Morality and Utility

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CHAPTER II

The Logical Status of Moral Principles

Logical Status of the Principle of Utility

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Bentham and his followers embarked on a defense of the utilitarian viewpoint in ethics, it was possible to announce the principle and then plunge right in, deducing consequences, warding off attacks, and so forth. Since the time of G. E. Moore, it is necessary to proceed more cautiously. In the previous chapter, utilitarianism was classified as a "substantive" moral theory as opposed to a "meta-ethical" one. This classification calls for explanation, especially since there has been, and still is, a tendency among the critics of the utilitarian theory to question it, or to ignore it even as a possibility. We need, then, some tolerably clear account of the status which the Principle of Utility is supposed to have. I shall follow up my discussion of this matter with some brief historical remarks to indicate that my interpretation is not out of line with the apparent intentions of Mill and Sidgwick, and probably Bentham.

We can easily produce examples of discourse which seem unproblematically of an ethical kind: "A man ought to be willing to die for his country if necessary"; "Jimmy, you ought to be nicer to Mrs. Smith"; "It is wrong to tell lies." These are pretty obvious examples, of different varieties. On the other hand, we can produce examples of explicitly metaethical statements: "'Good' connotes a unique, non-natural property"; "To say 'You ought not to have stolen that money' is equivalent to saying 'You stole that money!' in a peculiar tone of horror." The difference between these two classes of statements can perhaps
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be described best in terms of the distinction of use and mention. In the former class, ethical expressions are being used; in the latter, they are being mentioned; and the fact that they are is clearly indicated by the inverted commas surrounding their apparent occurrence. Indeed, we can say that the ethical expressions in question do not occur at all in statements of the second class.¹

It would be reasonable to say that statements of the first kind are ethical statements, as they stand, and to say that they give (or normally, would be used to give) advice, instruction, or criticism of a moral kind. We could speak sensibly of a person’s obeying or living up to, or failing to live up to, what is said in statements of the first kind; but there is no evident sense in speaking of living in accordance with the statement, “‘Good’ denotes a nonnatural property.” In a rather quixotic sense, we might say that philosophers could model their behavior on such a statement; but all we mean is that they could consider it, believe it, defend it, and so on.

Metaethical statements, we would like to say, are those which purport to describe the meaning, the use, or the logic (if these are distinguishable) of ethical expressions; that is, they purport to tell us what we are saying when we say that something is good, right, wrong, a duty, or whatever evaluative word is in question. As Moore pointed out, it is not sensible to construe such statements as of the kind which support particular evaluations: “‘You must do this, because many people use a certain word to denote actions of this nature.’”² Recent questionings of the distinction between fact and value or of the analytic and the synthetic are out of place against this obvious observation. It is hard to see how a philosophical investigation could proceed at all without “countenancing” such a distinction.

Unfortunately, there are many statements which seem to lie betwixt and between these two pretty clear categories. Philosophers rightly puzzle over such sentences as “We ought to do what is right,” “What is right is what produces the most good


on the whole,” or “It is one’s duty to do evil,” all of which have,
one might say, a logically peculiar ring to them. Recently, such
sentences as “We ought to keep our promises” and “Cheating is
wrong” have been argued to have a rather special status, too.
Some of these examples might plausibly be classified as analytic,
or as self-contradictory, although doing so would no doubt upset
the digestions of some philosophical readers, the notions of an-
alyticity, etc., having been subjected to skeptical doubts of late.
An analysis of such sentences is needed, since they are neither
explicitly about language nor obviously and straightforwardly
ethical as they stand. The question naturally arises whether the
Principle of Utility, however formulated, is not also in limbo.
In particular, the question arises as to whether we are to think
of it as a disguised metaethical sentence.

To begin with, a sentence cannot wear a disguise by itself. If
a sentence appears to be of one sort but is in reality of another
sort, this must be the fault of the persons using it. The question
is, how are we to understand this Principle? If it has not been
clear in the hands of other writers, at least we can assign it a
definite logical status here, if it us useful to do so. The reason
we are interested in the question, of course, is to find out what
sort of arguments it would be relevant to advance in order to
persuade people to adopt it. We want to avoid being influenced
by arguments of the following type, about which Moore was
rightly concerned: (1) “By ‘right’ I mean ‘in accordance with
the wishes of the Master Race’”; therefore (2) “To do what is
in accordance with the wishes of the Master Race is right.” Such
arguments are worthless, since they do nothing to show what
is right in our sense of the term. It is arguable that no mere
definition, even a correct one, can supply any help of this kind.
Moore went on to criticize the utilitarians in particular for com-
mitting the same sin, and numerous critics have followed him
in this. It will be worthwhile to devote a bit of attention to
setting the historical record right on this matter. The three most
important utilitarians are Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick, whom
we shall consider in reverse order. Sidgwick, the latest and per-
haps the clearest of the three, recognized a clear distinction be-
tween questions of analysis and questions of substance, and
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produced explicit analyses of both ‘right’ and ‘good.’ On the question of the meaning of ‘right’ and the other “deontological words,” he says:

What definition can we give of ‘ought’, right’, and other terms expressing the same fundamental notion? To this I should answer that the notion which these terms have in common is too elementary to admit of any formal definition.3

This view would certainly avoid the danger of trivializing the Principle of Utility, which Sidgwick formulates as follows:

By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct.4

Mill’s statement is similar:

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.5

What of Mill’s view of the meanings of ethical expressions? He rarely discussed this subject explicitly, but there are two places in which he does: the fifth chapter of Utilitarianism, and the final book of his System of Logic. In the latter, it appears that he is a forerunner of Stevenson, Ayer, and Hare, for he says that moral and other evaluative judgments do “not express themselves in the indicative, but more properly in the imperative mode, or in paraphrases equivalent to it.”8 Clearly, this analysis would also avoid the danger of trivialization. (He has a narrower and more special analysis of ‘just,’ which we will be considering in detail in Chapter VI.)

3 Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics, p. 32.
4 Ibid., p. 411.
5 Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 6.
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What, finally, about Bentham, the earliest of the three? Certainly he is the most plausible one to choose as having committed some sort of Naturalistic Fallacy. He tends, for instance, to say of ‘benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness’ that ‘all this in the present case comes to the same thing.’ But how much can we make of this? I submit that the evidence available from Bentham’s work does not support any particular assessment of his meta-ethical views. Much of the evidence suggests that he would not want to say, explicitly, that ‘right’ (for instance) means ‘conducive to the general happiness.’ For example, Bentham discusses a principle he calls the “principle of asceticism,” which asserts just the opposite of the Principle of Utility. He certainly regards this “principle” as wildly irrational and incredible, saying that it “never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one-tenth part of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day’s time they will have turned it into a hell.”

