

Egoism

A different sort of challenge to the idea of objective or universal moral truths is posed by ethical egoism. Here there are two distinct, but related views. First, there is **psychological egoism**, the view that as a matter of psychological fact, no one is *capable* of pursuing anything but his own selfish interests. Second, there is **ethical egoism**, the view that no one is ever morally obligated to act in any way that is contrary to his own interests (with the rationale being a person cannot be *morally obligated* to do anything that is psychologically impossible)—and perhaps, even less plausibly, that people are morally obligated to pursue their own best interests. Ethical egoism, in either of these versions, would, if correct, amount in a way to an objective moral truth, but it would mean that there are no objective moral truths of the more familiar sort that restrain people's selfish behavior by appeal to the interests and rights of others. The selection by Joel Feinberg offers a detailed critique of psychological egoism, which Feinberg claims to appear plausible only as a result of confusions of various sorts. (If psychological egoism is rejected, then there is no clear rationale of any sort for ethical egoism.)

The final selection, from Plato's most famous dialogue *Republic*, raises an issue that is distinct from but related to ethical egoism: whether or not it is in a person's self-interest to behave in a way that conforms to morality. The claim of psychological egoism was in effect that moral behavior is impossible if the demands of morality conflict with those of self-interest. Plato's striking thesis is that such a conflict does not arise, not because ethical egoism is true, but rather because conforming to the demands of a non-egoistic morality (like the views discussed in the first section) is in fact best for the individual person—or, more specifically, for the health of his or her soul.

What Is the Best Theory of Morality? Utilitarianism: Morality Depends on Consequences

Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was an English moral, political, and legal philosopher, and the main founder of the utilitarian approach to ethics. Bentham's main concern was with practical legal and social reform along utilitarian lines, and he became the leader of an important group of reformers (the "Philosophical Radicals"), whose influence led to significant changes in British law, particularly in the area of criminal law. In the following selection from his most important work, Bentham presents, explains, and defends a hedonistic version of act utilitarianism based on the *principle of utility*, which he regards as the only reasonable basis for moral judgments.

From *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Of the Principle of Utility

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what

from *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1823).

we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and

1 Editor Comment

As will become clear later, the party in question is the entire community.

2 Stop and Think

Bentham clearly assumes that all varieties of pleasure and happiness amount to essentially the same thing; and similarly for pain and unhappiness. How plausible is this?

3

What Bentham presumably means here (as suggested by the previous footnote) is that the morally right action is the one whose tendency in favor of happiness as opposed to unhappiness is the greatest of the available alternatives: the action that maximizes the net balance of pleasure or happiness over pain or unhappiness. (Notice that in a sufficiently unfortunate situation, this net balance might still be negative—that is, all the alternatives might produce more unhappiness than happiness.)

4

Why does Bentham say that an action that conforms to his principle might merely be "not one that ought not to be done"? He seems to be allowing here for the possibility that there might be two or more actions that are equally good from the standpoint of utility, in which case each of them would be permitted (it would be "not one that ought not to be done"), but no particular one of them would be required ("one that ought to be done").

confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility** recognises this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

II. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. ① I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

III. By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual. ②

IV. The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then

is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

V. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

VI. An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility, (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it. ③

VII. A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by particular person or persons) may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.

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X. Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. Or one may say also, that it is right it should be done, at least that it is not wrong it should be done, that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. ④ When thus interpreted, the words *ought*, and *right* and *wrong*, and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise they have none.

XI. Has the rectitude of this principle been ever formally contested? It should seem that had, by those who have not known what the have been meaning. Is it susceptible of a direct proof? it should seem not: for the which is used to prove every thing else, cannot itself be proved: a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere. ⑤

*Note by the Author, July 1822.

