Thus far in our discussions, we have been considering what ethical theorists have called "perfect" obligations, that is, principles demarcating acts which it is one's duty to do or to avoid on specific occasions, or whenever the possibility arises. A promise obliges one to perform a particular act or series of acts, and is only discharged when these have been performed or their nonperformance excused or justified; harms need to be justified always, not just sometimes. The general Principle of Duty, as I have called it, is peculiarly aimed at this category, for I have tried to show that all such duties can be thought of as instances of the duty not to harm people. It is ordinarily thought that we have other duties which cannot obviously be brought under this principle, duties such as the relief of suffering and contributions to charity. This category of duties has been entitled "imperfect" obligation, the idea being that we are not obliged to perform them on each and every occasion when it is possible to do so, since there is no end to opportunities of this type. One could work twenty-four hours per day at the relief of suffering, and could impoverish oneself contributing to charity, but it is felt that to require one to do this would be going rather too far.

It is commonly alleged that utilitarianism has just this consequence, and this is regarded as one of the objections to it as a theory. This is the opposite of the difficulty I have sketched above. If, as my general Principle of Duty asserts, our only fundamental duty is to avoid harm to others, then it is not a funda-
mental duty to relieve the sufferings of others. Thus, we seem to have a Scylla and Charybdis to steer between. According to the objection, we have too many duties, and according to my reply (which, after all, was made with reference to similar difficulties about overabundance of duties), we have too few. The matter evidently needs closer investigation.

Thus far, the account offered has yielded two categories of duties: those which are always with us, and those which we incur by acts of our own. The “fundamental” one, that of avoiding harm to others, might very well be called a “Natural” Duty, in the sense that corresponding to it we can think that there is a “Natural Right” not to be harmed. The point of calling it “natural” is simply that the primary types of harms are definable in a “state of nature”: no organizations, institutions, or practices need exist in order to make bodily injuries possible.

It has been argued by Hobbes\(^1\) that the whole notion of justice (and thus of the violation of a right) is inapplicable in a “state of nature.” Hobbes, in effect, makes the contractual type of duty the fundamental one, and claims that we have no duty to avoid harming others when we have no guarantee, supplied by covenant, that they will not harm us. But Hobbes’ argument shows that he doesn’t literally mean it when he says that in a state of nature “everyone has a right to everything.”\(^2\) To say that one has a right to do something is surely to say that others may properly be prevented from, or punished for interfering with, one’s performance of that act,\(^3\) and obviously Hobbes does not mean this.\(^4\) His whole argument implies that we are justified in taking measures, including the use of force, to prevent harm


\(^2\) *Ibid.*, p. 163: “It followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to everything; even to one another’s body.”

\(^3\) This, I take it, is by now commonplace. Cf. Hart’s “Are There Any Natural Rights?” in *Philosophical Review* (1955), among others.

\(^4\) The trouble is that in the context quoted, Hobbes identifies rights with “liberties,” in a sense in which a liberty is simply an ability; later, (p. 164, for instance) he talks of “transferring” rights, which is clearly nonsense, if a right is a liberty, where a liberty is merely the “absence of external impediments” (see definition on p. 163).
to ourselves, and this is not due to any contracts whatever. It is, in fact, precisely what I have claimed is meant by calling the avoidance of harms to others a duty.

Now it seems to me that the relief of suffering is not, in this same way, a duty. It is always a kindness, of course, always morally valuable, but as we have emphasized all along, this of itself is not sufficient to consider it a duty. Under what circumstances do we owe it to a person to relieve him from want or suffering? Under what circumstances, in other words, is it reasonable to blame or punish a person for failing to relieve suffering?

To begin with, we need to draw a strong contrast between the relief of suffering (which is what most charity and much philanthropy consists of), and something else which for want of a better term I shall call “sheer benevolence.” The distinction I have in mind here requires the concept of a sort of standard or “par” state of satisfaction. When a person is suffering, in need as we say (in the narrowest sense of ‘need’), let us say that he is “below par.” It isn’t just that his satisfactions are few, it’s that he’s positively in a state of dissatisfaction, involving pain, grief, anxiety, and the like. The object of charity is to raise him from this level to “par.” But if a person is in perfect health, both physically and psychologically, enjoys a good income, and is doing pretty well on the whole, then the rest of us aren’t really in a position to give him “charity.” If such a person has a rich uncle who unexpectedly leaves him enough to double his income, that is a stroke of good fortune, and certainly an act of benevolence on the part of Uncle, but hardly the sort of thing to be considered Uncle’s duty on general moral grounds. The distinction, then, is between restoring someone who is below "par" to a "par" state, and raising the level of satisfactions of a person who is already at or above “par.” Clearly, we must consider only the former a matter of general moral duty, and not the latter. Only by special arrangements, such as contracts, or

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5 This word, ‘need,’ unfortunately has wider and narrower uses. Sparshott, in *An Enquiry into Goodness*, pp. 136–38, interestingly attempts to get at the wider sense, but I find this rather dark. Anyhow, my use does see some circulation, I think. The idea is that a ‘need’ (as distinct from a ‘want’) is such that something terrible will happen if it is not satisfied.
because of special status, such as liability for reparations, could the latter fall under the heading of duty.

Mill has suggested that the distinction between "perfect" and "imperfect" obligation is that "perfect" ones are:

those duties in virtue of which a correlative right resides in some person or persons. . . . It seems to me that this feature in the case—a right in some person, correlative to the moral obligation—constitutes the specific difference between justice, and generosity or beneficence. Justice implies something which it is not only right to do, and wrong not to do, but which some individual person can claim from us as his moral right. No one has a moral right to our generosity or benevolence, because we are not morally bound to practise those virtues towards any given individual. 6

This feature was adopted as the definition of 'right' in the preceding chapter: To have a right to do x simply is for it to be the case that others have a duty to avoid interfering with one's performance of x.