Nevertheless, this does not square with the supposition that he thought it was self-contradictory. It is impossible to “follow” a self-contradictory “principle” at all; thus, no concern about the “consequences” of doing so would be relevant.

Finally, turning to recent times, we can point to the example of Smart who, in his recent defense of utilitarian ethics, explicitly adopts an emotivist position. Therefore, there is no excuse left for criticizing the utilitarian position in general, or in particular for trying to pull the wool over our eyes by defining itself into acceptance. This general assessment is supported by recent work on Mill, e.g., that of Urmson and Aiken.

What, then, is the status of this principle? Is it supposed to be analytic or synthetic, for example? I suggest that for the time

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8 Ibid., Ch. II, par. X, pp. 27, 28.
9 See J. J. C. Smart, An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics (Cambridge: Melbourne University Press, 1961), p. 2. “I . . . will assume for the purposes of this study the truth of some such meta-ethical analysis as that of Hare’s Language of Morals.”
11 Aiken, “Definitions, Factual Premises, and Moral Conclusions,” in Reason and Conduct, Essay III.
being we regard it as "synthetic," if we must make our choice; although, as it was pointed out earlier, in Chapter I, 'synthetic' does not function in quite the same way for ethical statements as for the obvious examples of factual statements. My reasons for suggesting this are as follows:

It would generally be said that utilitarianism consists in the assertion that the Principle of Utility is the fundamental principle of morality. It is this word, "fundamental," which causes the trouble here. For there is a tendency to suppose that if a statement is fundamental relative to another group of statements, then it must be of different epistemological status. This calls for a brief look into this matter.

To begin with, let us consider a scientific generalization. We observe a number of animals, and we notice that each of them has a heart; in fact, we never discover one which does not have a heart. We conclude that all animals have hearts. Now, "All animals have hearts" is a more general statement than "Fido is an animal, and Fido has a heart"; but it is no more necessary than the latter. In fact, no general statement can be more necessary than any statement it implies. To put it in general terms, if a statement, $S_1$, implies another statement, $S_2$, and $S_2$ is not necessary, then $S_1$ cannot be necessary. The situation is analogous to that of "validity" in logic. If the function of a statement is to sum up several particular statements, then it is a waste of time to argue that the (general) statement in question is necessary, unless you are willing to argue that the particular statements in question are also necessary.

The Principle of Utility, then, is to have whatever status typ-

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A similar view seems to be suggested in Stephen Toulmin's Philosophy of Science (New York: Hutchinson University Library, Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1960). One might, for that matter, consider the "Principle of Causality" itself as an example. Numerous philosophers, most notoriously Kant, have supposed that the proposition that every event has a cause is necessarily true; even though the proposition about any particular event that it has any particular cause is contingent. This juxtaposition is, in my opinion, flatly inconsistent.

13 Cf., e.g., Willard V. O. Quine, Methods of Logic (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1959), Ch. 26, p. 150, rule iii.
rical "low-level" moral principles have, the difference being merely one of generality. If we want to call these typical moral statements "synthetic," then we must regard the Principle of Utility as synthetic. This reflects, especially, the contrast with metaethical or implicitly metaethical statements, which is the main thing here. If arguments turn up eventually (e.g., Chapter IX), which suggest that the Principle is in some sense "necessary," then this will show that all of the particular, low-level statements that follow it are also necessary. In no case will there be a contrast of logical status between the "supreme" principle and the "lesser" ones.

There are two qualifications to this, neither of which alters the question of the analyticity of the Principle of Utility. First, the Principle is intended to be supremely general, in the sense that the "other things being equal" clause need not be attached to it; whereas, typical moral principles such as "Stealing is wrong," or "You ought to keep your promises" have to be understood as having an 'unless' . . . clause. More will be said on this point in the sections below. Secondly, all "particular" moral statements and many general ones have a factual element. Thus, if Bill stole an apple, then what Bill did was wrong; but that Bill stole an apple is just a matter of fact. Similarly, 'Adultery is wrong' is, according to the utilitarian account, only true to the extent that adultery causes such things as psychological pain and inconvenience. This, if it is true, is only contingently true. In the cases of these ethical statements, then, we can analyze them into a "factual" and an "ethical" element. Then we can say that if the Principle of Utility is a priori, then the "ethical element" of every ethical statement is also a priori.

In summary, if the Principle of Utility is true, we must be able to set it down as an axiom. Then, from a non-moral description of any act, together with definitions of specific moral terms, we can deduce from it the moral status of that particular act. The same holds true for classes of acts. If the Principle of Utility is adequate, we ought to be able to deduce all of the general moral truths as well as all of the particular ones from it, given the facts. The project undertaken in this book is to make it plausible that this can be done. Of course, I do not propose to deduce all of the particular moral truths from it, being neither in possession of
them nor in a position to be so. I do propose to show how a number of very important moral principles, generally regarded as true, follow from it, and especially how certain principles which have been thought not to follow from it, in reality do.

Now, what is the point of this? It is, in part, a question of theoretical interest. The theoretician is always interested in elegance and simplicity. It can hardly be denied that utilitarianism has these attributes; indeed, people tend to criticize it because it has them in too high a degree. However, this is not a question of theoretical economy for its own sake. As I see it, there are two serious reasons for wanting to be able to sum up morality in a simple system. First, and most importantly, it allows one to raise the question of proof more efficiently. Instead of having to ask, "Why should I resist my impulses to do violence to others?" "Why should I pay my debts?" "Why should I . . . ?" thus raising a new question for each particular duty or other moral practice, we shall, so to speak, be in a position to ask all of them at once. If we can find some predicate 'F' such that every right act has it and every wrong act has its opposite, say 'F_1'; then, if we can advance an argument for doing acts of type F and refraining from acts of type F_1, we shall have answered all of these questions at once. To those who do not believe that there can be a serious question why a particular right act is right, this apparent advantage will seem fraudulent. But most people, I think, as well as most philosophers, have felt uncomfortable from time to time about doing what morality requires, and have felt the need of some solid reason for continuing to do it. This feeling might be dispelled by insisting that ethical principles are self-evident, or that they are commands of God; this isn't very likely, and it is no more likely that it will be allayed by philosophers who insist that such questioning is out of place. In any case, recent philosophers have enabled us to put together a really strong argument for utilitarianism, which I shall discuss in the last chapter. I shall wait until then because, as argued earlier in Chapter I, it serves no useful purpose if it doesn't prove what needs to be proved; and what needs to be proved is that the basic body of our moral beliefs is correct.