To this denomination has of late been added, or substituted, the *greatest happiness* . . . principle: . . . that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper, and only right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action: of human action in every situation, and in particular in that of a functionary or set of functionaries exercising the powers of Government . . .

ive such proof is as impossible as it is need-
ss. 5

XII. Not that there is or ever has been that man creature breathing, however stupid or perverse, who has not on many, perhaps on most occasions of his life, deferred to it. By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it: if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men. There have been, at the same time, not many, perhaps, even of the most intelligent, who have been disposed to embrace it purely and without reserve. There are even few who have not taken some occasion or other to quarrel with it, either on account of their not understanding always how to apply it, or on account of some prejudice or other which they were afraid to examine into, or could not bear to part with. Such is the stuff that man is made of: in principle and in practice, in a right track and in a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency.

XIII. When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility, it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself.* His arguments, if they prove any thing, prove not that the principle is *wrong*, but that, according to the applications he supposes to be made of it, it is *misapplied*. Is it possible for a man to move the earth? Yes; but he must first find out another earth to stand upon.

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Chapter II Of Principles Adverse to That of Utility

If the principle of utility be a right principle to be governed by, and that in all cases, it follows from what has been just observed, that whatever principle differs from it in any case must necessarily be a wrong one. To prove any other principle, therefore, to be a wrong one, there needs no more than just to show it to be what it is, a principle of which the dictates are in some

point or other different from those of the principle of utility: to state it is to confute it. 6

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XI. Among principles adverse to that of utility, that which at this day seems to have most influence in matters of government, is what may be called the principle of sympathy and antipathy. By the principle of sympathy and antipathy, I mean that principle which approves or disapproves of certain actions, not on account of their tending to augment the happiness, nor yet on account of their tending to diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, but merely because a man finds himself disposed to approve or disapprove of them: holding up that approbation or disapprobation as a sufficient reason for itself, and disclaiming the necessity of looking out for any extrinsic ground. . . . 7

...

XIII. In looking over the catalogue of human actions (says a partisan of this principle) in order to determine which of them are to be marked with the seal of disapprobation, you need but to take counsel of your own feelings: whatever you find in yourself a propensity to condemn, is wrong for that very reason. For the same reason it is also meet for punishment: in what proportion it is adverse to utility, or whether it be adverse to utility at all, is a matter that makes no difference. In that same proportion also is it meet for punishment: if you hate much, punish much: if you hate little, punish little: punish as you hate. If you hate not at all, punish not at all: the fine feelings of the soul are not to be overborne and tyrannized by the harsh and rugged dictates of political utility.

XIV. The various systems that have been formed concerning the standard of right and wrong, may all be reduced to the principle of sympathy and antipathy. One account may serve for all of them. They consist all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of

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 What Bentham seems to be saying here is that the principle of utility is **self-evident**, that one can see that it is true just by understanding the content of the principle.

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 Again the assumption seems to be (?) that the principle of utility is self-evidently true, so that Bentham can appeal to it in refuting opposing views.

7

 The principle of sympathy and antipathy is Bentham's label for the moral view that assesses the rightness or wrongness of actions simply by appeal to one's immediate inclination to approve or disapprove of them—what is sometimes referred to as moral intuition. As we have already seen, his view is that there is no rational basis apart from utility for such inclinations.

*The principle of utility, (I have heard it said) is a dangerous principle: it is dangerous on certain occasions to consult it.' This is as much as to say, what? that it is not consonant to utility, to consult utility: in short, that it is *not* consulting it, to consult it.

*Restatement/
Summary*

R This important footnote lists a variety of ways of formulating what Bentham regards as essentially the same appeal to unargued and fundamentally irrational moral inclinations or intuitions.

STOP (Is he right that these all amount to the same thing?)

9

The first two of these are the most obvious features bearing on the utility or disutility of pleasures and pains: how intense they are and how long they last. "Certainty or uncertainty" really pertains to our knowledge that the pleasure or pain will result from the action in question, not to the pain or pleasure itself; Bentham is pointing out the obvious fact that we can base a decision only on what we believe will result. "Propinquity or remoteness" has to do with how close the result in question is in time; Bentham seems to be suggesting that a temporally distant pleasure or pain should count for less than one that will occur sooner.

