CHAPTER I

Utilitarianism and Philosophical Ethics

Normative Ethics

Until the twentieth century, there seems to have been no serious doubt that at least one of the functions of moral philosophers was to tell us, in a general way, what we ought to do. They were, of course, supposed to back up these views with reasons, often of a kind which geared ethical theories to metaphysical or other philosophical views in a system; but in any case, people expected to derive a general program for living (at least that portion of life with which ethics was presumed to be concerned), from the philosophers who dealt with ethical questions. People would not have believed that so far as the actual conduct of life was concerned, the implications of the ethical theories of Plato, Aquinas, Hume, and Nietzsche, among others, were identical. They surely supposed that there were some activities which would be deplored by some of these philosophies and simultaneously recommended by others. This does not seem to be an unreasonable supposition.

But during the twentieth century, the feeling grew that philosophers cannot, or perhaps ought not to try to tell us what to do, even in the most general way. This feeling has declined since the heyday of positivism, but it is still strong. If it is correct, then presumably the task of this book is impossible and should be abandoned. It may be useful to explain, therefore, why I feel justified in attempting it; more especially, what it is that a philosopher working with this subject is presuming to attempt.

This view that philosophers cannot, or ought not, attempt to underwrite moral principles stems, I think, from two main
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sources. The first is the general belief that philosophy consists exclusively in the analysis of concepts, meanings, or the uses of language. Such an activity presumably would discover only whether statements are, or are not, logically true ("analytic"). If a particular statement should be "synthetic," then it is not the business of philosophy to determine whether it is true at all. There is reason to claim that ethical statements that say what we ought to do are not logically true; hence, if they can be said to be true at all, it is held that it must be someone else's business to determine whether or not they are. This is a position explicitly set forth in Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*, where it is said:

As for the expressions of ethical judgments, we have not yet determined how they should be classified. But inasmuch as they are certainly neither definitions nor comments upon definitions, nor quotations, we may say decisively that they do not belong to ethical philosophy.¹

Subtler views than this are now current with regard to the nature of philosophical analysis; by and large, these later improvements continue to support the belief that ethical judgments are not, as such, capable of being supported by purely philosophical investigation. To put it broadly, philosophy is out to establish truth-by-meaning rather than truth per se. Moreover, I agree with this general understanding of the tasks of philosophy. I do not propose (if I can avoid it) to cross the borderline into psychology, nor to appeal to such spurious sources as "synthetic" metaphysics, "intuition," or the like in support of ethical statements. But I deny the inference that philosophers cannot advance substantive ethical theories, for reasons to be explained in the course of this work.

The second source of this rejection is a set of currently popular views about the meanings or logical functions of ethical language, viz., those called "emotive" and "performative." According to these views, ethical statements are not literally propositions at all—they do not state facts of any kind, but perform certain

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other functions, such as expressing emotions or attitudes, stimulating action, advising, ordering, and so forth. It is easy to proceed from this position to say that:

Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have. . . . But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.2

If we accept this particular view of Ayer's, which has had considerable following, there is good reason why philosophers should not try to demonstrate moral principles: it is because they are undemonstrable—by anyone—not only by philosophers. Thus Ayer's position is not aimed especially at philosophers, as the first one is. The first view, which concerns the nature of philosophical analysis, leaves open the possibility that someone might be able to "verify" ethical statements, only not in the role of a philosopher; whereas the second leaves ethical statements without the possibility of verification by anyone, regardless of profession.

The view that ethical statements are not essentially propositions, that they are imperative or performative in their logical function is, by now, almost a truism in ethical philosophy. I do not propose to challenge it. And if by "true" one means "corresponds to the facts," then no doubt ethical statements are neither true nor false. But why should we say this? And what would we mean if we did say it? Recent work on the concept of truth should be sufficient to warn us against supposing that expressions like "corresponds to the facts" really explain the notion of truth. For example, Strawson has argued forcibly that

“is true” is not a predicate, any more than “is good” or “exists.” And if “is true” is itself essentially a performative, as Strawson argues, then there is no obvious reason for not applying it to ethical statements. On the contrary, there are numerous reasons—some of them, I think, quite obvious—for applying it to these statements. (I shall try to indicate some examples in the last chapter.) Even if we forego using “true” of ethical utterances, we can do as well with “justified,” “well-grounded,” or similar locutions, as Aiken and others have argued.