The other serious advantage is that once we have found a plausible fundamental principle, we need no longer rely heavily on the strength of a patchwork fabric of independent principles to bear the weight of moral thinking. Instead, we can reason things out by making deductions from the basic principle. Thus, there is less reliance on memory and more on reasoning. This has an additional advantage in making sense of moral change. Moral beliefs can easily become ossified, rigidified, and thus distorted, if one has no sense of a general purpose, common to them all. One of the main troubles with intuitionism of any kind is that it tends to lead to this kind of rigidity, as such writers as Dewey (and recently, Smart and Warnock) have emphasized. Who is more intolerable than a misguided but fanatical moralist?

The seriousness of these advantages will be weighted differently by different readers. But it seems to me that each of them singly, and surely all of them jointly, justify a serious effort to explore the possibility of reducing ultimate ethical principles to a single one. It may be asked what the criteria of individuation for "principles" is, and to this I have no answer. I think it is natural to view the Principle of Utility as "unified," or "single" in some sense. I shall have to rely on this tendency, although I do not think there is any serious danger of its simplicity being exposed as fraudulent. We just have to realize that this simplicity is not incompatible with extreme complexity and multiplicity of secondary principles; and to those to whom simplicity of underlying assumptions is intrinsically suspicious, I can only add, "Wait and see."

Utilitarianism is a Moral Theory

If we are to have any hope of plausibly explaining and defending the utilitarian theory, we must have a precise idea of the work to be done by it. This question has not been very clearly faced, and sometimes barely faced at all, either by defenders or opponents of utilitarianism in the past. In the previous section, I argued for the view that the utilitarian theory is a "substantive," rather than essentially "analytical" or "meta-ethical" the-
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ory. In the present, I shall narrow down the sense of what this
tory is about by insisting that we do not confuse the question
it is answering with a number of others that are often conflated
with it. The general question to which the Principle of Utility
is an answer is: "What is it about an act that makes it morally
right or wrong?" or more generally, "What is the criterion of
moral value?"

On the other hand, it does not provide an answer to the fol-
lowing questions: (1) What is the (general) criterion of value?
(2) How ought I (anyone) to live? (3) What is intrinsically
good? When I say that it "does not" provide an answer to these
questions, however, perhaps I should say instead that we should
not think of it in that way. Undoubtedly, Mill did say that
"Pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable
as ends." It is debatable how this remark was meant to be in-
terpreted. In any case, I shall propose (in Chapters III and IV
which follow) that it is quite unnecessary to make this statement
in the context of utilitarian theory. In order to lay down a gen-
eral foundation for determining the questions with which utili-
tarianism properly deals, we need a reasonable characterization
of the distinction between moral and non-moral evaluative ques-
tions. Fortunately, a fair amount of good work has at last been
devoted to this question. In the main, I shall need only to
summarize it here, hoping (no doubt unrealistically) to avoid
the begging of any serious questions. To a certain extent, I am
going to restrict the sense of the word 'moral' in what some
people will consider an artificial manner. However, I hope to do
so without hocus-pocus, and to provide good reasons for the
limitation.

It is easy to generate examples of evaluative questions that are
not, as such, ethical questions. Judgments of the value of works
of art, mechanical devices, or of a person's performance at a
special type of task are typically non-ethical. All such matters can,
of course, be connected with others in such a way as to raise
ethical questions. For instance, an artist in his garret may be
on the point of completing a master-stroke when he hears a
scream emanating from the neighboring room. Does he drop

15 Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 6.
what he is doing, possibly to lose the inspiration forever, or does he ignore the cry for help in order to forward his art? This we would obviously consider to be a moral question. But a question of whether to use blue instead of pink at a certain juncture in the production of a painting would clearly not be counted as a “moral” question, but as an aesthetic one.

Probably there would now be general agreement that the distinction between moral and non-moral evaluation is not to be sought in a distinction of meanings of words such as ‘ought,’ or even ‘right.’ Rather, the distinction lies in the context of their use, or the point of view from which they are used. We may, without prejudicing the issue, characterize the question as follows: What makes the use of ‘You ought to do x,’ say, on a particular occasion a moral use? What factors constitute a context as a moral one rather than some other kind? In particular, there is the question whether and to what degree factors other than “formal” ones are relevant. For example, some writers have held what might be called an “extreme protestant” position, according to which a judgment is a moral judgment if it is “a matter of authentic personal decision or commitment.” On this view, the range of actions which might be morally judgable is logically unlimited, since almost any act could conceivably be made the subject of such a decision. At the other extreme from this view is that of Toulmin, according to whom the moral judgments are those whose function is “to correlate our feelings and behavior in such a way as to make the fulfillment of everyone’s aims and desires compatible so far as possible.” It seems to me and to many critics that such a view amounts to a sort of naturalism. If we took that view, it would be no great problem to defend utilitarianism as a moral theory, since Toulmin’s view is all but a statement of that position. But then the danger of trivialization discussed previously becomes imminent.

There is evidence in favor of both of these extremes, certainly. On the one hand, the “protestant” view takes account of the undoubted motivational element in moral judgments. Socrates’

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puzzles about whether a man can voluntarily do evil have worried philosophers for centuries; and for ages, men have experienced the phenomenon of wrestling with their consciences. All of this would be inexplicable if we simply meant by 'moral' some such thing as Toulmin suggests. On the other hand, modern philosophers rightly make a serious and general distinction between prudential and moral questions. In a broadened sense, in which 'prudential' is applied to what is best for oneself, or any particular person, not taking others into account, it is often proper to contrast the moral and the prudential, even though they undoubtedly have many points in common.

Ultimately, so long as we realize what needs to be done and where, it may be that the present question is not of too great intrinsic importance as it stands, and is primarily a matter of organization. If one takes the "motivational" element of moral expressions as primary, and yet argues for a socially-oriented ethics, then one must show that such an ethics really does exhaust the content of morality. On the other hand, if one defines 'moral' in terms of the common good, or some such, then we have to raise a question which, on the "protestant" conception of morality, makes no sense whatsoever. This question is: But why ought we to be moral? We can sensibly ask whether we ought to have regard for people other than ourselves. It would not do to try to apply the "definitional stop," as Hart calls it, to this question by saying that morality is, by definition, social, and at the same time answer the other question by saying that morality, by definition, commits one to action.  

