuroses, we may arrange neurotic diseases in a series, in which two factors, sexual constitution and experience, or, if you wish, libido-fixation and self denial, are represented in such a way that one increases as the other decreases.<sup>13</sup>

9. T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, e.d., A. C. Bradley (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press: 1906) § 161-2, 183-184.

10. Siri Leknes and Irene Tracey, “A Common Neurobiology for Pain and Pleasure,” *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience*, (April, 2008) 9: 314-320.

11. “But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god . . .” Aristotle, *Politica*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Bk. I, Ch. 2), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1131.

12. Mill, 34.

13. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Boni and Livright, 1920), 301.

“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill

In what way can Mill’s notion of human nature and of harmony of self meld the good of the individual with the good of mankind? Indeed, need the good of mankind depend upon individual self-denial?

8. The problem of Hume’s guillotine arises when the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive statements is not observed. Hume puts the problem in this manner:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ’tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.<sup>14</sup>

In a word, Hume believes “ought” statements cannot be validly inferred from “is” statements. The “is-ought problem”, then, arises whenever value statements are derived from factual ones. Even so, isn’t this proceeding precisely what J. S. Mill does when he argues from the empirical observation that “each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness”<sup>15</sup> to the conclusion of the greatest happiness principle that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness.” Either try to show how Mill’s inference is an exception to Hume’s principle of “is” not implying “ought” or try to show Hume’s principle is not true.

9. Mill, apparently in an attempt to stave off criticism of neglecting duties, reasons:

In 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 practised generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the objection to abstain from it.<sup>16</sup>

To what extent do you think Mill’s conclusion here is compatible with Kant’s categorical imperative:

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14. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1968), Bk. II, Pt. I, Sec. 1, 469.

15. Mill, 52.

16. Mill, 44.

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.<sup>17</sup>

Explain whether or not you think Mill’s conclusion about abstinence is consistent with the greatest happiness principle?

10. Is desire a function of reason or sense for Mill? He argues,

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.<sup>18</sup>

Is Mill’s analogical argument fallacious? How is his attempted justification of the end of actions related to the question of the nature of teleological arguments?

11. Might the principle of utility be based on brain chemistry? Many kinds of stimuli activate the so-called reward regions in the brain and consequently are termed pleasurable stimuli by behavioral scientists. Different kinds of pleasure are correlated with increased dopaminergic signaling, for example in the nucleus accumbens, medial orbitofrontal cortex, and sensorimotor cortex, among others. The pleasures from music, play, food, drink, money, and sex, even though not reliably reported by individuals, are associated with the activation of different areas of the brain as revealed by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Activation areas differ according to different conditioned rewards, such as money and backgammon, and natural rewards, such as food and sex.<sup>19</sup> Do you think fMRI scans would provide the kind of relevant evidence for Mill distinguishing (1) the differing quantity of pleasure and (2) the differing qualities of pleasure? Do you think Mill would retain his belief in the intrinsic goodness of pleasure when he realizes the negative effects of pleasure such as addiction and motivational toxicity?

Pleasure can serve cognition, productivity and health, but simultaneously promotes addiction and other negative behaviors, i.e., motivational toxicity. It is a complex neurobiological phenomenon, relying on reward circuitry or limbic activity.<sup>20</sup>

17. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1888), 48.

18. Mill, 80.

19. Gregory S. Berns, Samuel M. McClure, Giuseppe Pagnoni, and P. Read Montague, “Predictability Modulates Human Brain Response to Reward,” *The Journal of Neuroscience* (April 15, 2001) 21, no. 8, 2793-2798.

20. Tobias Esch and George B. Stefano, *Neuroendocrinology Letters* (August, 2004) 25, no. 4, 235.

“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill

As a related question, does Mill’s ethical theory commit the naturalistic fallacy?<sup>21</sup>

12. On the one hand Mill seems to argue utilitarian morality harmonizes two principles: (1) each person ought to act to maximize individual happiness and (2) each person ought to act to maximize the collective happiness of everyone. On the other hand, Mill also seems to state that utilitarianism does not require that each person seek the general good in every action. Is Mill’s view consistent with Adam Smith’s view in this passage?

Though the standard by which casuists frequently determine what is right or wrong in human conduct be its tendency to the welfare or disorder of society, it does not follow that a regard to the welfare of society should be the sole virtuous motive of action, but only that, in any competition, it ought to cast the balance against all other motives.<sup>22</sup>

What specifically is the implicit criterion Mill and Smith use to recommend when an action should be performed in the interests of others rather than in our own interest?

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21. “It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact were simply not ‘other’ but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the ‘naturalistic fallacy’...” George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 10.

22. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1969), 446.



# Index

- altruism
  - Adam Smith, 24
  - and utilitarianism, 12
- Aristotle, 21
- Bentham, Jeremy, 2
- Bradley, F. H., 2
- British East India Company, 1
- Butler, Joseph, 21
- Carlyle, Thomas, 8
- categorical imperative, 22
- character
  - irrelevance to right action in utilitarianism, 14
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1
- composition, fallacy of, 20
- depression
  - caused by egoism, 10
- desire
  - as means and end, 16
  - disinterested, in utilitarianism, 15
  - distinguished from objects of, 21
  - interconnections, 16
  - its relation to the objects of, 17
- dignity
  - mark of higher being, 6
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 19
- duty
  - as related to motives, 13
- egoism, 2
  - ethical, 3
  - psychological, 3
- Entsagen, 8
- epicureanism, 4
- Epicurus, 4
- ethical relativism, 19
- Freud, Sigmund, 21
- golden rule
  - relation to utilitarianism, 12
- good of all
  - not primary to utilitarianism, 13
- Greatest Happiness Principle, 4
  - and virtue, 16
  - goal of, 8
- Green, T. H., 2, 20

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

- happiness
  - as pleasure, 4
  - as the end of action, 18
  - compared to virtue, 10
  - dependent on education, 9
  - not the goal of morality, 8
  - related to the good of others, 11
  - relation to virtue, 15
- hedonism, 2
- human being
  - higher and lower, 5
- Hume’s guillotine, 22
- Kant, Immanuel, 22
- Mill, J. S.
  - criticism of, 21
- Mill, James, 1
- Mill, John Stuart, 4
- morality
  - independent of motive, 13
  - utilitarian standard of, 8
- neurosis
  - causes of, 21
- Novalis (Georg von Hardenberg)
  - on suicide, 9
- ought-is distinction, 22
- Philosophical Radicals, 1
- pleasure
  - and addiction, 23
  - as related to pain and happiness, 18
  - biology of, 23
  - criterion of preference, 5
  - distinction by quality, 7
  - not homogeneous, 8
  - quality of, 5
  - quantity of, 5
  - sources of, 4
- pleasures
  - higher, 5
- renunciation
  - as a means to happiness, 8
  - utilitarian view of, 12
- Saint Paul, 19
- Saint-Simon, Henri de, 1
- selfishness, 10
- Smith, Adam

*“Utilitarianism,” by John Stuart Mill*

- on altruism, 24
- stoicism, 5
  - conception of virtue, 14
  - tranquility of, 11
- suicide, 9
- Taylor, Harriet, 1
- utilitarianism
  - and renunciation, 12
  - and the general good, 12
  - by J. S. Mill, 2
  - disinterested character of, 12
  - happiness as an end, 15
  - standard of right conduct, 12
  - view of character, 14
- utility
  - principle of, 4
- virtue
  - as means and end, 16
  - association with pleasure, 17
  - compared to happiness, 10
- Wordsworth, William, 1