Now, Mill's analysis is born out to the following extent. In the case of the General Duty discussed in Chapter VI, there is indeed a corresponding right, namely the right to personal safety. The specific, or "incurred," duties in turn are of the kind which create a right in certain specific individuals, namely the promises of the contracting parties. (Sometimes third parties get the right, as when I promise you to give Hattie a ride to town. Here I acquire an obligation "to" Hattie, as well as "to" you. This ambiguity of 'to' in 'A has an obligation to B' is nothing to worry about, it seems to me, once we recognize that it exists.) 7

But what about the relief of suffering?

If we say that there is a duty to relieve suffering, we ought to be able to say whose duty it is. It is clear enough whose right is involved: the sufferer's. In saying that somebody or other has a duty to relieve suffering, we are saying that people have a right not to suffer, and this is a natural extension of the concept

6 Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 46.
7 There has been much confusion about this, especially as it relates to the "correlativity of rights and duties." Baier helps out considerably when he distinguishes the 'partner,' the 'ground,' and the 'content' of an obligation. Moral Point of View, p. 216.
of a right to safety. I suggest as a general answer to the question, whose duty is it to relieve suffering?, that it is the duty of “society.” By the expression ‘duty of society,’ I mean that every member of society has the duty to play some part in seeing to it that somebody performs the act in question. The steps taken might be of many different sorts, but in general, they will consist in creating and supporting a social institution. An example of a rule of this kind is that ordinarily, if a person is in a position to relieve a particular case of suffering without great danger or trouble to himself, then he is to do so. Another example is the creation of a medical system, whereby some members of society volunteer to become doctors, which results in those individuals’ having both the ability and the duty to relieve certain kinds of suffering. An example of a practice prevailing in certain parts of western society until recently is that the sufferer, when cured, pays the doctor for the relief.

There are good reasons to put the relief of suffering in the category of “duties of society,” if we are to classify it as a duty at all. Some of these reasons are as follows: In the first place, if Jones just happens to be in the neighborhood where someone is suffering in a way relievable by Jones, this is just luck. Any of us might have been there instead; Jones didn’t do anything to deserve the imposition of having to forego his present activities in order to relieve suffering. Therefore, it is unreasonable to make the relief Jones’ duty, as distinct from any of the rest of us. If we were to consider this a strict duty, that would be unfair to individuals who happened to be in a position to relieve suffering quite often. Secondly, the relief of many kinds of suffering requires specialized knowledge and/or skills which most of us do not have. We obviously cannot require someone to do what he isn’t able to do; but also, it would be silly to require everyone to acquire the knowledge in question, even if they were able to acquire it. But a duty has to be someone’s duty. It can’t just be no one’s in particular. Consequently, the thing

For the interest of readers with a taste for symmetry and architectonic, we might mention that my “duty of society” is construable as the mirror image of Mill’s “imperfect duty”: in the latter, the duty is to no one in particular; in the former, there is an “imperfect right”—a right against no one in particular.
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to do is to make it everyone’s duty to do something, even if the “something” is just a matter of seeing to it that someone else does it. Those who are put on the “business end,” such as the police, the medical people, firemen, etc., should of course be compensated for going to the trouble of performing these activities. The simplest solution is simply to make these professions supportable by the public.

The question is, then, why should relief be treated as a duty at all, even if only a duty “of society” in the sense explained? It seems to me that this should only be treated as a duty in a “society,” as one of the (perhaps the chief of the) obligations of membership. It is here that the “contract” theorists were, I think, on the right track. It is always reasonable, in any state of human existence, to prevent people from harming others. But it is not reasonable to require people to trouble themselves to relieve suffering unless they are compensated for it in some way, and in particular, unless they have reason to expect similar treatment. There is, after all, no such thing as an obligation to be a member of society.9 If a person wishes to become a hermit, we ought to permit him to become one, and this will mean that we shan’t expect anything of him in the way of assistance in time of need. But if he wishes to remain a member, then it is reasonable to impose as duties on him that minimum which he in turn expects of society. The relief of suffering, where possible, is certainly going to be the minimum such condition.

In short, the fundamental consideration, when it comes to obligations imposed by society, as distinct from obligations incurred by an individual himself and duties which are completely unconditional, is that each individual gains more from having the obligation (provided everyone else is seen to have it as well) than he loses.10 Under these conditions, we can expect a net gain in utility, and this is therefore the ultimate justification for regarding the relief of suffering as having the status I have described. For our original definition of ‘duty’ is ‘an act the nega-

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9 Curiously, Kant thought it was, in *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*. But in the end, this would have to be a “duty to the self,” which category is renounced below.

10 This is different from Rawls’ idea (objected to in Ch. VII, see n. 19) for here the individual genuinely loses something.
tive reinforcement of which would be morally good,' good being measured by utility. Since we have shown that we can expect an increase in utility when reliefs are considered a duty of society, while we cannot if we regard them as individual duties (since in that case the individuals who happen to go out of their way to relieve suffering are uncompensated for their trouble and thus lose), nor if we do not regard them as duties at all (since in that case the relief of suffering would be highly un dependedable), we can conclude that this is the status which utilitarianism must assign to these acts. Surely this is also very much the same status which the "ordinary moral consciousness" would assign to them; indeed, the classification as "duties of imperfect obligation" suggests as much.

The notion of 'par' discussed above is obviously a variable one. What counts as deprivation in one state of society might well amount to immoderate wealth in another. This is not only unsurprising, but just what one would expect on our account; for the amount of trouble which an individual or society as a whole would have to go to restore a person to a state of non-deprivation will be immensely greater in a very poor state of society than in a very wealthy one. There is a further reason for this, at least in any kind of society which we can expect now or in the near future. This is that there is a very prominent role assigned to competition in the acquisition of wealth in such societies (Communist as well as Capitalist; only the types of position for which people compete differ a great deal between the two). In any such society, a person must be able to compete. Inability to do so, caused by lack of the minimum conditions for competition insofar as society is able to supply them, is equivalent to deprivation. In such societies, the conditions comprising 'par' will have to include a good deal of education, together with whatever features of home environment may be requisite to its pursuit. Consequently, it becomes proper to regard these things as basic rights in any such society. They are "basic" only in the relevant kinds of society, however, and not basic rights of mankind everywhere and in any condition.