In my opinion, neither of these two general views seems to show that philosophers ought not to do substantive ethical work. The first view would only imply this, I think, in company with a wholly unsatisfactory supposition of a parallel between non-analytic ethical statements and non-analytic “factual” statements. It would indeed be absurd to suggest that a philosopher, who is essentially an armchair theorist, might be able to decide between two statements of a factual kind when they are incompatible but both equally conceivable. What one must do in order to verify factual statements varies, of course; in all cases, except those which assert something about what is going on in the vicinity of our armchairs, it is necessary to get out and look (or otherwise investigate the world) to see whether they are true, test them. This, then, is a perfectly intelligible explanation of why a philosopher cannot set up shop to discover new facts; although he can, and should, keep track of the ones he already knows! Surely, the whole trend of twentieth-century analysis in ethics—a trend exemplified by the second of the two views—demonstrates that this could not be the case with substantive ethical statements. If these major trends are correct, any empirical investigating you can do with such statements is bound to serve to verify only the so-called “factual components” of ethical statements. Since the “specifically ethical” components of such statements are precisely the “non-factual” ones, what would be the character of an ethical investigation? If anything, these trends in analysis imply that

any “investigating” that can be done has to be of the “armchair” variety.

In order to reinforce this suggestion (and to qualify it somewhat), consider the way we must proceed with propositions thought to be “synthetic.” The philosopher who is wondering whether or not some statement is synthetic must attempt to conceptualize, imagine, or describe what it would be like for the statement to be false. If he can produce a clear description or picture of a situation in which it would be false, and another in which it would be true, then he concludes that the statement is not a conceptual truth (or falsehood). On this basis, he also concludes that its verification is not the task of the philosopher. Let us take the statement, “Killing is wrong,” for example. We might test the truth of this statement by considering circumstances in which killing would be right; only our question is not whether the statement is true but whether it is synthetic. On the model for testing syntheticity of descriptive statements, this would require that we try to imagine what it would be like for killing to be right. For this purpose, it does no good to conjure up special circumstances or borderline cases such as self-defense or unintentional manslaughter; for it is the central cases of descriptive statements which can be conceived false. There is a tree in the quad—but it is perfectly conceivable that there should not be. In order to establish that the statement, “Killing is wrong” is “synthetic,” we must imagine what it would be for straightforward homicide (with no excuses), to be right. But how are we supposed to go about supposing, imagining, or conceiving that homicide is right? If we attempt this, we must draw a blank, since this only shows that ethical statements do not express matters of fact. This strongly suggests that when ethical principles are said to be non-analytic (which is true enough, I shall argue later), this must not be taken as proof that only an empirical investigation can support them, for we have seen reason to suppose that only a conceptual investigation could support them. If we are quite convinced that there is something wrong with killing people, and observe that this is not due to any special information of the sort required for supporting scientific statements, we have no option but to conclude that if our convictions have any kind of support, that support must be provided
by some kind of abstract argument. We may or may not want to conclude that the fundamental principles of ethics are “synthetic a priori,” a phrase both obscure and misleading. That they are “a priori” seems the inescapable conclusion if, of course, there are any such principles at all.

This argument must be understood to concern only the “specifically ethical” components of ethical statements. We are all aware that a particular act is right or wrong only if it does, or does not, have certain characteristics. Then the statement that it is “right” or “wrong” will in part require observational support, to establish that the type of act in question actually does or does not have those characteristics. Here the psychologist, the sociologist, the economist, or other investigators can and must be brought into the picture. The question is not whether some facts are relevant to ethical questions, but whether we can show that they must be. Moreover, we must be able to do this without resorting to peculiar “specifically ethical facts” to which only certain people have access. Such a move would be tantamount to giving up the search for good arguments.

In short, it is only the contention that ethical statements cannot be rationally supported at all that would seriously imply the inability of philosophers to support them, and this view, as we have seen, would also make nonsense of the suggestion that they should be supported by anyone else. Added to this is the fact that whenever people try to say who, other than philosophers, can help us with our substantive ethical thinking, the results are unsatisfactory. Psychologists, teachers, and preachers come in for mention. But can we seriously argue that these professions prepare one for the role of general moralist better than moral philosophy? This seems doubtful.

In summary: the supposition that ethical statements are intrinsically undemonstrable is not compatible with the assertion that certain non-philosophers are better qualified to make them than philosophers. We should all be equally unqualified if that view were correct. Secondly, it is difficult to produce a plausible list of other persons who would be qualified to formulate ethical principles, if they can be rationally formulated at all.