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As Bentham proceeds to say, "fecundity" and "purity" are not really qualities of the pleasures or pains themselves. It would be clearer to put his point here by saying that all of the consequences of an action in terms of pleasure and pain must be counted in assessing it, including of course pleasures and pains that are caused by earlier pleasures and pains.

the author's sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself. The phrases different, but the principle the same.* **8**

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XVI. The principle of sympathy and antipathy is most apt to err on the side of severity. It is for applying punishment in many cases which deserve none: in many cases which deserve some, it is for applying more than they deserve. There is no incident imaginable, be it ever so trivial, and so remote from mischief, from which this principle may not extract a ground of punishment. Any difference in taste: any difference in opinion: upon one subject as well as upon another. No disagreement so trifling which perseverance and altercation will not render serious. Each becomes in the other's eyes an enemy, and, if laws permit, a criminal. This is one of the circumstances by which the human race is distinguished (not much indeed to its advantage) from the brute creation.

XVII. It is not, however, by any means unexampled for this principle to err on the side of lenity. A near and perceptible mischief moves antipathy. A remote and imperceptible mischief, though not less real, has no effect. . . .

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Chapter IV Value of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain, How to Be Measured

I. Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the *ends* which the legislator has in view: it behooves him therefore to understand their *value*. Pleasures and pains are the *instruments* he has to work with: it behooves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value.

II. To a person considered by himself, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by itself, will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:

1. Its *intensity*.
2. Its *duration*.

*It is curious enough to observe the variety of inventions men have hit upon, and the variety of phrases they have brought forward, in order to conceal from the world, and, if possible, from themselves, this very general and therefore very pardonable self-sufficiency.

3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty*.

4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*. **9**

III. These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself. But when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any *act* by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account; these are,

1. Its *fecundity*, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the *same* kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.

2. Its *purity*, or the chance it has of *not* being followed by sensations of the *opposite* kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain. **10**

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasure or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.

IV. To a *number* of persons, with reference to each of whom the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones; *viz.*

1. Its *intensity*.
2. Its *duration*.
3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty*.
4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*.
5. Its *fecundity*.
6. Its *purity*.

And one other; to wit:

7. Its *extent*; that is, the number of persons to whom it *extends*; or (in other words) who are affected by it.

V. To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as follows.

Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable *pleasure* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
2. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it *after* the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pleasure* and the *impurity* of the first *pain*.
4. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pain*, and the *impurity* of the first pleasure.
5. Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that *individual* person; if on the side of pain, the *bad* tendency of it upon the whole. **11**
6. Take an account of the *number* of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. *Sum up* the numbers expressive of the degrees of *good* tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *bad* upon the whole. Take the *balance*; which, if on the side of *pleasure*, will give the general *good tendency* of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general *evil tendency*, with respect to the same community. **12**

VI. It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one. **13**

VII. The same process is alike applicable to pleasure and pain, in whatever shape they

appear: and by whatever denomination they are distinguished: to pleasure, whether it be called *good* (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or *profit* (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of distant pleasure,) or *convenience*, or *advantage*, *benefit*, *emolument*, *happiness*, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called *evil*, (which corresponds to *good*) or *mischief*, or *inconvenience*, or *disadvantage*, or *loss*, or *unhappiness*, and so forth.

VIII. Nor is this a novel and unwarranted, any more than it is a useless theory. In all this there is nothing but what the practice of mankind, wheresoever they have a clear view of their own interest, is perfectly conformable to. An article of property, an estate in land, for instance, is valuable, on what account? On account of the pleasures of all kinds which it enables a man to produce, and what comes to the same thing the pains of all kinds which it enables him to avert. But the value of such an article of property is universally understood to rise or fall according to the length or shortness of the time which a man has in it: the certainty or uncertainty of its coming into possession; and the nearness or remoteness of the time at which, if at all, it is to come into possession. As to the *intensity* of the pleasures which a man may derive from it, this is never thought of, because it depends upon the use which each particular person may come to make of it; which cannot be estimated till the particular pleasures he may come to derive from it, or the particular pains he may come to exclude by means of it, are brought to view. For the same reason, neither does he think of the *fecundity* or *purity* of those pleasures.

...