How much counts as one "society" is also a notorious problem. Eventually, there is reason to hope, the totality of mankind on earth will constitute "society," and already some nations are
acknowledging the obligation to improve the lot of the poorer nations. Is this a genuine duty on the part of rich nations, or should it be classed as pure benevolence? (The motives of the nations in question are not in point here!) This is difficult to say, and I do not see any obvious reasoning to support one or the other view at present. On the other hand, wherever there is a genuine society, extending governmental functions to all persons in a certain area, the above results will clearly apply.

Finally, it is worth observing that there is the strongest argument for putting all of the functions classifiable as “duties of society” in government hands, and supporting them by general taxation. Anyone who argues that any such functions ought to be matters of private charity (or in the extreme case, as some people evidently believe, of private enterprise) unless he has some extremely strong practical reasons for the view, can be accused of insincerity. If a duty is genuinely a duty of society, then it is contradictory to say that it should be left up to individual consciences to be done, unless there is good reason to think that public servants just can’t do the job. But if anybody can do it, government can do it, and those who say it cannot are usually people with a vested interest in seeing to it that it doesn’t. If, of course, there happen to be a lot of people in society who just enjoy relieving suffering, they’re welcome to do so. But this won’t do as a general social answer to any such problems. People who relieve suffering hardly ever do it because they enjoy it; they do it because their conscience tells them that they should. But if their consciences are correct, then it is no more their duty than anyone else’s, and it is the responsibility of society to see that it is done without sanctioning special impositions on people of exceptional good will. Duties of society are duties, not gratuities; and they are duties of society, not of whoever happens to feel especially called on to perform them. It follows that the agents of society (i.e., governments) ought to see to it that these functions are carried out in a reliable, regular way without any special self-congratulating of the kind that private participants in charity sometimes indulge in.¹²

¹¹ Logic does not require civil servants to be incompetent.
¹² This is not to say that charity is a bad thing; obviously, it is prima facie a good thing. But to rely on charity, which is spontaneous, for the carrying out of what are properly duties of society is a bad thing.
We have now considered all of the kinds of acts which can properly be classed as duties or obligations, and there remain to be considered only those activities which go beyond the category of duty altogether. There is a tendency to regard this category as empty. According to such views, morality is equivalent to obligation. There is some point in so regarding it, but I think there is better reason for thinking of morality as including more than this.

I suggest that all acts of raising people above "par," as I called it, provided they are not required by some special relation between the benefactor and the benefited, should be regarded as praiseworthy, morally good, but not such that their nonperformance is blameworthy or morally bad. The argument for so regarding them is a simple extension of the argument of Chapters V and VI, in reference to "fundamental" duties. To class something as a duty, as we have seen, is to put an onus on the person whose duty it is, to hold him responsible for nonperformance, eligible for blame or other "negatively reinforcing" activity. If Jones regards Smith as having the duty to increase Jones' happiness, and the rest of us support him in this, then we are effectively doing Smith harm. We are, then, lowering his utility-level, which is a disutility. But if our only reason for doing this is to raise Jones' utility-level, then Jones' desire for such a "raise" is illegitimate. He would be putting something over on Smith. Thus it would be contra-utilitarian to regard any such act as a duty.

Utilitarianism, as we have emphasized so often, requires us to regard everyone as equal in point of satisfiability. It follows that I am doing precisely as much good (in the "objective" sense discussed in Chapter V above) by satisfying my own desires as by satisfying someone else's, other things being equal. Why, then, should we reward people for satisfying other people when we do not reward them for satisfying themselves? In part, this has been answered in Chapter III. People do not need to be rewarded for satisfying themselves, because they will do so anyhow if given the chance. On the other hand, we do not have any
motive, as such, for satisfying other people. Of course, everyone has friends and favorites, people whom he wants to do good to, whom it gives him pleasure to do good to, and this is all to the good. But these are selective motives and do not prompt people to acts of perfectly general, nonselective benevolence.

Now, it isn't all that easy to perform acts of "perfectly general, nonselective benevolence." In many cultures, it is almost impossible; in our own, for example, people would think it extremely bizarre if one were to send Christmas cards at random or leave presents at strange doors. Nevertheless, it is possible to make contributions of this kind, with a bit of ingenuity. For example, one can underwrite orchestra concerts which the community might otherwise be unable to afford; indeed, one can do a lot by simply being friendly, smiling at people, being willing to give them directions, etc. There is a moral point to rewarding this kind of thing, even though one cannot seriously regard it as literally obligatory.

Still, such actions fall within the purview of morality, for the reasons supporting the practice of rewarding them are of the moral kind. These reasons are "supreme" and "absolute," in the sense discussed in Chapter II. An example will clarify this. Suppose that you happen to be interested in model airplanes. In that case, you will be disposed to praise the constructors of exceptionally interesting models, just because they are exceptionally interesting. Here, then, is a special reason for bestowing praise: a "model plane enthusiast's reason." But even if you are totally uninterested in model planes yourself, you nevertheless have a reason for helping to make it possible for those who do have this interest to satisfy it: namely, you have the same reason that anybody has, that this activity brings some joy into some people's lives, satisfies some interests. The argument for regarding this as a good reason will be considered in Chapter IX, but here it is sufficient to point out that it is different in kind from the enthusiast's reason. It holds for everyone, independently of particular interests. Praise for such acts will accordingly be moral praise. We increase the general happiness by singling out for praise acts which increase the general happiness when there is no other motive for performing them.