In the final section of this book, I shall consider whether and how it is theoretically possible to demonstrate, support, or ra-
tionally advocate any substantive ethical positions by means of a
general, abstract philosophical argument. For the present, it is
sufficient to point out that the proposition that ethical statements
are intrinsically indemonstrable is unsatisfactory. The view that
we are prevented, logically and therefore forever, from really
solving ethical problems seems incomprehensible, especially since
people sometimes do solve them. The view that they cannot be
said to be true or false is at least obscure, especially since people
talk as if they were true or false. And the view that people can-
not literally contradict each other on ethical questions is simply
incredible. Even if there were no currently available theories to
suggest a plausible way of combining the undoubted truth that
ethical statements are not essentially factual with the doubted
truth that they are nevertheless subject to rational investigation,
we could not remain satisfied with the curious view that they
are not open to such investigation, which would mean that there
is no point in thinking about ethical questions at all. We should,
I think, be quite justified in going ahead and trying to produce
some sensible views on these questions.

In addition to casting doubt on the supposition that philos-
ophers are not qualified to formulate ethical principles, we can
produce some plausible reasons for thinking that they should
be better qualified to do this than other people. It is agreed that
it is precisely the philosopher's business to consider the meaning
or logic of ethical sentences. This is in itself one good reason
for handing to the philosopher the job of attempting to expose
the fundamental principles of the subject as well. We have noted
that formulating these principles is not like formulating funda-
mental principles in science. In the case of science, a background
of experimentation and observation is logically essential before
there can be theorizing to any purpose. But no special experience
is necessary to formulate ethical principles. If they can be formu-
lated at all, this must be, in some sense, a conceptual task rather
than a task requiring some special types of extra-armchair inves-
tigations. Philosophers themselves are only too quick to point
out that people who begin to think about ethical principles very
often confuse the philosophical task of analysis with that of
framing principles. But if the philosopher is able to point out the
danger, why should he not be peculiarly fitted to surmount it?
He would, presumably, be ahead of the philosophically un-tutored in this respect.

In short, I have argued that the activity of formulating and supporting general principles in ethics must be conceptual if anything, and that the "analytical" task of ethics is important to anyone undertaking to engage in that activity. If this is correct, it follows that philosophers ought to do this job. That it has traditionally been considered the philosopher's job can be respectfully suggested as a supporting reason under the circumstances. They may or may not have done the job well, but it was theirs to attempt.

Method in Normative Ethics

In the introduction to a recent book on ethics, this statement occurs:

One of the points I shall hope to establish—for the beginner rather than for the advanced student to whom it will already be obvious—is this: no moral philosopher is able to legislate moral standards in the way that some earlier writers thought he could.6

Passages expressing a similar sentiment are easily found in many recent works on moral philosophy, and they are doubtless justified. It is indeed impossible for philosophers to legislate moral standards, or to create them, or to be in any other way the originators of them. Again, this is merely because they cannot be legislated, created, or originated at all.6 But why should it be expressed with particular reference to philosophers when it could be addressed equally well to anyone? Suppose that in the same statement we substitute the word 'discover' for 'legislate.' It would then be a good deal less plausible, I think. Now suppose we substitute the words 'support' or 'advance' for 'legis-

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late.' In that case, it appears that we could fairly doubt it. Why should not a philosopher be able to support, or advance, or even to discover a moral "standard," just as a scientist might support, advance, or discover a proposition in chemistry? The fact that moral principles are not on the same subject as chemical ones, and even the fact that they are of a logically different type, is hardly sufficient to make this impossible. In any case, previous philosophers have not attempted to "legislate" moral standards, although they have attempted to support, defend, and sometimes discover them. Philosophers do admit that philosophy can help to make our thinking on moral subjects more coherent and more rational. If this is true, why can they not actually hope to improve or correct it?

The suggestion that philosophers cannot "legislate" morality serves to remind us of the method which the philosopher must adopt as he attempts to formulate general ethical principles. The point is (as in all cases of rational inquiry), that we will not be able to progress unless our proposals are subject to some kind of control imposed by the sense that our theorizing is testable by reference to some sort of "data." As in the case of other theories, a philosophical theory is an effort to account for something, not an exercise performed in intellectual vacuo. We must now attempt to specify just what these "data" are.

