

# John Stuart Mill

## What Utilitarianism Is (1871)\*

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

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

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

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

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

subjected to equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English opponents.

### •Higher and Lower Pleasures•

When attacked in this way, the Epicureans have always answered that it is not they but their accusers who represent human nature in a degrading light, because the accusation implies that human beings are capable only of pleasures that pigs are also capable of. If this were true, there’d be no defence against the charge, but then it wouldn’t be a *charge*; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same for humans as for pigs, the rule of life that is good enough for *them* would be good enough for *us*. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading precisely because a beast’s pleasures do *not* satisfy a human’s conceptions of happiness. Human beings have •higher faculties than the animal appetites, and once they become conscious of •them they don’t regard anything as happiness that doesn’t include •their gratification. Admittedly the Epicureans were far from faultless in drawing out the consequences of the utilitarian principle; to do this at all adequately one must include—which they didn’t—many Stoic and some Christian elements. But every Epicurean theory of life that we know of assigns to the •pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to •those of mere sensation. But it must be admitted that when utilitarian writers have said that mental pleasures are better than bodily ones they have mainly based this on mental pleasures being more permanent, safer, less costly and so on—i.e. from their circumstantial advantages rather than from their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they *could*, quite consistently with their basic principle, have taken the other route—occupying the higher ground, as we might say. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to

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\* Excerpted from the second chapter of Mill’s book, *Utilitarianism*, which was first published in 1871. This version was edited and “translated” into modern English by Jonathan Bennett, and is available online at: <<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/millu.html>>. Bennett explains the notation he uses in his editing as follows: “[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ‘dots’ enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four -point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.”

recognise that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. In estimating the value of anything else, we take into account quality as well as quantity; it would be absurd if the value of pleasures were supposed to depend on quantity alone.

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

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

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

Now, it is an unquestionable fact that the way of life that employs the higher faculties is strongly preferred to the way of life that caters only to the lower ones by people who are equally acquainted with both and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both. Few human creatures would agree to be changed into any of the lower animals in return for a promise of the fullest allowance of animal pleasures;

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

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

existence. Explain this unwillingness how you please! We may attribute it to

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

But the most appropriate label is a *sense of dignity*. All human beings have this sense in one form or another, and how strongly a person has it is roughly proportional to how well endowed he is with the higher faculties. In those who have a strong sense of dignity, their dignity is so essential to their happiness that they couldn’t want, for more than a moment, anything that conflicts with it.

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

‘But many people who are capable of the higher pleasures do sometimes, under the influence of temptation, give preference to the lower ones.’ Yes, but this is quite compatible with their fully appreciating

the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men's infirmity of character often leads them to choose the nearer good over the *more valuable* one; and they do this just as much when it's a choice between two bodily pleasures as when it is between a bodily pleasure and a mental one. They pursue sensual pleasures at the expense of their health, though they are perfectly aware that health is the greater good, doing this because the sensual pleasures are *nearer*.

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

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

opinion of those who are familiar with both? Moving back now from quantity to quality: there are different kinds of pain and different kinds of pleasure, and every pain is different from every pleasure. What can decide whether a particular kind of pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular kind of pain, if not the feelings and judgment of those who are experienced in both kinds? When, therefore, those feelings and judgments declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable in kind, apart from the question of intensity, to those that can be enjoyed by animals that don't have the higher faculties, their opinion on this subject too should be respected.

I have dwelt on this point because you need to understand it if you are to have a perfectly sound conception of utility or happiness, considered as the governing rule of human conduct. But you could rationally accept the utilitarian standard without having grasped that people who enjoy the higher pleasures are happier than those who don't. That's because the utilitarian standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and even if it can be doubted whether a noble character is always happier because of its nobleness, there can be no doubt that such a character makes other people happier, and that the world in general gains immensely from its existence. So utilitarianism would achieve its end only through the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if

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

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

### **•Happiness as an Aim•**

According to the greatest happiness principle as I have explained it, the ultimate end . . . , for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence as free as possible from pain and as rich as possible in enjoyments. This means rich in quantity and in quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preferences of those who are best equipped to make the comparison—

equipped, that is, by the range of their experience and by their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation. If the greatest happiness of all is (as the utilitarian opinion says it is) •the end of human action, it must also be •the standard of morality; which can therefore be defined as:

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

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

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

happiness is the end of life were as fully aware of this as those who taunt them. The ‘happiness’ that they meant was not a life of rapture; but

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

A life made up of those components has always appeared worthy of the name of ‘happiness’ to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it. And even now many people have such an existence during a considerable part of their lives. The present wretched education and wretched social arrangements are the only real hindrance to its being attain- able by almost everyone. [In Mill’s day ‘education’ tended to have a broader meaning than it does today, and to cover every aspect of a young person’s upbringing.]

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

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

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

•he isn't, because of bad laws or conditions of servitude, prevented from using the sources of happiness that are within his reach; and

•he escapes the positive evils of life—the great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as poverty, disease, and bad luck with friends and lovers (turning against him, proving to be worthless, or dying young).

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

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

And this leads to the right response to the objectors who say that we can, and that we should, do without happiness. It is certainly *possible* to do without happiness; nineteen- twentieths of mankind are compelled to

do without it, even in those parts of our present world that are least deep in barbarism. And it often happens that a hero or martyr forgoes it for the sake of something that he values more than his individual happiness. But what is this 'something' if it isn't the happiness of others or something required for their happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own share of happiness, or the chances of it; but no-one engages in self-sacrifice just so as to engage in self-sacrifice! He must have some end or purpose. You may say: 'The end he aims at in his self-sacrifice is not anyone's happiness; it is *virtue*, which is better than happiness.' In response to this I ask: Would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr didn't think it would spare others from having to make similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no result for any of his fellow creatures except to make their situation like his, putting them in also in the position of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can give up for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by doing this they contribute worthily to increasing the amount of happiness in the world; but someone who does it, or claims to do it, for any *other* purpose doesn't deserve admiration any more than does the ascetic living on top of his pillar. He may be a rousing proof of what men can do, but surely not an example of what they *should* do.