It is possible for a person to become a "general happiness
enthusiast.” Imagine a person whose only interest was to promote the general happiness, and who had no other interests of his own. This is very difficult to do, of course, for it is hard to imagine a person who gets no pleasure from eating different kinds of food, or from various activities such as sports, who is uninterested in art or science, and who is even devoid of sexual desire. Clearly, it is no one's duty to try to become such a person, to suppress all of his natural interests in favor of his moral interest in happiness-promoting. This is what makes Kant’s conception of a community of Holy Wills 13 who have nothing but moral motives so strange. In such a community, there would be nothing for anyone to do: if the only interest that anyone had was to satisfy other people's interests, the game couldn’t get started. The “ideal” of utter self-abnegation is thus a logically poverty-stricken ideal. 14

Nevertheless, we can conceive of people who come pretty close to having nothing but other-interests, and so long as there were at least some people who weren’t like that, these people would have something to do. The question is, then, ought we to regard their lives as especially worthwhile, more so than (say) those of tennis players, pianists, or (for that matter) perfectly happy day-laborers? My answer to this question is that we should not. We have here a question about the relative worth of different ways of life, and this, as I have emphasized, is not a specifically moral kind of question. For moral purposes, any life is as good as any other life so long as it makes an equal contribution to the general happiness; this is sometimes done by contributing mainly to one's own. It is true that the “general happiness enthusiast” performs activities which everybody has a reason for praising, whereas people will differ in their estimate of the value of being a piano player, a day laborer, a tennis player, a politician, and so forth. But the fact that we would

13 Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals, especially part III. Kant thinks that the notion of an “intelligible world” implies such a community; if so, I would suggest that “unintelligible world” might be more apt.

14 I do not mean to imply that Kant favored this ideal. But I think this is an inescapable implication of his idea. My “The Two Faces of Kant’s Normative Ethics,” paper read before the Canadian Philosophical Association, Sherbrooke, Québec, June 17, 1966, argued thus.
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not bestow moral praise on these people for living the kinds of lives they lead, whereas we would bestow it on the saintly type, does not mean that the saint's life is (necessarily) more valuable than that of the others.\textsuperscript{15} Reckoned among the benefits of sainthood, of course, would be included the appreciation of others. A real saint presumably would not put any special value on this, except insofar as it was a sign that his efforts at promoting the general happiness were successful. (This is a peculiarly unreliable benefit, as the occasional martyrdom of saints suggests. However, saints are rarely if ever martyred just for being good; ordinarily, theological motives lurk in the background.) But then, that just means that we have to reckon among the reasons for not trying to be a saint the fact that it has peculiar occupational hazards: as soon as the saint begins to enjoy something, he starts suspiciously examining himself to make sure that the enjoyment is absolutely selfless, and such habits inevitably lead to neuroticism.

All this amounts to, really, is a reiteration of my oft-stated insistence that, from the utilitarian point of view, the choice of a way of life is absolutely up to the individual who is doing the choosing, so long as the way of life he selects is not immoral. The fact that one would enjoy being a gangster or a Nazi does not mean that it is morally permissible to do so; but short of this, any kind of life is as permissible as any other.

A great many people have, and have had, "Ideals" which they regard as moral ideals, and which do include recipes for the conduct of individual lives. What can we say of these? To begin with, the utilitarian view implies that such people have a reason to try to persuade other people of the soundness of their views. If I think that way-of-life x would be of extremely high intrinsic value, I presumably will regard it as my duty to encourage other people to follow it. If I succeed in persuading somebody to adopt it, then, so long as I haven’t tricked him into it, I have ipso facto raised the level of his utility; for if I have persuaded him, what I have done is to show him that the type of life he was living is not as good as the one I am trying to "sell." Thus, if he is persuaded, it follows that he regards himself as better

\textsuperscript{15} There is an interesting discussion of these matters in J. O. Urmson's "Saints and Heroes," in \textit{Essays in Moral Philosophy}, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1958).
ROUNDING OUT THE SYSTEM

off than he was before, and this by definition (Chapter II, Section 12) is to increase his utility. Thus, utilitarianism puts a special value on this kind of evaluative argument.

On the other hand, utilitarianism cannot grant any special validity to any one such conception as opposed to any other. If I try to persuade somebody to engage in way-of-life x, and I fail, then I just have to lump it, morally speaking. I may regard it as highly regrettable that he doesn't take up the particular cross I have to offer, but I have no right to force my view on him; and it would be immoral for me to try to get the community to adopt laws which would restrict his activity for non-acceptance of my view. This is just as true if 99 per cent of the community are of my way of thinking as if only I myself am, as is shown by the argument of Chapter VI.

Is there, then, any "Ideal of Life" promoted by the utilitarian creed? Well, no, except in the rather vacuous sense that the utilitarian would like to see everybody perfectly happy. But this only means seeing each person living a life which is as good by his own standards as it is possible for it to be. And what kind of life is that? Obviously, it is no one particular kind of life, nor is it a variety of types of life, necessarily. We can see that virtually every human being is likely to be happier if he is adequately fed, clothed, sheltered, and has opportunities to be active. We know from general human experience that if people have nothing to do, they get bored, that if they are continually exposed to danger, they get traumatized, that they do not enjoy being pushed around and persecuted, and so on. And we are therefore safe in promoting these particular ends, for the time being. But there just isn't any one kind of life which we have reason to believe would maximally satisfy everybody, and if anyone thinks he does know of such a life, his work is cut out for him: let him go and persuade everyone else that he is right. If he succeeds, he will have promoted the general happiness, and if he fails, then we hope he enjoyed trying and that those with whom he argued the view derived some benefit from the argument.