1. One man says, he has a thing made on purpose to tell him what is right and what is wrong; and that it is called a *moral sense*: and then he goes to work at his ease, and says, such a thing is right, and such a thing is wrong—why? ‘because my moral sense tells me it is.’
2. Another man comes and alters the phrase: leaving out *moral*, and putting in *common*, in the room of it. He then tells you, that his common sense teaches him what is right and wrong, as surely as the other’s moral sense

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Thus Bentham assumes that all pleasures and pains for a given individual are *commensurable*: that the positive and negative values they represent can be combined in one total. It is suggested here and made clear in the following paragraph that these values are to be thought of in numerical terms.

12



He also assumes, even more controversially, that positive and negative values pertaining to different people can be combined into one numerically expressed total.

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Strictly carrying out this process in a real-life case would require enormous expenditures of time and effort (if it could be done at all—see Discussion Question 2). This would be wasteful and inefficient, and so mistaken according to the principle of utility itself, since the resources involved would produce more pleasure or avoidance of pain if used in other ways than is gained by figuring out the best action with complete precision.

did: meaning by common sense, a sense of some kind or other, which, he says, is possessed by all mankind: the sense of those, whose sense is not the same as the author's, being struck out of the account as not worth taking. This contrivance does better than the other; for a moral sense, being a new thing, a man may feel about him a good while without being able to find it out: but common sense is as old as the creation; and there is no man but would be ashamed to be thought not to have as much of it as his neighbours. . . .

3. Another man comes, and says, that as to a moral sense indeed, he cannot find that he has any such thing: that however he has an *understanding*, which will do quite as well. This understanding, he says, is the standard of right and wrong: it tells him so and so. All good and wise men understand as he does: if other men's understandings differ in any point from his, so much the worse for them: it is a sure sign they are either defective or corrupt.

4. Another man says, that there is an eternal and immutable Rule of Right: that that rule of right dictates so and so: and then he begins giving you his sentiments upon any thing that comes uppermost: and these sentiments (you are to take for granted) are so many branches of the eternal rule of right.

5. Another man, or perhaps the same man (it's no matter) says, that there are certain practices conformable, and others repugnant, to the Fitness of Things; and then he tells you, at his leisure, what practices are conformable and what repugnant: just as he happens to like a practice or dislike it.

6. A great multitude of people are continually talking of the Law of Nature; and then they go on giving you their sentiments about

what is right and what is wrong: and these sentiments, you are to understand, are so many chapters and sections of the Law of Nature.

7. Instead of the phrase, Law of Nature, you have sometimes, Law of Reason, Right Reason, Natural Justice, Natural Equity, Good Order. Any of them will do equally well. The latter is most used in politics. The three last are much more tolerable than the others because they do not very explicitly claim to be any thing more than phrases: they insist but feebly upon the being looked upon as so many positive standards of themselves, and seem content to be taken, upon occasion, for phrases expressive of the conformity of the thing in question to the proper standard, whatever that may be. . . .

It is upon the principle of antipathy that such and such acts are often reprobated on the score of their being *unnatural*: the practice of exposing children, established among the Greeks and Romans, was an unnatural practice. Unnatural, when it means any thing, means unfrequent: and there it means something; although nothing to the present purpose. But here it means no such thing: for the frequency of such acts is perhaps the great complaint. It therefore means nothing; nothing, I mean, which there is in the act itself. All it can serve to express is, the disposition of the person who is talking of it: the disposition he is in to be angry at the thoughts of it. Does it merit his anger? Very likely it may: but whether it does or no is a question, which, to be answered rightly, can only be answered upon the principle of utility.

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Discussion Questions

- Bentham seems to regard the principle of utility as self-evidently correct. Does this amount to any more than saying that he (and many others) have a strong inclination or intuition in favor of this principle? If so, Bentham seems to be appealing to the very principle of sympathy or antipathy that he wants to reject. Is there any way of assessing moral claims that does not appeal, directly or indirectly, to such moral inclinations or intuitions? (See the discussion of the method

of reflective equilibrium in the introduction to this chapter.)