On the other hand, it seems to me that the purely protestant view of morality is a dangerous one, for on this viewpoint it is too easy to answer the "social" question in the negative, or not to answer it at all. Given that moral judgments are those that we regard as committing us to action, there is a very real danger

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18 David Gauthier, in *Practical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1963), p. 173. (E.g., "... the acceptance of the wants of others as providing reasons for acting is of the essence of morality." This would make the question, "Why ought I to be moral?" a logically open one. However, Gauthier regards this question as unanswerable.)
that we will come not to think of the question of our responsibilities to other people as terribly serious, or that it won't occur to us to think that there are such responsibilities at all. There is something absurd about this. Failure to have regard for others is obviously a moral shortcoming, whereas failure to have sufficient regard for oneself is clearly a different matter. It "puts the thing in a different light," as one might say, so that any view collapsing the two must surely have gone wrong somewhere. The question is, can one have an understanding of the word 'moral' that does justice to both the "protestant" and the "social" aspects of morality, and at the same time does not beg the substantive question of the criterion of right and wrong?

Some suggestions are available that will get us reasonably close to this goal. In the first place, there is the general feeling, recognition of which is doubtless due mainly to Kant, that morality is a matter of the ends one ought to have, whereas prudential values are due to the ends one happens to have. The limitations of this distinction for our general question are ably discussed by W. D. Falk in his essay, "Morality, Self, and Others." He points out that despite the truth of this claim, moral duties can be slight and prudential "duties" very serious; that prudential values are capable of being as serious, as binding, as real, and as cogent as moral ones. He rightly emphasizes that we cannot think of moral obligations as merely those which are in fact imposed by society. But, and here we come to the crucial point, it is nevertheless true of moral values that they ought to be imposed by society, while this is not so of prudential ones. This point is easy to overlook, but of the greatest consequence, I suggest. We would like to distinguish, not only between those decisions which the individual may make for himself, and those which society prods him about or forces him to make; but also between those which individuals may or should make for themselves, and those which society would be justified in prodding him about, whether or not it actually does so. This general view, which is derived in part from Mill, has been advanced by T. L. Sprigge in a

20 Mill, Utilitarianism, Ch. 5, and Liberty, Ch. 1.
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recent article. According to Sprigge, "The ethical sense of 'X ought to do A' is distinguished from others by the methods which the speaker would favor for inducing X to do A." Roughly speaking, "Moral issues are issues with which we are concerned that everyone should be concerned." This seems to me to point in the right direction.

This view does not beg the question about the content of morality. Any kind of activity in theory could have been, and indeed has been, held to be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy in the above sense. For example, many beliefs, as well as private practices such as autoeroticism, have been held to be proper subjects of social concern. Moral matters are everyone's business, but some very strange things have been (and thus, can be) held to be everyone's business.

The above account might not be held to be the most fundamental one. It is possible, for instance, that we could derive it from some other account of a more "protestant" kind. At least, the above account is not incompatible with the "protestant" one. The most essential feature of that type of account is: that moral judgments take precedence over other evaluative judgments, in the following sense: If a particular act is thought to be morally wrong on the whole, then no weight of other kinds of reasons in favor of doing it should be permitted to count. Only after an act has passed the tests of moral permissibility may other considerations be brought into the picture. It follows that moral values are "absolute" or "ultimate"—they have to be taken into account no matter what else is taken into account. For this reason, a certain stringency or authority, a certain onerousness, has traditionally been associated with moral questions, and rightly so, I think.

This "protestant" account nevertheless tends to support the suggested "social" one as well. For if moral ends are absolute, then there can be no limitation on the means which may be used to achieve them, and thus, in particular, the methods of social, as distinct from merely personal, reinforcement can be appropriate to them.

22 Ibid., p. 322. See also Baier, Moral Point of View, Ch. 8, pp. 195 ff.
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This matter of being an "absolute" end, to which no limitation of means is relevant, may also be a main source of the felt weight of moral considerations. Bernard Suits has suggested\(^{23}\) that the essential feature of a game is that there are certain limitations of means to the end of "winning" or succeeding, which are adopted for their own sakes and not because the means in question will not work. This may account for that lack of complete seriousness that we tend to associate with games; if the end in question were really important, we would feel that any means would be justified. The principle that "The end does not justify the means" is obviously false, I suggest, if the "end" is just that of being morally good.

That moral ends are supreme and precedence-taking should not, however, be confused with the assertion that they are the most important in an unqualified sense. Precedence in action is certainly a sense (or perhaps a criterion) of "importance"; but it seems to me quite wrong to suggest that morality is "intrinsically" important, for instance. That is precisely what it is not. Consider the way in which a sensitive person might regard art. We can easily imagine a person who is extremely interested in art, and who would not want to live without it, although he could get along very well without other people, or at least without personal contact with many of them. Nevertheless, such a person could be a very moral person—honest, kind, responsible, and so forth—despite the fact that he doesn’t regard other people as very interesting. In a sense, he regards art as much more important than people; yet, he responds to the scream for help across the hall from his garret.

If this person believed that intrinsic importance was the basic factor in morality—if, for instance, he subscribed to the Moore-Rashdall theory that our only duty is to increase the quantity of intrinsic good in the world—he would have no reason to heed the scream. Should the lives of a lot of ordinary clods be held of more intrinsic importance than the advancement of Art? Opinions would no doubt differ a great deal on this point. For the artist’s part, the answer is obviously, No. To use a Mooreian fantasy for illustration: if he had his choice between pushing

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two buttons, one of which would bring a lot of "peasants" into existence (even if they were perfectly happy ones, and quite good people, morally), and another which would bring another Beethoven's Ninth into existence, he would not hesitate to push the second button. A person whose moral principles were determined by considerations of intrinsic value would say that such a choice was dictated by morality. If, for instance, he were faced with a button which would make some presently existing people miserable if he pushed it, while bringing into existence a magnificent work of art, whereas, if he did not push it neither would happen, he might very well push it. Yet surely a moral artist would not push it, however sorry he would be at the thought of missing out on that masterpiece—however much intrinsic value would thereby be lost, in short. 24

I am going to suggest that utilitarianism provides an explanation for this somewhat paradoxical status of moral values. According to it, moral values are logically derivative. They ride piggy-back, so to speak, on nonmoral evaluations. If there were no nonmoral values, then there could also be no moral values. Thus the notion of a "Holy Will" which had absolutely no interest in any but moral values is incoherent—a community of such beings would be logically out of business, a metaphysical Ghost town, only with no previous existence! Moral values are precedence-taking, because they embody whatever other values there are, as seen by the people whose values they are. But moral values are not additional intrinsic ones, unrelated to those which people already happen to recognize.