There is, in short, no such thing as "the utilitarian way of life" any more than there is such a thing as the "democratic way of life." It seems to me that we should strenuously object to the
common practice of supposing that every social question is a question about “ways of life”—that our disagreement with the Russians, for instance, is a disagreement about “ways of life.” These problems and these disagreements are nothing of the sort, and to put them in that category is to put unnecessary obstacles in the way of solving them. Properly conceived, these problems all are concerned with ways of satisfying the general interest, i.e., with ways of improving everyone’s life to his own satisfaction. Whether a particular policy, system, or practice achieves this or not is, in principle, knowable by observation. To erect any of these means into ends, especially ends supposedly sanctioned by some misty metaphysics, is merely to put people off the track. This, I take it, is a point which Dewey was concerned to advocate, and we owe him a great debt for having labored so mightily (and with considerable effect) on its behalf.

Finally, it is necessary to repeat, in the interests of clarity on the point, that I am not advocating “subjectivism” regarding these non-moral matters. Questions about the value of ways of life, aesthetic questions, and any other evaluative questions of a non-instrumental kind, are real and important, and to label them “subjective” just because they aren’t specifically moral, would be unjustified, especially if the point is (as it often is) to belittle them by calling them so. No doubt some lives are intrinsically better than others. What I object to is the move from “this way of life is intrinsically better than that” to “therefore, it is your duty to abide by it.” There is no reason why one perfectly “objective” proposition cannot be perfectly irrelevant to another perfectly objective proposition, and the same goes in evaluative matters. Nor am I in any way denying that there is objective reasoning of a prudential kind as well as of a moral kind. Indeed, some of the latter is, in a sense, suggested by the terminology of utilitarianism. For example, we can argue that a person is being “unfair to himself” if he neglects his future welfare in favor of present pleasures, that it is imprudent to concentrate on long-range plans to the neglect of present satisfactions, that

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16 This is a recurring theme in *The Public and its Problems, Human Nature and Conduct, The Quest for Certainty*, and other works.

17 Cf., the next section of this chapter.
it is wise to cultivate the virtues of industry, patience, economy, and so forth. I neglect these questions simply because they are irrelevant here, and not because they don't exist or don't matter.

Self and Others

There are two opposite problems concerning self and others with respect to utilitarianism. On the one hand, there is a feeling, which I share, that self-regarding acts have no specifically moral worth, and that notions of moral duty "to the self" are out of place. But on the other hand, it is felt that one ought to prefer one's own family, friends, community, and nation to perfect strangers; and moreover, there is something to be said for the view that, other things being equal, one should prefer oneself to others.

In Chapter III, I argued that according to utilitarianism the central aim of morality is to get people to respect the value of others. That people already do respect their own values was held to be, in a sense, a trivial truth. Moral praise, blame, and criticism are to be bestowed with a view to getting people to do what they would not naturally do of their own accord, and what they do not have motives to do already (which comes to much the same thing). If a person has an interest in doing something, then there is no point in blaming him if he doesn't do it, or praising him for doing it. No moral point, that is. For the purpose of morality is to maximize the general happiness, which is to say, to be concerned for others as well as oneself. But "having concern for oneself" does not mean having any special set of concerns: it just means having whatever concerns one happens to have, no matter what they are. If, of course, one happens to be

18 Kant has put the point very succinctly when he says that one's own happiness "can never, without contradiction be regarded as a duty. What everyone of himself already inevitably wants does not belong under the concept of duty, because a duty is a constraint to an end that is not gladly adopted" (Metaphysical Principles of Virtue, p. 43.) The reader with a careful familiarity with Kant's work will notice a considerable similarity between positions argued for here and Kant's. (Cf., especially Ch. IX.)
so constituted that one naturally wants to promote the happiness of other people, then there won’t be any need for moral predicates to be applied to one’s behavior; if everyone were like that, then there would be no need for an institution of morality at all, though there might be use for other kinds of evaluatory activities. Now Falk, for example, in his interesting essay, “Morality, Self, and Others,” has pointed out that concerns for our own interests are often just as serious, and a need for self-discipline just as important, as other-regarding considerations, and of course he is correct here. But as he himself recognizes, “to say, ‘you ought to’ to another is always a kind of interference; and the propriety of saying so varies with the case.” The question is, would it be proper, on the utilitarian account, to invoke this interference against a person on his own account? And how much would it be proper to invoke? It is well known that the answer to these questions in Mill’s Liberty is that it is never proper to force a person to do anything on his own account, whereas it is quite proper to force a person to do certain things on account of others (which things, we shall see below). Now in this, as I have argued, Mill is basically in the right, though the matter is not quite properly put in this way. The reasoning is as follows. Suppose that I am an exceptionally imprudent person and, reflecting in a cool hour, I perceive that the only way for me to protect my interests is to force myself to do certain things that I know I won’t like to do at the time for doing them. Seeing that I doubtless won’t have the means to carry out this plan myself, I might invoke the aid of others. In that case, if they assist in forcing me to do what I believe to be in my best interests is to force myself to do certain things that I know I won’t like to do at the time for doing them. Seeing that I doubtless won’t have the means to carry out this plan myself, I might invoke the aid of others. In that case, if they assist in forcing me to do what I believe to be in my best interests, they are helping me out, because it was my value-appraisal of my situation that they are acting on. If, for instance, part of my plan involves your emptying a bucket of cold water on my head if I don’t get up by x o’clock, and you do so, I may dislike it intensely, but by my own showing I have no right to complain. You are doing precisely what you should do on the utilitarian view and your action, if done without pay (for example), is morally good, despite the fact that you’re causing me

20 Ibid., p. 56.
a lot of discomfort. But the discomfort is in what I conceive to be my own interest, and that is exactly what you are supposed to go on, on the utilitarian view.