Most of the classical moral philosophers, as well as recent writers on ethics, are in agreement that broadly speaking, data for the moral philosopher consist in the "deliverances of our ordinary moral consciousness," or words to that effect. They are correct, but we need a more precise characterization, in the first place. Secondly, we deserve an argument to show that that is the way it must be.

All of us who study ethics have some more or less well-defined ethical beliefs. If we did not, we should be quite unable to proceed. This is commonplace, and the only question is how much to make of it. Too much certainly can be made of it. Any number of ethical writers have made this observation into a theory: the theory, for instance, that we all come equipped with a ready-made source of authoritative ethical deliverances known as "conscience," "practical reason," or perhaps "the moral sense," the deliverances being referred to as "intuitions." That this is
unsatisfactory is, I trust, sufficiently well-established by now to obviate further argument. But the need to present an alternative and more neutral characterization is evident if we are to continue to maintain that our pre-existing ethical beliefs play an important role in ethical analysis.

We employ the words 'good,' 'right,' and 'just,' very often, applying them to some things and withholding them from others. These tendencies to apply ethical words may be referred to neutrally as "ethical beliefs" but there are also ethical hunches, doubts, hesitations, and downright quandaries, as well as times when we feel confident or certain. In addition to variation in degree of confidence of application, there are variations in precision of formulation. Some of our ethical beliefs are reasonably well-defined, and others extremely vague. The fact that there are variations is sufficient reason in itself to deny that they can be accounted for as authoritative intuitions. Often we change our minds and even have inconsistent beliefs without being aware of it. The question concerning all these beliefs is: can we say that the object of ethical theory is to "account" for them? Many writers have talked as if it were so. Around the turn of the century, in particular, they tended to refer to ethics as a "science," the "science of moral phenomena," or some such thing. This is not a satisfactory way of looking at the matter.

One obvious objection to characterizing ethical theory as a "science" is that there are sciences properly so-called which do concern themselves with the same subject matter. Cultural anthropology and sociology are cases in point. But if one presents ethical philosophy merely as a systematic description of a certain set of ethical beliefs, one will miss the point; for no normative conclusions will appear to follow. It would therefore be misleading to classify moral philosophy as a "science."

Perhaps a more serious reason for not considering ethical philosophy as closely parallel to science is that the parallelism in structure is not as great as it might appear. The assumption is

7 Thus Henry Sidgwick: "It [his book] claims to be an examination, at once expository and critical, of the different methods of obtaining reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done which are to be found—either explicit or implicit—in the moral consciousness of mankind generally." The Methods of Ethics (Preface to 1st ed.; London: Macmillan Co., 1907), p. v.
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that there is a structural resemblance between ethics and empirical science, in that there is a field of data consisting of observations. These observations are to be accounted for in terms of a comprehensive theory which will also suggest new experiments and observations by which they can be tested. It cannot be denied that there is some similarity here. But there is an essential difference which suggests that the comparison is inappropriate on the whole. The observations behind an empirical science are not, generally speaking, open to much doubt. We do not ordinarily suffer from illusions, hallucinations, or other mistakes in perception when we observe phenomena. Moreover, our observations cannot be construed as vague hunches of which the final theory is a more precise formulation. But in the case of ethical beliefs this is just the status we do have to ascribe to them. When we judge that some particular act was right or wrong, we are making a judgment, not an "observation." It is entirely possible for the judgment to be wrong; in fact, most people would probably claim no more than a modest success in their ethical judgings. In science, we can distinguish reasonably well between facts and the theories which are designed to account for them; but in ethics, the very status of the "facts" is continually in question. Moreover, disagreement in judgments is quite common in ethics: as much so as disagreements among ethical theories of different philosophers. Therefore, it is not very satisfactory to view these theories as attempts to account for essentially undoubted facts.

Indeed, the role of theorizing is rather pervasive in ethics. People do not ordinarily have hunches about matters of high-level scientific theorizing; but they very often theorize about ethics. Take a random groups of students into a classroom, introduce them to some of the problems of ethics, and nearly all of them will in short order be found advocating some theory or other. Take the same group into a classroom, expound to them some tolerably comprehensible scientific theories, and most of them will sit back and say, "How interesting!" It seems that a need is felt to theorize in ethics, which is not felt in the sciences. It seems unlikely that this is just a happenstance psychological fact about people.