However this may be, the characterization of morality in terms of precedence-taking, with the understanding that it leads therefore to the justification of social action, seems to me the best one to adopt for our present purposes. It does not logically beg the question as to the specific content of morality; and yet, at the same time provides a reasonable sense of direction to substantive work. Relations among the different kinds of values are, of course, complex—which is what we should expect on the utilitarian theory, in view of the preceding paragraph. It is sufficient for the present to emphasize that they must not be identified with

24 Further discussion of these matters is found in various places below, especially Ch. III.
each other, that the utilitarian theory is concerned only with moral value as distinct from the others, and that our characterization of the precise difference between them is useful only as a guide. If some readers think that this is an arbitrary limitation on the purposes of utilitarian theory, or that it does not wholly correspond to the intentions of various utilitarian theorists, I am quite willing to accept these criticisms. In that case, let us consider the following chapters as an account of a certain part of morality, that part of it that is distinct from the purely prudential part. Further reasons for such a restriction will be presented in the final chapter.

Formulation of Moral Principles

We now need to consider the criteria which must be met by any well-formed moral principle. By “well-formed,” I mean “applicable”—to the extent that a moral principle is vague or otherwise ill-formed, we shall be unable to apply it. With very general ethical principles—especially one meant to be so general as to comprehend the entire area of morals—there is a grave danger of formulating them so ill that no application is possible. There are many examples of such ill-formed principles. For example, the general view that right action is action “in accordance with one’s nature,” or action “aimed at realizing one’s nature,” fails hopelessly on this score. To begin with, the words ‘nature’ and ‘realizing’ are essentially misused in these views. Given any quite ordinary senses of the words, it will either make no sense at all to suppose that we ought to “realize our nature,” or it will be hopelessly implausible to suppose that we ought to do so. Is Jones realizing his nature when he murders Smith? Yes, says Jones, because his nature is that of a murderer and he is simply trying to realize it. But the philosophers who try to defend this view reply that that is not his “real” nature. His “real” nature, then, is what? We have no idea how to decide, at least none that is provided by the word ‘nature’ itself. Hence, the application of the view becomes quite arbitrary. Such views of ethical principles are philosophically useless; worse than this, their vague-
ness can lead to ethical disasters. Especially if the view is incul-
cated with the formidable apparatus of an establishment of
religion, the people who are fed this vague slogan will find that
they cannot apply it themselves, and being unable to do so, they
come to rely on authorities to do it for them. They blindly
follow the opinions of the authorities they accept without being
able to examine them to see whether they are any good. If, as is
natural, the authorities are fallible or, worse yet, have special
interests to defend, their "flocks" will end up regarding the most
bizarre things as morally sacred and persecuting other people
who disagree, and there will be no end of troubles.

Moral problems are (ordinarily) serious ones—as is inevitable
from the meaning of the word 'moral,' if the views in the pre-
vious section are correct. Accordingly, any shortcomings of
formulation of ethical principles are likely to result in moral ill
of one kind or another. The same holds true, of course, for
misunderstandings of the process of moral reasoning, if anything
about the latter is held to be distinctive. Thus, there are moral
reasons for being precise and intelligible in the formulations of
moral principles. That this is philosophically desirable in any case
goes without saying.

What conditions must be met to achieve this desired precision?
Clearly, the general condition is that we should know, for each
amable act, whether that act is right, wrong, or indifferent;
also, which act to prefer among alternatives. In other words, we
must be able to see what the principle we are examining says
about each case it is intended to cover. Since the Principle of
Utility is intended to cover all moral questions whatsoever, we
should ideally get a decision in each case. Moreover, it ought not
to be the case that the decision depends upon who is doing the
interpreting; this indeed, is implied by my previous remarks.
The uselessness of a principle will be proportional to the amount
of disagreement among interpreters as to what it says about par-
ticular cases. Needless to say, we shall not be worried if those
who are not acquainted with the principle, or who have no fa-
miliarity with the arguments on its behalf or interest in attempt-
ing to apply it, should "disagree" in this way. But if a person
who is familiar with the language in which the principle is stated
is unable to give any sense to some of its terms, or is able to apply
his own tastes to its applications, then the principle (or its statement, if we can distinguish between them) is to that extent at fault.

Any moral principle or statement, however general, attaches some moral predicate to an act, character, or intention, or to a class of any one of these. In Chapter IV, it will be argued that concern with acts is logically primary in morals; thus I shall limit my statement here, for the sake of convenience, to acts. Also, since we are dealing only with principles, which are general, we shall neglect singular moral statements for the time being. Thus, we may represent any moral principle schematically as follows: (x) \((Fx \supset Mx)\), where 'F' is replaceable by a "factual" predicate, and 'M' is replaceable by some moral predicate.

The point I wish to make about formulations may be made by concentrating on the possible replacements for 'F.' What I want to say about this is that these replacements must not contain any evaluative language if our goal of objective applicability, and therefore of reasonably public and uniform interpretation and usability, is to be achieved. They may, of course, include mention of evaluative language, but they may not contain the evaluative language itself.

For instance, the "Ideal" utilitarians' view that what is right is that which is conducive to maximum good will fail of this test, since applying it involves making value judgments oneself. On the other hand, an "old-fashioned subjectivist" principle, e.g., that (x) (y) (x thinks that y is wrong \(\supset\) y is wrong) does not fail on this particular score, since the antecedent here requires only that we discover someone's opinion on a point, and not that the opinion in question be right. It does fail on a different point, for it requires x to have an opinion already, independently of the "principle," (which is why it is such a silly one). It also leads to contradictions, since we need but find two people who disagree about y, and we shall be able to infer that y is both wrong and not wrong. It "leads to" them only if there are people who disagree—but there are. To be perfectly applicable, however, a principle must not be able to lead to any contradictions.

Compare this with "(Ex) (y) (if x thinks y is wrong, then y is wrong)," which would be true on the theistic voluntarist's position. There is nothing wrong with this on either of the above
scores, provided that the person [or God] x does not contradict himself about y. But it suffers on the quite different score that there is no clear and generally acceptable way of discovering what God’s opinions are. The restriction we need here is not easy to formulate, but I am inclined to suggest that it be couched in terms of “empiricism”: Replacements of ‘F’ must meet the condition that it is applicable by empirical procedures.

There is, of course, no end to the complexity of the project of trying to specify in clear and precise terms just wherein clarity and precision consist, and I do not propose to do so here. Some of the above conditions, not very precise or clear themselves, are surely necessary but not sufficient. I think it safe to say that they represent goals toward which the ethical philosopher who concerns himself with formulating moral principles must work.