The reason why it is improper to speak of its being a "duty" in the moral sense for me to ask you to douse me with cold water in the morning is that it's my business, and I can call it off whenever I want. The matter is entirely up to my own judgment. But with moral duties this is precisely not the case. When I have a moral duty to do something, this is a genuine constraint on my behavior. I can't simply release myself from it, call it off whenever I feel like it or am so inclined. This characteristic is, I have argued, part of the definition of moral predicates (in Chapter II). If it is, then it is obvious that moral praise and blame just don't come into the self-regarding sphere. This does not mean that we are demeaning the self-regarding sphere or claiming that it is unimportant. Quite the contrary: in a sense, it is the only important sphere, for it is everyone's interest that is the concern of morality, and this means the same as everyone's "self-interest." The point is, there is no need for the peculiarly moral kinds of praise and blame, which have an impersonal authority independent of self-interest, in matters of self-interest.

It also follows from this last consideration that it would be wrong to employ moral predicates in contexts of self-interest. For to do so is to erase the distinction of moral and nonmoral, to assimilate the one to the other, and thus to run the danger of encouraging immoral behavior. To see this, consider for example a man who, as in Kant's example, is "wearied with life because of a series of misfortunes that has reduced him to despair" and so contemplates suicide. Such a person is likely to take the view that nothing is worth doing, life is meaningless, and it doesn't matter what he does. (Strictly speaking, this isn't quite what he thinks, for this person would not have a reason to commit suicide; he just wouldn't have any reason to do anything at all. But the suicide takes the fact that life, if he continued to live it, would be empty and meaningless as a reason for ending it.) Now, this is a prudential estimate, and it does indeed give him a perfectly good reason for committing suicide, which is exactly what he should do, if it is certain that a psychiatrist or
someone could not restimulate his interests in life. But if the
distinction between moral and nonmoral value is not alive in
him, he would see no difference between dynamiting an airliner
with himself in it, and thus killing a great number of other people
who want to live as well as himself, and doing it in the privacy
of some dark forest. This is an extreme example, of course, but
there are innumerable examples on a less exotic scale.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that so-called “ideal” utili-
tarianism leads to the same disastrous result. Only utilitarianism
holds that what basically matters morally is what people like and
dislike, i.e., what they think is good, rather than some supposed
intrinsic value. The suicide mentioned above is precisely the
person who sees no intrinsic values in life, and this is a question
which we may not be able to argue about with him. We may not
be able to convince him that anything is intrinsically valuable.
But for moral purposes, we don’t need to. Whether anything is
intrinsically worth doing is irrelevant: other people think that
something is worth doing, and unless he can convince them
otherwise he has no right to immolate them along with himself.

Perhaps I have overstated this contrast: Its validity is limited,
perhaps, by certain conditions which do not necessarily obtain.
For example, it seems that it is logically possible that people
should “naturally” be more concerned for others than for them-
selves; in that case, it might be urged, the “moral” predicates
would be the ones to apply to what we now call “self-regarding”
actions, and the non-moral ones to what we now consider “other-
regarding” actions. Is this a possibility?

Something of the general sort is a possibility, but it seems to
me that the exact description given above could not apply to it.
From our present point of view, we have been defining “self-
interest” as consisting of whatever interests one happens to have.
This is, of course, partly a stipulative definition. In ordinary
discourse, “self-interest” is defined in part in terms of a certain
range of interests: e.g., that in filling one’s own stomach, as
opposed to someone else’s. The assumption, clearly, is that these
interests are, in the relevant sense, “natural” ones. It is very diffi-
cult to conceive of a state of the world in which a totally differ-
ent set of interests are natural. I suspect that the term ‘self’ would
not be usable in such a world, and that some rather different
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class concept would have to be employed. Thus, it seems to me that speculations of this kind must be inconclusive at present.

More to the point, however, are the following considerations. We can point out that there is a general evaluative province, which some would consider part of morality, and which we can at least include under the more general heading of “ethics,” in which the problem is to set forth the criteria for evaluation insofar as they concern oneself. This would be the area of prudence. Now it might be suggested that just as there is a problem involving the use of reason and calling for the employment of self-control, in going from prudence to morality (in the substantive sense of learning respect for others), so there is a formally similar problem involved in going from one’s present state, one’s immediate concerns, to one’s future concerns. Indeed, it has been argued that what defines a “rational” directive in this area is the principle that those of one’s wants which are remote in time from the present are to be counted equally with those now prominent. 21 This would be a prudential “principle of utility,” the essence of which would be the allotment of parity to all wants, whenever occurring, just as the essence of the (moral) principle of utility is allotment of parity 22 to all wants, no matter whose.

Now, I have argued in Chapter II that we must not simply define the term ‘moral’ in such a way that prudential values are ipso facto not moral, even though it is common to contrast ‘prudential’ and ‘moral.’ The meanings of the words are certainly to be distinguished, but their extensions could nevertheless be the same: indeed, it is the main business of my final chapter to see whether we can construct an argument to prove that they are not, and of course argument would be unnecessary if we could settle this by definition. Why, then, should we not permit considerations of prudence proper, in the sense described, to count as moral?

The reason for this, I think, is as follows. I have suggested that


22 This is not to deny the factor of probability, of course. Other things equal, a good nearer in time should perhaps be preferred to one more distant, simply because of the lesser certainty of more remote events. But it seems wrong to make “propinquity” and “certainty” measures of utility, as does Bentham.
the differentia of morality consists at least partly in the question of who is authorized to use (verbal or nonverbal) force or stimulation. If this is correct, then the reason for including prudence would be, in effect, that one's future "selves," or "states of oneself," being distinct from one's present self (or state of self), are therefore entitled to be thought of as members of the "moral community," just as much as other people are (or, not to beg a question, "other" people differentiated nontemporally).

The reply, which is perhaps a lame one, is that one's future states of self—that is, that set of momentary "selves" which are related to one's present state (or "self") in such a way that the whole series constitutes a single person in our present sense of that term—are somehow too intimately related to one's present state to be put in the same category with other persons. It is true that if I make a mistake, my future self (or one of them, or should I say, some proper subset of them?) will suffer, and this is a reason for criticism of a kind. But it seems also that it is a reason for criticism by me, rather than primarily by others.