Nevertheless, we are obliged to think of ethical theories as
having an "inductive" aspect in the sense that they must be capable of implying many of the ethical beliefs we already hold. How are we to describe this, in view of the foregoing difficulties? I suggest that the situation is as follows. We noted at the outset of this discussion that we have tendencies to apply ethical words to some things and to withhold them from others. Now, if we try to formulate what ethics is about, we shall begin by listing some of these ethical words and envisaging cases in which we should apply them. If we are presented with a theory which implies that certain acoustically similar words apply to a totally different and unrelated set of things (acts, events or objects), then what reason could we have for supposing that it is a theory about the same concepts as those we have been employing? This is not exactly a "paradigm case" argument, although it is similar. A better parallel, however, is with the philosophical question of the existence of the external world. We make mistakes in perception now and again—things are not always as they seem. From this observation, a philosopher concludes that we always might be wrong in our statements about the world; from this he concludes that we might always be wrong. But the last inference is logically unsupportable. No sense can be made of the supposition that we are always wrong, despite the fact that we might be wrong in any particular case. Similarly, no clear sense could be made of the theory that nothing is ever right or wrong. The set of activities which define the problems of morals do not make sense without the supposition that something is right or wrong. So what can we do but choose standard examples and ask for a theory which will, at least, make sense of those?

It is for this reason, then, that we must test ethical theories by reference to what we already believe on the subject. No theory that will do justice to ethics can fail to do justice to at least a fair share of them. If it does not, it will be judged either false or not an ethical theory at all. And to apply these considerations to our present case, we must therefore begin our appraisal of the utilitarian theory by seeing whether or not it will account for what is already recognized to be right or wrong.

Theorizing activity also has some force of its own, as philos-
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ophers recently have urged with regard to science. An ethical theory, to be adequate, must account for many of our previous ethical beliefs. But suppose it does so extremely well for most of them and yet that there remain a few aberrant cases which cannot be reconciled with it. There may well come a time, under these circumstances, when the supposed “data” will themselves be rejected. It is important to recognize that there is more room for this in ethics than in science. For we do make sense of the notion of ethical reform, and we do not, if we are sensible, repose too thoroughgoing a confidence in our ethical judgments. Exactly how the process of ethical reform occurs is not easy to discover, but the possibility of it cannot be denied, although the possibility of a complete, wholesale, top-to-bottom alteration can. It seems likely that the force of a simplifying ethical insight plays a major role in this process of reform.

Moreover, it must be borne in mind that although this “inductive” method, as it might be called, of testing the adequacy of ethical theories is perhaps the basic one, there is also another way of arguing for such a theory. This might be called the “a priori” method, by which a comparatively short argument purports to establish the whole theory all at once. For instance, if we could show that the Principle of Utility is true by arguing that it is necessary, demonstrable, undeniable, or self-evident, that would be a conclusive proof. People have doubted that there can be such arguments for ethical theories, and certainly some that have been used are open to criticism. It would be dangerous to argue that the principle of utility is “analytic,” for reasons which will be adduced in the next chapter; the category of the “synthetic a priori” is more than open to suspicion. Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that such an “all-at-once” argument is possible, and I shall formulate one in the last chapter. What I am suggesting here is merely that if a plausible argument of that kind can be produced, and if the theory it supports is also plausible by the “inductive” tests of accounting for our presently firm ethical beliefs, then that fact must be taken as very powerful support for the theory.

Let us now turn our attention to utilitarianism in particular. If we look at the standard “text book” pictures of the utilitarian theory, we find that it reads approximately as follows. Utilitarianism is a species of hedonism, which is a philosophy of life. According to this philosophy, the goal of man’s life is pleasure. An “egoistic” hedonist would hold that each man ought to “pursue” his own pleasure and nothing else; utilitarianism, on the other hand, says that we are to “pursue” the general pleasure, that is, to endeavor to produce as much pleasure as possible, no matter where it is found, nor whose it is. He is, correlatively, to shun pain (others’ as well as his own). Since in most situations what we do is likely to produce both some pleasure and some pain, we have to settle for the maximum “balance” of pleasure over pain. Pleasure is, by definition, good, or perhaps “the good”; pain is, by definition, bad, or perhaps “the bad.” Our duty at each moment, under any circumstances, is (by definition) to produce the maximum balance of pleasure over pain in as many people as possible.