- Consider a choice between two actions, A and B, assuming that only your own utility is in question. Action A involves going out with friends, having pizza and beer, and going to a concert; but it also involves considerable expense, driving in heavy traffic, and so on. Action B involves staying home with your significant other, eating food you prepare yourself, drinking lemonade, watching a movie on

cable, and relaxing, with little effort or expense. (You may need to adjust the examples to make them better fit your particular desires and tastes.) How plausible is it that the various pleasures and pains (including various sorts of discomfort) involved in each of these cases can be combined into two total net values that are reasonably precise and can be numerically compared with each other?

3. How feasible is the larger utilitarian calculation Bentham describes? Suppose you are considering a choice between two different actions, each of which will cause a variety of pleasures and pains (or states of happiness and unhappiness) for many different individuals. (Try to think of a specific, fairly detailed example of your own here.) Is there any way to arrive at a total net value of each action for all the different individuals involved by combining all of their different sorts of pleasure and pain (or happiness and unhappiness) into one total—especially if consequences indefinitely into the future are considered?

4. Here is a slightly more specific problem for such calculations: suppose that one alternative action

leads to the death of one or more people, while the other does not. How should death be figured into the calculation? How much pleasure or happiness does it take to offset someone's death (or how much pain of other sorts is it equivalent to)? Is there any answer to this question that is both clear and defensible?

5. One moral value that is often regarded as very important is justice (or fairness). What role, if any, does justice play in a utilitarian evaluation of alternative actions? Suppose one action produces a certain amount of positive utility (pleasure or happiness) that is divided fairly evenly among the members of the relevant community, while a second action produces an amount of utility that is slightly greater, but most of which is enjoyed by a small group of people, with most of the members of the community receiving very little. Which action will apparently be preferred according to the principle of utility? Does this seem like the right result? (This is an appeal to moral intuition.) Can you think of any response to this objection on behalf of utilitarianism?

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was a British philosopher who made important contributions to many areas of philosophy, including logic, ethics, political philosophy, and epistemology. His father, James Mill, was a close follower of Bentham, and John Stuart was essentially raised as a utilitarian. In the following selection, Mill defends a version of hedonistic utilitarianism, but one that departs from Bentham by bringing the quality of pleasures, as well as their quantity, into the utilitarian assessment. Mill's discussion also contains some passages that seem to move in the direction of rule utilitarianism. Mill also offers a controversial "proof" of the principle of utility.

From Utilitarianism

Chapter I **General Remarks**

There are few circumstances among those which make up the present condition of human knowledge more unlike what might have been expected, or more significant of the backward state in which speculation on the most important subjects still lingers, than the little progress which has been made in the decision of the controversy respecting the

criterion of right and wrong. From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects and divided them into sects and schools carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to

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The reference is to Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*.

being unanimous on the subject than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras and asserted (if Plato's dialogue be grounded on a real conversation) the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist. **1**

...

To inquire how far the bad effects of this deficiency have been mitigated in practice, or to what extent the moral beliefs of mankind have been vitiated or made uncertain by the absence of any distinct recognition of an ultimate standard, would imply a complete survey and criticism of past and present ethical doctrine. It would, however, be easy to show that whatever steadiness or consistency these moral beliefs have attained has been mainly due to the tacit influence of a standard not recognized. Although the nonexistence of an acknowledged first principle has made ethics not so much a guide as a consecration of men's actual sentiments, still, as men's sentiments, both of favor and of aversion, are greatly influenced by what they suppose to be the effects of things upon their happiness, the principle of utility, or, as Bentham latterly called it, the greatest happiness principle, has had a large share in forming the moral doctrines even of those who most scornfully reject its authority. . . .

On the present occasion, I shall, without further discussion of the other theories, attempt to contribute something toward the understanding and appreciation of the "utilitarian" or "happiness" theory, and toward such proof as it is susceptible of. It is evident that this cannot be proof in the ordinary and popular meaning of the term. Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof. . . .

Before . . . I attempt to enter into the philosophical grounds which can be given for assenting to the utilitarian standard, I shall offer some illustrations of the doctrine itself, with the view of showing more clearly what it is, distinguishing it from what it is not, and disposing of such of the practical objections to it as either originate in, or are closely

connected with, mistaken interpretations of its meaning. . . .