It is worth mentioning here that Mr. Smart’s view of utility seems unsatisfactory on the first of the above counts; in his view, ‘happiness’ is a partly evaluative concept.25 This seems to me a theoretical shortcoming; certainly, it is what Mill must have had in mind in insisting in the Essay on Liberty that a person’s own good is not a sufficient warrant for interfering with his line of action. Smart’s admission26 that two utilitarians might advocate very different courses of action if they differed about what constituted happiness, and that this difference between them would be simply an ultimate difference in attitude, seems to point up the need for eliminating the so-called hedonistic aspects of utilitarianism as essential ingredients. A moral system should not presuppose solutions to any first-order evaluative problems.

However, it is worth adding a point of sufficient importance to count as a general principle of interpretation of utilitarianism. This is the point that if the applicability of a predicate is sufficiently difficult or obscure, that in itself constitutes a reason for not placing very much weight on the outcome. It is surely

25 Smart, Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics, p. 15. “To sum up so far, happiness is partly an evaluative concept, and so the utilitarian maxim, ‘You ought to maximize happiness’ is doubly evaluative.” This is a result we ought to avoid if we can. Smart’s reason for holding this rests, I think, on the assumption that utilitarianism requires us to have a general theory of intrinsic value and that happiness is this value. This assumption will be discussed in the following chapter.

26 Ibid.
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contrary to the general interest to require people to spend too much time trying to make precise calculations of happiness or unhappiness, so long as methods for doing this are not available.

Clarity Versus Precision

Utilitarianism is, of course, a theory par excellence in which the fundamental predicates are matters of degree. In order to be able to arrive at moral decisions on the basis of utility, we must be able to say, in the case at hand, whether alternative x would produce more utility than alternative y, or less, or an equal amount. But the measurement of utility is notoriously fraught with difficulty, and some of the difficulties may well be inextricable. It might be thought that this fact makes the ideals of objective applicability discussed in the previous section unattainable. For that matter, it has been held in some quarters that an ideal of objective applicability is itself inapplicable in the realm of morals. It is difficult to dispute Aristotle’s dictum that a theorist should aim at no more precision than the subject admits of: the implication being, in the case of ethics, that it is not very much.

What we have here are two contrary objections, although it is not uncommon to hear both advanced against utilitarianism by the same critic. On the one hand, it is argued that utilitarianism should be rejected because it is not possible to measure precisely the variable which it holds to be basic; on the other, it is argued that utilitarianism should be rejected because the precise measurement of anything whatsoever is out of place in so unscientific and visceral a subject as ethics. When we contemplate these contentions in juxtaposition, we can formulate a rejoinder which surely deserves consideration: If morality is essentially imprecise, calling for judgment and sensitivity, and utilitarianism makes basic the estimate of quantities whose estimation is essentially imprecise and calls for judgment and sensitivity, then it is the more plausible that utilitarianism is barking up the right tree.

The issue, or at least one important aspect of the issue, may be put as follows: Can we claim that ‘has more utility than,’
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'has less utility than,' or 'has as much utility as' are clear predicates, if utility cannot be precisely measured? In what does precision consist, and is imprecision compatible with clarity and applicability in the sense required? It was suggested, in the preceding section, that the principal (or at least one principal) component in the notion of objective applicability is attainability of general agreement. Consider, then, the following parallel. Height, as it happens, is (often) very precisely measurable with the aid of measuring rods and rules. But even without the aid of these instruments, there is a considerable range of cases in which we get general agreement among observers. Goliath is obviously taller than David, Napoleon shorter than Wellington. But if two people are of nearly equal height, then we might get disagreement. On the other hand, we would not get disagreement as to whether the pair in question are roughly the same height. Such developments make it clear that there is a "quantity" being observed in these different cases. These pave the way for the establishment of units of measurement and rules or rods by which to make the measurements precise. Indeed, the agreement of the precise measures obtained with the obvious but imprecise measures made previously is a necessary condition of being sure that the new system is measuring that quantity which we want measured. If I introduce a system which makes David "taller" than Goliath, then my system is no good, at least as a system of measuring height. 27

We may now suggest the following conclusions. In the first place, if it is sometimes clear and obvious, that x is of more utility than y, and sometimes not clear whether x is of more utility than y or less utility than y but clear that they are of roughly equal utility, then it follows that utility is, at any rate, a "quantity," in the general sense of being subject to variation in degree—something which some cases have more, less, or the same amount of as others. In the second place, it ought to be possible to decide whether this "quantity" is the one whose magnitude is the relevant factor in a given moral issue. If it is the relevant one, then it may also be the case that if we can think of no good reason to suppose in a particular application, that one alternative will in fact produce more or less utility than another,

27 The discussion of Baier on this subject is illuminating. Cf., Moral Point of View, pp. 57–64. (The example of height is his.)
then in that application, the two alternatives are morally equal—
neither is better than the other. If this decision is the one indi-
cated, then the fact that we cannot measure utility with precision
will, of itself, have been the deciding factor in the case.

As to the first point, it seems evident to me that we are some-
times clear as to which of two alternatives produces more utility;
and that we are clear about this without having had to invoke
precise metrics, precise instruments. What really is in question is
the second point: Is utility the relevant factor or not? This book
is devoted almost entirely to the discussion of this second ques-
tion, and to the effort to answer it in the affirmative in all cases
where the issue is a moral one. Sometimes, the method will be
that of matching vaguenesses: If a case really is hard to decide,
and if we can show that what makes it hard to decide in that
case is that utility is involved, and that the utility in question is
hard to measure, then that is a point in favor of the utilitarian
view.

Certainly Bentham's language has led many people to extrava-
gance concerning the aims of utilitarian theory. The question is
whether the difficulties in a program of making precise measure-
ments of utility are practical or theoretical. The reason for sup-
posing that the difficulties are "practical" is that pleasure or
happiness would presumably be an intensive magnitude, and these
are notoriously difficult to measure. In Bentham's time, the meas-
urement of such quantities was in its infancy. Since then, psycho-
physicists have devised measures of apparent volume, of light
intensity, and so forth.\textsuperscript{\text{28}} If pleasure or happiness were comparable
to such sensory phenomena, then the difficulty of measuring them
would be of the same kind, and thus presumably soluble.