The standard interpretation of this picture is open to numerous well-known objections. G. E. Moore showed that it is fallacious to define the word “good” as meaning “pleasurable”; in fact, that it is incoherent to maintain that “good” means pleasurable and also that “the good” is pleasure. Ross argued that even the apparently innocuous premise, “It is our duty to produce the most good,” cannot be held to be true by definition. He claimed that it is false. He alleged that on the utilitarian view, it would follow that if someone made a promise to someone else to do something, and then discovered that more good could be brought into the world by ignoring it, it would be his duty to ignore it. By this reasoning, it is easily shown that there is no point in making promises at all; since our duty is to act in the same way in any case, whether we make them or not. (If more

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good would be brought into the world by doing what was promised, it would be one’s duty anyhow; whereas, if more good would not be accomplished, then it would be one’s duty to break a promise if made.) Numerous authors have objected that the “calculus” which would be needed to put the Principle of Utility into practice cannot be carried out, certainly not in practice and perhaps not even in principle. Again, they hold that utilitarianism cannot be squared with the demands of justice. It is held, for example, that we have a duty to distribute good things equitably as well as felicifically, and that this is incompatible with utilitarianism. As to criminal justice, they argue that if, for example, it were discovered that everyone would be made happier if an innocent man were imprisoned, then he should be imprisoned, if utilitarianism holds true. Alternatively, if a certain criminal could no longer harm anyone, then he ought not to be imprisoned. And it also has been fashionable to hold up utilitarianism as a “pig philosophy.” Some have denied that pleasure is a good at all; many have held that there are, in any case, other good things besides pleasure. Is not a life of pleasure-seeking, even if combined with an effort to secure that life for others as well as oneself, ignoble, befitting only the low-browed? Critics have pointed to Mill’s celebrated defense of liberty and have claimed that a concern for freedom, as such, is incompatible with the view that ultimately pleasure is the only good. Theorists also point out that at least Bentham and Mill appear to have been “psychological hedonists,” holding that man is incapable,


15 E. F. Carritt, Ethical and Political Thinking (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), Ch. 5.


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"by nature," of seeking anything except pleasure. They have striven to show that this premise is false, and that it is incompatible with ethical hedonism, of which utilitarianism is supposed to be a species. Since the time of Bentham and Mill, there have been many improvements in ethical theory, and not a few of the preceding objections are due to these improvements. There have also been developments within the utilitarian tradition itself. Of the improvements in question I shall make considerable use in the remainder of this book, but two of the developments are worth mentioning here. The first, historically, is what Hastings Rashdall called "ideal utilitarianism," though Moore, who also held this view, called it simply "utilitarianism." In this theory, the identification of "good" with "pleasure" is abandoned. "Good" is chosen as a primitive term (indefinable, as well as undefined, in Moore's view), and various things besides pleasure are held to be good in themselves. The Principle of Utility is amended simply to read that our duty is to produce the most good, rather than the most pleasure or happiness. This, indeed, is the theory which Ross was particularly concerned with in his refutations of "utilitarianism." It is still regarded as a generalization, or perhaps idealization, of the original view.

The other, more recent, development is known as "rule" utilitarianism. Its chief modification, or as some claim, interpretation, of the original utilitarian view is the idea that instead of evaluating particular acts by the principle of utility, we must think of this principle as applying only to general rules. Acts are right if they conform to the rules, which in turn are justified on the ground that they in general produce more good than any alternative. As this formulation suggests, they also tend to

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adopt "ideal utilitarianism" as their version of the principle of utility.

The "textbook picture" of utilitarianism sketched at the outset is, I shall argue, unsatisfactory. Moreover, I regard both of the developments of utilitarian theory briefly outlined above as misguided. In succeeding chapters, I propose to show what is wrong with the picture in question, and what is wrong with the developments. I shall argue that the numerous standard objections, many of which were briefly mentioned above, are based either on the travesty in question, or on erroneous reasoning as to what utilitarianism does imply. The "developments" are plausible, if at all, only because they appear to meet these objections. Since the objections are incorrect, the developments are unnecessary; they are open to serious objections themselves; and to the extent that they are helpful, they are not incompatible with utilitarianism.

I shall present an alternative picture of the Principle of Utility which, in my opinion, does more justice to the apparent intentions of the theory's founders. But I shall not devote very much effort to arguing this. Historical questions concerning the intentions of philosophers are fraught with difficulty. I am not primarily concerned with such questions. Whether or not my picture of utilitarianism is in accord with the original intentions of Bentham and Mill, I believe that it is a considerable improvement over what we have come to accept as the standard picture. It is an improvement in the sense that it seems to me to be true, and its truth is what I propose to argue for, in the main.