Chapter II

What Utilitarianism Is

...

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure, and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain. **2**

Now such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and groveling, as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light, since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good

2

Pleasure (understood as including the avoidance of pain) is thus, for Mill, the only **intrinsic good**, with other things being valuable either for the pleasure they involve or for their **instrumental** value in leading to pleasure (or the avoidance of pain).

enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. ③ . . . It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. ④ And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other and, as it may be called, higher ground with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone. ⑤

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account. ⑥

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would

consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. . . . Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior—confounds the two very different ideas of happiness and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides. ⑦

...

According to the greatest happiness principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable—whether we are considering our own good or that of other people—is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality and the rule for measuring it against quantity being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being according to the utilitarian opinion the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality, which may accordingly be defined “the rules and precepts for human conduct,” by the observance of which an existence such as has been

3

R Mill suggests not only that human beings are capable of experiencing kinds of pleasure that animals are not (which is obvious), but also that nothing will count as human happiness that does not include these “higher” pleasures.

4

R Here is one rationale for the claim that “higher” pleasures are more valuable: they are *instrumentally* superior to bodily pleasures, in that they last longer, involve less risk (of unpleasant experiences), and are less costly (again in terms of unpleasant experiences, not just money).

5

 While not rejecting the previous point, Mill suggests a different reason for preferring “higher” to “lower” pleasures: “higher” pleasures are superior in *quality* to “lower” pleasures, where this means that a given quantity of a higher pleasure is preferable *in terms of its intrinsic pleasureableness alone* to the same or even a greater quantity (how much greater?) of a “lower” pleasure.

6

 Mill seems to present the appeal to what has been described as “a jury of pleasure testers” as giving the very *meaning* of the claim that one pleasure is of a better quality than another, but it is perhaps better to regard this as simply a practical test or *criterion*. Can the “competence” of such jurors be decided in a way that does not beg the question at issue? (See Discussion Question 1.)

7

 The issue is not just whether it is “better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied” (that is, that anyone familiar with both sorts of lives would choose the former), but whether this is so because the human life is superior *in terms of pleasure or happiness*. Mill cannot simply assume that pleasure or happiness is the only basis for this choice.

8

 There are at least three different issues raised by this passage: (1) Is it true that happiness and enjoyment are the ultimate ends of human life in the sense that they capture everything that people actually aim at? (See the selection from Nozick in Chapter 8 for more on this issue.) (2) Even if this were true, does it follow that happiness is thereby the standard of morality—that people *ought* to be guided only by the pursuit of happiness (their own and that of others)? (3) If circumstances do not allow all of mankind and even “the whole sentient creation” to be maximally happy, does utilitarianism have anything to say about how the choice of who is to be happy (and to what degree), and who is not, is to be made?

9

 Since all that matters is achieving the greatest total, utilitarianism does not allow a person to give *any* preference to his own happiness or well-being (or that of his family and friends)—nor to be any more concerned about his own projects and commitments than about those of anyone else.

 How reasonable a requirement is this? (See the selection from Williams later in this chapter.)

10

 One objection to act utilitarianism is that it would sanction violating various common-sense moral rules (rules that seem to be supported by our intuitive moral convictions, such as the rules not to lie, not to break promises, etc.) whenever even a very small gain in utility would result. A response to this objection is that when the damaging effects of such actions on valuable social institutions and practices are added in, such violations will be justified only in very unusual cases, where it is no longer clear that they are objectionable. (Does this work? See Discussion Question 3.)

described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation. 

...

I must again repeat what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. “To do as you would be done by,” and “to love your neighbor as yourself,” constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. 

It may not be superfluous to notice a few more of the common misapprehensions of utilitarian ethics, even those which are so obvious and gross that it might appear impossible for any person of candor and intelligence to fall into them; since persons, even of considerable mental endowment, often give themselves so little trouble to understand the bearings of any opinion against which they entertain a prejudice, and men are in general so little conscious of this voluntary ignorance as a defect that the vulgarest misunderstandings of ethical doctrines are continually met with in the deliberate writings of persons of the greatest pretensions both to high principle and to philosophy. . . .