The trouble is that pleasure and happiness are not comparable
to subjective sensations. What we have to measure (when it
comes to measuring such things), is the desire or preference with
which the pleasure or satisfaction we are considering is corre-
lated. These can be measured only in a comparative way. There
seems something nonsensical about trying to measure the total
quantity of desire in a person, as opposed to the degree to which
he desires this or that. Even the latter, in turn, can be "measured"

\textsuperscript{\text{28}} Cf., S. S. Stevens, "Mathematics, Measurement, and Psychophysics," in
\textit{Handbook of Experimental Psychology} (New York: John Wiley and
Sons, Inc., 1951).
in any clear sense only by considering a person's "preference structure": The degree to which he desires x is the number of other things which he desires, but which would rank below x.\textsuperscript{29}

Finally, it is noteworthy that the only occasions on which we clearly need precise measures for ethical purposes are those on which the things to be measured are quantities desired, but not quantities of desire. If two small boys are given chocolate cake, it may be important to divide it precisely into equal pieces. If Jones' income is $100 per year greater than Smith's, then it is presumed that Jones' income is slightly more desirable than Smith's. But this is because it can be safely assumed in such cases that an indefinite amount of the things in question, or at least a good deal more than is available, is desired. When this condition is not satisfied, it is difficult to make precise measurements of utility; but this is because we don't know what, in the relevant sense, the "utilities" in question are. (Further remarks pertaining to this are to be found in the following Chapters III and VII.)

Apart from these problems, which are of genuine concern, there are two more of a spurious kind deserving some attention. First, the contention that since the consequences of our acts go off into the indefinite future, we can never know what the utility of a given act is; hence, we cannot use estimates of it as a basis for action. Secondly, there is the contention that the "general happiness" is too indefinite, too remote, or too obscure an object of pursuit to permit its being used as a guide to action. Coupled with the latter is an extremely curious argument advanced now and then by critics, to the effect that according to utilitarian principles, it presumably follows that there ought to be as many people as possible provided they are all at least slightly happy.

With regard to the first, we need merely to deny both the premise and the reasoning. That the consequences of each of our

\textsuperscript{29} However, game theorists and decision theorists have devised various ingenious measures of these things. The literature in these new disciplines is by now immense. For an ethicist's appraisal, see, for example, Robert P. Wolff, "Reflections on Game Theory and the Nature of Value," \textit{Ethics} (1962). For a rather ingenious general formulation, see R. McNaughton, "A Metrical Concept of Happiness," in \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} (December, 1953). This system introduces a way of making interpersonal comparisons of utility as well as intrapersonal ones; but it is subject to the difficulties of application discussed in the text, which are such as to make one wonder whether the system is of much use other than as a purely abstract exercise.
acts go parading off into the indefinite future is, in the relevant sense, just not true. The supposition is founded on a mistake, I believe, or rather, on two mistakes. (1) First, there is the standard philosophical tendency to inflate local and isolated cases into vast metaphysical generalizations. If one sits back and tries to recall any act which there is genuine reason to believe will significantly affect the happiness of persons into the indefinite future, he will find that the number of such acts is approximately zero. The speculation that all of our acts have such effects is theoretical speculation in the bad sense of that expression. If we take a perfectly elastic ball and let it fall onto a perfectly solid surface, it will keep on bouncing forever—provided that it's done in a perfect vacuum and that nothing gets in the way (and provided that the laws of nature continue operating?). True, but these conditions are never realized. There is friction, and there are winds, and so forth. Human affairs are similar. The fact is that people forget, or lose interest. When Mrs. Smith's husband is killed in an accident, she wails and rends her hair for a day or two; but, in a year or two she has found a new and different, and perhaps better, husband. Or, she has discovered she's better off without one, or . . . indeed, we may oppose a maxim based on better evidence to the theoretical speculation in question: Everything is in flux. (2) The other error is simpler. It is forgotten that the effects of my acts on persons remote in time from myself generally depend upon the intervening actions of other people. How, then, is the "effect" to be attributed to me alone? Are not the acts of the intervening persons to be counted as well? Clearly, if I do something which will affect the happiness of Smith in a certain way, and which will have a different effect if I don't do it, then the fact that it would not have been possible to do it had it not been for an earlier act of Jones is not sufficient reason for requiring Jones to have taken the possibility in question into account. Most of the remote effects of our acts are of this kind. They affect the happiness of remote persons only in the sense that they alter the conditions under which intermediate persons can produce the effects in question. If, for example, I have a child, then this makes it possible for persons in the future to affect its happiness. Nevertheless, the things they do which affect its happiness are their responsibility, and not mine.

Thus, there is no good reason to accept the contention that
utilities are inestimable because our acts have remote effects which are unknown or unknowable. Even if we did accept this contention, it would not follow that we therefore cannot ever know the utility of any particular act. As Bentham pointed out, one of the dimensions of utility is propinquity or remoteness, and another is certainty or probability. Principles such as that a certain present evil is not justified by an uncertain future good are clearly utilitarian in foundation, and are sufficient to resolve many cases. Finally, we may point out that any sensible system of principles for guiding action is going to require some knowledge of the future. The fact that this is difficult to obtain doesn't differentially affect utilitarianism. We must carry on as best we can in a difficult world on any realistic moral theory.

The other class of objections may be dismissed more shortly. To the objection that our acts do not, in general, have discernible effects on the general happiness, we can reply simply that no utilitarian has ever held that in order for the utility of an act to be appraised, it must have effects on everyone's happiness. As Mill points out:

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 those 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.

The principle of utility is always stated in terms of the effects of one's actions on whatever persons they do affect, and not merely in terms of its effects on everyone in general. Thus, we have Sidgwick's formulation as follows:

The conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct.

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30 Strictly speaking, one might doubt that these are two separate dimensions; it seems preferable to say that a near good is only preferable to a remote one of equal quantity because of the inherently lesser certainty of its being attained, things being as they are in this world.