I call this a "lame" reply, because perhaps it will turn out in the end that the feeling that one's future selves are more intimately related to one's present self than are other people is simply a metaphysical prejudice. Indeed, perhaps the day will come when, owing to developments in brain surgery or in psychiatry or in psychological drugs, the distinction in question will be much blurred. In any case, the distinction would seem to be a matter of degree, in some way.

For the time being then, it seems to me that we need a suitable compromise, and that this in fact is what we have. There is one's present state, or self, one's future states (or selves), and other people, with one's future states standing somewhere in between. We suppose, in general, that people are going to be a good deal more responsible in the second area than in the third. The community, we might say, is welcome by invitation only until such time as a person has clearly lost his senses.

Thus, there is good reason to distinguish between moral praise and blame and nonmoral valuation. If we do, then on the utilitarian view there is every reason why moral praise and blame should not be used in purely self-regarding contexts. We have other expressions for this, which carry just the right connotations of critical tone. A man who lets his talents go to rack and
ruin in the pursuit of frivolities is a fool, but he’s not immoral. He is not doing anything contrary to duty, but he is being irrational, foolish, silly, or perhaps weak. These are serious charges, but if the man recognizes that he has these talents, wants to develop them, realizes that it would be in his interest to do so, and still doesn’t do so, then these criticisms are quite justified. They are justified by reference purely to the man’s own value-scheme, and if he doesn’t care about these talents, doesn’t care about the money he could earn by developing them, etc., then we shall be obliged to let him go his own way. Of course, all sorts of moral factors do tend to arise in such cases. If he’s married, he may owe it to his wife and family to earn more money by developing his talents; and society can point out to him that, at any rate, they would benefit from his exercise of them (if they are of certain kinds). But we aren’t considering these at the moment. The utilitarian view is that, so long as it’s only his own interest that’s concerned, moral criticism (i.e., the kind of impersonal criticism which in serious cases also leads to reinforcement), is out of place.

On the other hand, since everybody’s interests are to be regarded equally, neither more nor less, a person has a perfect right to urge his own interests against others. We might regard him as a fool if he doesn’t; on the other hand, he doesn’t have a duty to stand up for his rights; but he does have them. And this also follows from the utilitarian view. Obviously, if everyone’s interests count equally, then I have a right to advance my own claims where they are in question. I presume that most people would agree with the result that we have a right, but not a duty, to pursue our own interests equally with everyone else.

The view that we have a duty to prefer ourselves to others is, accordingly, false. But the view that we nevertheless should prefer ourselves to others is another matter. According to Baier:

If we ask ourselves to which reasons, other things being equal, we attach the greater weight, to the self-regarding or the other-regarding, the answer is that, if the two reasons are of exactly the same sort and importance, then we always (other things being equal) attach greater weight to the self-regarding reason.²³

²³ Baier, Moral Point of View, p. 121.
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It is difficult to evaluate this view, owing to the problem of deciding just what the force of "other things being equal" is. However, I think that on the most natural interpretation, Baier is correct and that the view is just what we would expect on the utilitarian principle. What Baier is saying, I think, is that if another person would enjoy something that I can do for him just as much as I would enjoy it if I did it for myself, and I can't do it for both, and I have no particular affection for the other person, so that I would not get any additional pleasure out of doing it specifically for him, then I should do it for myself. The reason is simple: it's more trouble to do it for him. The other fellow is, after all, someone else, another person with his own plans, activities, friends, etc. In order to do it for him, I not only have to sacrifice my own enjoyment, I also have to go to the trouble of doing it for him. Suppose, for example, I have an opera ticket and I happen to know that Jones would enjoy going to the opera just as much as I, but that Jones is a perfect stranger. Aside from the obvious embarrassment (in our society anyway) and absurdity of doing such a thing for a perfect stranger, there is the fact that he might have other plans for the evening, he might suspect my motives and I would have to go to the trouble of explaining that I am just being benevolent (but would he believe it?). Even if Jones is somebody I know, still, how can I be quite sure that he really would enjoy it just as much as I would? All in all, unless one has good reason to believe that the other person would enjoy it much more than oneself, and unless it wouldn't be any special trouble and one really wouldn't mind (and after all, one usually does mind missing out on an enjoyable experience), it's better to go ahead and do it yourself. The other chap can take care of himself. This seems to me to be the obvious conclusion on utilitarian grounds, and is surely in accordance with common sense as well. The above remarks also apply to the preferring of one's family, relatives, etc., to people one doesn't know. Clearly, one reason for doing things for those we know rather than those we don't know, is precisely that we do know them, and thus can be reasonably confident that they really would enjoy certain things and not others, that they wouldn't be embarrassed, and so on. It is also true that, by and large, we enjoy doing things for people we
know more than for people we don’t know, and provided there is no other reason to discriminate among recipients of favors, this gives one a good reason for bestowing them on friends, acquaintances, and family in preference to strangers. Finally, associating with people inevitably tends to involve one in obligations of the types previously discussed in Chapter VI. The utilitarian must deny, of course, that being someone’s brother creates obligations to him simply as such; but it is unlikely that most people would think, on reflection, that it does. Most people have a psychological preference for their siblings and parents instilled into them by society. Thus, if told that someone hitherto thought to be quite unrelated to one is in fact one’s brother, say, this will stir a certain interest in most people. But suppose he turns out to be a crook, or a bore? Clearly, the sense of obligation in these relationships is due to affection and association, and when these disappear, the sense of obligation declines as well.

In short, we might question whether the types of attitudes toward relatives (and fellow countrymen, for that matter) sanctioned in a particular society are good ones or not, and whether they could be changed for the better (would it be an improvement to try to instill the view that all men are equally one’s “brothers”?)