. . . utility is often summarily stigmatized as an immoral doctrine by giving it the name of “expediency,” and taking advantage of the popular use of that term to contrast it with principle. But the expedient, in the sense in which it is opposed to the right, generally means that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself. . . . When it means anything better than this, it means that which is expedient for some immediate object, some temporary purpose, but which violates a rule whose observance is expedient in a much higher degree. The expedient, in this sense, instead of being the same thing with the useful, is a branch of the hurtful. Thus it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to

ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth does that much toward weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilization, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends—we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies. Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a malefactor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would save an individual (especially an individual other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial. But in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognized and, if possible, its limits defined; and, if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates. 

Again, defenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this—that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness. . . . The answer to the objection is that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions; on which experience all the prudence as well as all the morality of life are dependent. People talk as if the

commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness. . . . There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better. That philosophers might easily do this, even now, on many subjects; that the received code of ethics is by no means of divine right; and that mankind have still much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness, I admit or rather earnestly maintain. The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and, in a progressive state of the human mind, their improvement is perpetually going on. But to consider the rules of morality as improvable is one thing; to pass over the intermediate generalization entirely and endeavor to test each individual action directly by the first principle is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgment of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveler respecting the place of his ultimate destination is not to forbid the use of landmarks and direction-posts on the way. The proposition that happiness is the end and aim of morality does not mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that persons going thither should not be advised to take one direction rather than another. Men really ought to leave off talking a kind of nonsense on this subject, which they would neither talk nor listen to on other matters of practical concernment. Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanac. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on

many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. And this, as long as foresight is a human quality, it is to be presumed they will continue to do. Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by; the impossibility of doing without them, being common to all systems, can afford no argument against any one in particular; but gravely to argue as if no such secondary principles could be had, and as if mankind had remained till now, and always must remain, without drawing any general conclusions from the experience of human life is as high a pitch, I think, as absurdity has ever reached in philosophical controversy. 11

. . . It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable. . . . There exists no moral system under which there do not arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligation. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points both in the theory of ethics and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. . . . If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible. Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all; while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority, there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them; their claims to precedence one over another rest on little better than sophistry, and, unless determined, as they generally are, by the unacknowledged influence of consideration of utility, afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities. We must remember that only in these cases of conflict between secondary principles is it requisite that first principles should be appealed to. There is no case of moral obligation in which some secondary principle is not involved; and if only one, there can seldom be any real doubt which one it is, in the mind of any person by whom the principle itself is recognized. 12

...

11

 Even act utilitarianism can sanction the use of general rules of morality in cases where it is too difficult or costly or time-consuming to do a full utilitarian calculation (a point also made by Bentham). The issue between act and rule utilitarianism is whether one should follow such rules even when it is clear that doing so will not produce the greatest utility in the situation in question. (See the following selection from Smart for more on this.)

12

 Here Mill may be saying that a utilitarian calculation should be made only where the "secondary rules" conflict. This would mean that in the absence of conflict, the relevant secondary rule should always be followed—even in cases where it clearly does not lead to the greatest utility. This would be a rule utilitarian view (see the chapter introduction and the following selection by Smart). But he may only be saying that an appeal to a utilitarian calculation is not required ("requisite") where there is no conflict but is still permitted and perhaps even desirable where feasible—which would still be an act utilitarian view.

Chapter IV

Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility Is Susceptible

It has already been remarked that questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles, to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct. But the former, being matters of fact, may be the subject of a direct appeal to the faculties which judge of fact—namely, our senses and our internal consciousness. Can an appeal be made to the same faculties on questions of practical ends? *Or by what other faculty is cognizance taken of them?*

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

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it. **13** If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good, that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct and, consequently, one of the criteria of morality. **14**

But it has not, by this alone, proved itself to be the sole criterion. To do that, it would seem, by the same rule, necessary to show, not only that people desire happiness, but that they never

desire anything else. Now it is palpable that they do desire things which, in common language, are decidedly distinguished from happiness. They desire, for example, virtue and the absence of vice no less really than pleasure and the absence of pain. The desire of virtue is not as universal, but it is as authentic a fact as the desire of happiness. And hence the opponents of the utilitarian standard deem that they have a right to infer that there are other ends of human action besides happiness, and that happiness is not the standard of approbation and disapprobation.