Since utilitarianism is a view of the whole of normative ethics, its defense is a complicated business. In order to meet a certain objection, one has to explain other implications of the theory. Soon, one discovers that nothing less than a complete exposition is enough to convince the critic, or to make one's view clear. This poses severe problems of organization, which, I fear, are not very well-solved in this work. I therefore beg the reader's indulgence on two scores: first, that he read the work in its entirety before he leans too heavily on a particular criticism of any one part; and secondly, that he forgive the nonconsecutive-ness of exposition.

As an aid to the reader, I shall begin by painting in very broad
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strokes the alternative picture of utilitarianism I propose. I shall then fill in individual chapters with the different elements of the picture and present them completely, with the necessary arguments to support them. The general picture is as follows:

To begin with, utilitarianism is a moral theory. It is not a "metaethical" theory, that is, one which purports to define, explicate, or analyze the language of morals. It is not a "theory of value," that is, one which attempts to lay bare the fundamental features of anything, in any context whatsoever, that make it good, bad, or indifferent. It is not a theory of "intrinsic value," in the sense of G. E. Moore. It is not a "philosophy of life." It is not, therefore, a species of "hedonism" in any straightforward sense. It is a theory of what makes any act good or bad, right or wrong, from the moral point of view, in short, a theory of moral value. It is, to put it another way, a theory of the moral criterion, as Mill said.23 The criterion in question, stated briefly, is that the moral value of an act is proportional to its productiveness in all those whom it affects, of what they hold to be non-morally good; and inversely proportional to its productiveness of what they hold to be (non-morally) bad. I take this to be a more accurate way of saying that moral value is determined by the general interest, welfare, or happiness. We could say that utilitarianism is the view that the whole of morals can be summed up as the taking of everyone's point of view, and not just our own, when we act. The theory of utilitarianism is the theory that we can deduce from this principle, together with relevant statements of fact plus suitable definitions of the more specialized ethical terminology, any true statement of a moral kind. It is the business of an exponent of utilitarianism to bring this theory to bear on all of the different kinds of judgments properly called moral judgments. If there are differences of this kind however (and there are), the theorist must have some view of the differences in meaning of the different moral terms in which these judgments are stated. This activity is a metaethical one. Therefore it is not a task which can be solved by making deductions from the Principle of Utility. To be specific: I believe that it is a different

23 John Stuart Mill, in Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government (New York: Everyman's Library, E. P. Dutton and Co., 1926), p. 1. (All further references to these works will be taken from this edition.)
thing to say that an act is a morally good one, a morally right one, a just one, or an obligatory one. The utilitarian must show us which acts are good, which are right, which are just, and which are obligatory. In order to make it possible to deduce general statements such as “All and only acts of type F are good,” “All and only acts of type G are right,” etc., from the Principle, we must evidently have a view as to what we are saying when we say of an act that it is good, right, or just, etc. Views on these subjects belong to metaethics, and there is nothing especially utilitarian about them. Thus, we can go wrong in either of two ways when applying the utilitarian principle. We may have gotten the distinction wrong, i.e., have failed to have an adequate view of just what we are saying when we say that an act is ‘just’ as opposed to ‘good,’ for instance; in which case, it will not be surprising if we also come out with a wrong theory as to which acts are just, however correct our deductions. On the other hand, the resulting deductions can be wrong. Only if we are successful on both counts can we hope to appraise the utilitarian theory itself. As we have seen, such an appraisal must proceed by seeing whether the resulting view of what is good (right, just, etc.) is adequate; that is, accord with what really is right, just, etc. so far as we can see by our pre-analytical lights.

To sum up: it is absurd to suppose that promises have no moral force; that inequitable distribution is just as good as equitable; that innocent men sometimes ought to be punished; that we should live like pigs. It is also absurd to maintain that if I like jam, then it is my duty to eat jam, that a theory of the moral criterion should be incompatible with analytic propositions, and that twice as many people being half as happy is as good as half as many people being twice as happy. These are all results which any theorist, and hence the utilitarian, must avoid. I have, in previous paragraphs, made a number of general assertions about this theory which, if carefully understood, will I think be seen to go a great way toward avoiding all of these various absurdities which people have claimed to deduce from the Principle of Utility. We shall now proceed to their explicit statement and defense.