Some of the precursors of Bentham’s utilitarianism, such as Gay, Paley, and Malthus, were of the “theological” variety, and it is perhaps worth including a brief note on the bearing, if any, of religion on the present discussions, or perhaps vice versa. Most religions are thought by their adherents, and by the general
public at large in Europe and North America, to have some serious connection with ethics, and on occasion this has been made the ground of some sort of objection to the utilitarian view. Utilitarianism is generally regarded as a “secular” doctrine, and there is a sense, as we shall shortly see, in which they are perfectly justified in this.

Those who believe that there is an important connection between religion and ethics may be divided into two classes of very unequal sizes. The preponderant class consists of those who believe that it is our moral duty to be religious, in any of various ways; the smaller believes that it is our religious duty to be ethical. Of the second view, we may observe that so long as the substance of morality is determined by utility, there is no objection whatever to reinforcing moral behavior by religious motives, so long as this is not made the ground (as it often is) of reverting to the first view.24 It is the first that is important. Plato first showed that God cannot set or create the standards of morals;25 any number of modern authors have clarified this to a point which leaves little room for improvement.26 This demonstrated, it follows without difficulty that it cannot be a (moral) duty to be religious. The only question remaining is whether religion is consistent with ethics. This has been thought possible, among utilitarians, by assuming that God is a utilitarian.

Unfortunately, the supposition that there is a utilitarian God is incredible, if not meaningless. On the utilitarian view, the ground for regarding something as a duty must be that its non-performance would harm someone or other. In the case of omnipotent beings, who can supposedly do anything without any cost of effort to themselves, the argument for this restriction becomes inapplicable. Since it would cost God no effort what-

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24 I see little to be desired in the account of this in the doctrine of “sanctions” in Bentham and Mill. Cf., Principles of Morals and Legislation, Ch. II (sec. xviii) and Ch. III; Utilitarianism, Ch. III.
25 Plato, Euthyphro.
26 E.g., Baier, pp. 173–80; Sparshott, pp. 39, 40; Moore, Principia Ethica, Ch. IV; Frankena, Ethics, p. 84; Brandt, Ethical Theory, Ch. 4; Kai Nielsen, “Morality and God,” Philosophical Quarterly (1962); C. B. Martin, Religious Belief (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959), among many others.
ever to make everyone perfectly happy, then we are fully justified in regarding it as a duty on the part of God to do so. But obviously God has done nothing of the sort; and since he is supposed to have been our creator as well, he is literally responsible for the conditions of our well-being, which are notoriously imperfect. It is impossible to reconcile the supposition of the existence of such a being with the state of the world as we know it. What is done is quite different. It is supposed that somehow God is justified in creating a world of people of the kind we know because such people either could not be any happier than they are, or if they were made so, it would have to be at the expense of the supposed faculty of “free will.” The former is beneath discussion, and the latter involves a gigantic misunderstanding. For free will, in any sense in which we attribute free will to people, is of no intrinsic moral value whatever. If another person, of his own “free will,” goes about causing pain and suffering, then we are not only justified but obligated to restrict his activity, which means, of course, diminishing his “freedom.” It follows that the possession of free will is not a value that overrides any negative values, and it is difficult to see what could have made philosophers think so, other than a penchant for obscurantism. The advocates of the existence of God ought to reflect with sobriety, instead of with metaphysical enthusiasm, on this difficulty.\(^{27}\)

If it is claimed that it would not have been possible for God to make men perfectly happy because otherwise they would not be men, or because (as some now hold)\(^{28}\) the concept of perfect happiness is self-contradictory or otherwise logically inapplicable, then it merely follows that God ought not to have created people at all. Only conceit, I think, compounded by bad reasoning, could make this the ground of an objection. If, of course, we had not been born (or otherwise created), then the problem of evil, and indeed any other problems, would not have arisen; but in any case, God would not have done us a wrong in not creating us, since there would then have been no “us” to do


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wrongs to.\(^{29}\) But on the theological scheme of creation, coupled with the doctrine that God is a morally responsible being, we can only conclude that he has been doing a bad job of it ever since he did commit the initial mistake of creating us.

I conclude that discussions of religion in any way, shape, or form, are wholly irrelevant to ethical contexts.\(^{30}\) The fact is, there’s a great deal less to ethics than has often been supposed, and it is conceivable, I think, that races of intelligent beings could exist without any such institution. It is this sense of the limitedness of morality with which I should like to conclude this Chapter. Morality can be summed up, if the interpretative devices introduced in the foregoing chapters should prove sound, as that institution whose concern is the general happiness (conceived in the manner of Chapter III). The general happiness is merely everybody living the sort of life he would find best, according to whatever conception of the good life he happens to have. For most of us, this conception does not include any substantial specific concern for the general happiness, and does include a wonderful variety of other concerns. For any given one of us, then, these other concerns are our major business in life. Moral concerns crop up every now and then, to be sure, but by their very nature are secondary. Without other interests, there can be no moral interests. Thus, it is in the nature of the institution that they cannot be predominant, and indeed that action from specifically moral motives ought not to be predominant. We might say that in a morally ideal world, morality would be unnecessary.\(^{31}\) For there is no moral value in the existence of moral problems. The world is perhaps more interesting because interests conflict and moral dilemmas arise, but this is no moral reason for supposing that there ought to be moral problems. Morality is not a matter of taste, even if the taste is in universes.

\(^{29}\) The case is then parallel to the “new generations” problem: does one have a duty to have children if they would be happy? There is, in fact, no moral value in it as such, at all, since if one doesn’t bring them into existence, the question of doing them well or ill doesn’t arise.

\(^{30}\) Irrelevant, that is, in the sense that no general moral principles depend on religious ones for their validity; but no doubt religious people could have moral problems which non-religious ones don’t have.