But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself. Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue, however they may believe (as they do) that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue, yet this being granted, and it having been decided, from considerations of this description, what is virtuous, they not only place virtue at the very head of the things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognize as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it; and hold that the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner—as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. **15** This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the happiness principle. The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, is to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end. Virtue, according to the utilitarian

13

 This is the first stage of Mill's "proof," purporting to establish that happiness is *desirable* in the sense of being an intrinsic good for all people (given the further premise that all people in fact desire their own happiness).

STOP How good is the analog between visibility or audibility and the relevant sense of "desirability"? (See Discussion Question 4.)

14

 Here is the second stage of the argument: if the happiness of each person is an intrinsic good for that person (supposedly established in the first stage), then "the general happiness" of all people is an intrinsic good for "the aggregate of all people."

STOP Does this, as Mill is claiming, establish that individual people should aim at "the general happiness" (as utilitarianism claims)? (See Discussion Question 4.)

15

R It is clearly compatible with utilitarianism that something other than happiness (such as virtue) be desired as an *instrumental* means to the end of happiness. Somewhat more surprisingly, it is also compatible with utilitarianism to hold that more utility will be produced if virtue is desired as an end in itself, as intrinsically valuable, rather than being explicitly sought only as a means to happiness.

 (But this might just mean that it is instrumentally valuable for people to believe *falsely* that virtue is an intrinsic good.)

doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who live it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness.

... Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity.

Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good. . . .

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

We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true—if human nature

is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness—we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole.

And now to decide whether this is really so, whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain, we have evidently arrived at a question of fact and experience, dependent, like all similar questions, upon evidence. It can only be determined by practiced self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others. I believe that these sources of evidence, impartially consulted, will declare that desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable or, rather, two parts of the same phenomenon—in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact; that to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences) and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing; and that to desire anything except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.¹⁶

...

16

 Here is the third and final stage of the argument: Mill argues, that if virtue (or anything else) is desired as an end in itself, then realizing that end becomes in itself a source of pleasure or happiness, so that it becomes "part of happiness," in which case it is still only pleasure or happiness that is desired.

 Here he seems to be making a mistake (one that is discussed in the later selection by Feinberg): the pleasure or happiness that results when a desire for something is satisfied cannot be the main end of that desire, for it is only because there is an independent desire for that thing that pleasure results when the desire is satisfied.

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose you are attempting to assess the relative quality of two pleasures: the pleasure of attending an opera and the pleasure of eating pizza. Mill says this question should be decided by appealing to a jury composed of people who have experienced both pleasures or, he says a bit later, are "competently acquainted with both." How is it to be decided which people qualify to be members of this jury? Clearly merely having some brief exposure to both pizza and opera is not enough, especially for opera, which seems to be an "acquired taste." But then how much exposure is required to produce "competent acquaintance" with something like opera (or other "higher" pleasures)? Clearly we cannot say that a person is not "competently acquainted" with a "higher" pleasure unless he or she prefers it (in general) to "lower"

pleasures, since that would load the dice in favor of the "higher" pleasures.

2. Even if the utilitarian calculation were possible under Bentham's view (see Discussion Questions 2 and 3 to the Bentham selection), is it still possible given Mill's recognition of qualities as well as quantities of pleasure? How are qualities to be figured into the calculation? Can pleasures of different quality be combined into one total, and if so, how? (Remember how differences of quality are supposed to be determined: does this plausibly yield a numerical value for the quality of a pleasure that could perhaps be multiplied with the numerical measure of quantity?) If not, how is a definite result as to which action leads to the most pleasure (and least pain) supposed to be arrived at?