This point might seem to be too obvious to be worth making. Yet Sidgwick himself, as well as numerous critics of the theory, have failed to see what follows from this. Thus it has been held that on utilitarian principles, bringing into existence twice as many people who are half as happy is just as good as half as many people who are twice as happy, other things being equal. He contends that:

Assuming, then, that the average happiness of human beings is a positive quantity, it seems clear that, supposing the average happiness enjoyed remains undiminished, Utilitarianism directs us to make the number enjoying it as great as possible.\(^{33}\)

This is entirely unsatisfactory, for reasons which are worth going into very briefly here. There are two related confusions underlying the inference drawn in the second quotation from Sidgwick, and in the objection advanced on similar grounds. The first confusion is between two interpretations of the phrase, 'produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole.' One interpretation, which I fear may be the one most usually adopted, is that producing happiness is like producing milk: just as it is a matter of contingent fact that, as things stand, we have to have cows to have milk, so too, as things stand, we need to have sentient organisms to have happiness. Just as we can, under present conditions, increase the production of milk by increasing the production of cows, so too we may increase the production of happiness by increasing the production of people: Make people happy by making happy people. This is a fundamental error, involving as it does the supposition that utilitarianism is a theory of intrinsic value, coupled with the moral position that the moral value of an act is proportional to its production of intrinsic value. In the following chapter, I shall attempt to show what is wrong with both of these assumptions. For the present, I shall simply contrast this interpretation with the other one which, in my view, is the correct one. According to this interpretation, the important phrase in the first Sidgwick quotation above is the phrase, "taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct." The principle of utility, on this view, enjoins us to in-

crease people’s happiness and to decrease their misery.\textsuperscript{84} The question of increasing or decreasing a person’s happiness cannot logically arise unless and until there is a person whose happiness is in question. It is nothing more than a silly play on words to ask the question: What effect on a person’s happiness does it have to bring him into existence? Even if we have gotten over the first confusion, it will do us no good if we make the second one, which involves the supposition that such questions make perfectly good sense. If I do not have a child, then the question of how happy he is logically does not arise; a comparison between the state of his happiness if not born versus the state of his happiness if born is similarly absurd. Nonexistent people are not one kind of people any more than nonexistence cupolas are one kind of cupolas, or nonexistent gods one kind of gods\textsuperscript{35} (and in the case of people, as things stand, an unborn person is a nonexistent person).\textsuperscript{36} But this is the mistake which one must make in order to advance the objection above.

Now, if it were impossible to exercise any control over the birth of children, so that we could not deliberate on population policy, then there would be no distinction in practice between the two interpretations of utilitarianism distinguished above. But

\textsuperscript{84} Smart, in his \textit{Outline of Utilitarian Ethics}, p. 18, distinguishes these two interpretations under the heading of “average” versus “total” happiness. I don’t like this choice of labels owing to the fact that it tends to cross the present question up with that of distribution, for one thing. This confusion infects Marcus G. Singer’s discussion of the present point, for instance in \textit{Generalization in Ethics} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961), p. 202. Also, Smart tends to discuss the present question in terms of “what a humane and sympathetic person would prefer,” and this seems somewhat tendentious.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf., the 1930’s routine which went: “Do you want to buy a duck? Does your brother want to buy a duck? If you had a brother, would he want to buy a duck?” Compare also Anselm’s Ontological Argument which, according to many interpreters, involves use of the premise that an existing thing is better than a non-existing thing of the same kind, other things being equal. It is generally agreed that if Anselm’s proof really does turn on this step (although not everyone thinks it does), then that constitutes a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of it. The same should be true of analyses of utilitarianism.

\textsuperscript{36} “As things stand,” because presumably it is possible that people should be raised in test tubes. There is also an issue about whether embryos should be accounted persons, and if so at what stage. Disagreements on this point are not relevant here, although they are very relevant when it comes to discussing the moral legitimacy of abortion.
we can, and consequently there is such a distinction in practice. On the first interpretation, the fact that a child would, if produced, be happy would constitute a positive intrinsic reason for having it; whereas, on the second interpretation, it would not. The reason is as follows: If one has not yet conceived, then there is, as yet, no person whose happiness is in question, and nothing can be done either to increase or decrease it. Consequently, no utilitarian considerations arise from this source; any reasons in favor of having a child would have to stem from effects on other people, e.g., the parents. On the first interpretation, however, the fact that a child, if born, would be happy, constitutes a reason, of itself for having one; since on this interpretation, the moral question is that of production of happiness tout court, rather than of increasing or decreasing anybody's happiness, which is the question on the second view.

On the other hand, on the second view as well as on the first, the fact that a child, if produced, would be miserable, is a sufficient moral reason for not having one. The reason for this is that once a child is produced, then of course moral questions arise which would not arise if it is not. And if one can foresee that a child, if produced, would inevitably be miserable, then one can avoid an increase in human misery by not having it in the first place.\(^{37}\) The conclusion, then, is that there can be a moral reason (on utilitarian grounds, arising from hypothetical considerations about the happiness, or reverse, which would be the lot of children if produced) for not having children, but there cannot be such a reason for having them.

This conclusion might be thought strange at first; but the reason for thinking so is failure to see that the situations confronting us here are subtly, but importantly, asymmetrical. If you have a child, then the relevant population whose happiness or unhappiness is in question is different from the relevant population if you don’t have a child. To see this, assume for purposes

\(^{37}\) It remains the case that bringing someone into existence does not, as such, have any effects on his happiness, although the process of being born can. Generally, it is the various things which happen to a child after birth which have the relevant effects, and these can be prevented by not having a child to have them happen to. See an interesting discussion of a related matter by Jonathan Bennett in *Analysis* (1965–66), entitled “No Matter What.”
of simplicity that we have but two persons in the world, Adam and Eva. If they remain childless, then this fact might make them unhappy, in which case it is a reason for them to consider producing a child if they can; but it does not do anything to the happiness of their child, there being no child the happiness of whom to consider. Nobody, other than Adam and Eva themselves, will be missing out on any joys or experiencing any sorrows as a result of their childlessness. On the other hand, if they decide to have a child, for whatever reason, then that would put a third party on the scene whose happiness or unhappiness is on the utilitarian view, to be accounted equally with those of Adam and Eva themselves. Thus, the size of the population to be considered will be greater if the action concerned (i.e., having a child) is taken than if it is not taken.

One must not be misled, in discussions of this type, by the temporal connotations of the word 'exists' in ordinary usage. The view being recommended here does not imply that the principle of utility "merely enjoins us to maximize the happiness of already existing persons." All persons who can be affected by our acts are to be considered equally here, be they presently alive or in the however distant future. If one knows that certain people in the future will be affected by one's actions, then effects on such people must be taken into account. It's just the peculiarity of the present subject that it concerns actions whose effect is to increase, or not to increase, the population. The fact that persons other than those who presently exist must be taken into account is precisely why it is possible to have a utilitarian reason (arising from hypothetical considerations about the well-or ill-being of persons presently unborn) for not having children, but not for having them.

By way of a footnote to the above discussion, it should of course be remembered that there can be plenty of non-moral reasons for having children, and also sometimes moral reasons, such as when an area's population is too small to afford a good life for all. Most people enjoy having children, and this is sufficient reason to have them, provided that the resulting children will not be miserable or burdensome to others.38

38 I discuss these matters more thoroughly in "Utilitarianism and New Generations," Mind (1967).