

**THE PROMOTION OF
GENERAL HAPPINESS:
A UTILITARIAN ESSAY**

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The Promotion of General Happiness: A Utilitarian Essay by Michael Macmillan

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MICHAEL MACMILLAN

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A UTILITARIAN ESSAY

BY

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We cannot expect to agree in our utilitarian estimates, at least without much debate. We must agree to differ, and though we are bound to argue fearlessly, it should be with the consciousness that there is room for wide and *bona fide* difference of opinion. We must consent to advance cautiously, step by step, feeling our way, adopting no foregone conclusions, trusting no single science, expecting no infallible guide.—
Jevons: *The State in Relation to Labour*.

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PREFACE.

IN the following pages I have borrowed from Professor Henry Sidgwick the useful word "felicific," and doubtless I have in many passages been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the same writer. It would indeed have been impossible for me to read his *Methods of Ethics* for ten successive years in the ordinary routine of my Indian work, each year with increased admiration for the Aristotelian thoroughness of the discussions it contains, without having my opinions on many subjects, and my way of looking at all questions, considerably affected thereby.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS.

CHAPTER I.

GENERAL REMARKS.—Even if happiness entirely depended on comparison of our own possessions with those of others, happiness might be increased (1) by discovery of a more miserable race of beings, (2) by spread of pessimistic ideas. So far as it depends on comparison with previous generations, it can be increased by the discovery of new sources of pleasure. So far as it depends on comparison with our own past state, it may be increased by sudden increase of production or discovery of new sources of pleasure. But happiness is not always due to comparison, and therefore other sources of happiness must be considered. Custom blunts our sensibility to pleasure and pain, but does not make it impossible to increase or decrease general happiness. We must assume, unless there is reason to the contrary, that the increase of any individual's happiness increases general happiness 1

CHAPTER II.

KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION.—Knowledge being imperfect cannot give mental satisfaction, nor can mankind by increase of knowledge gain happiness through a feeling of superiority, nor can greater knowledge of the world's condition be assumed to be productive of happiness unless we accept optimism. Increase of knowledge will direct aright utilitarian action, and will be expected by the utilitarian to lead to the more general adoption of utilitarianism. It will also prevent useless riots and rebellions. The spread of female education should be especially encouraged by the utilitarian as the best remedy for the infelicitous inequality between the sexes 12

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INVENTIVE KNOWLEDGE.—The power over nature given by knowledge being still imperfect gives no more mental satisfaction

than the less power possessed by the ancients. The mariner's compass, by increasing the population of the world, has had a doubtful effect on happiness, and the same may be said of free trade, steam engines, and other inventions whose chief effect has been to increase production and population. Printing increases happiness in some ways and diminishes it in others. Material comforts, though much improved by modern inventions, afford no more pleasure than the inferior luxuries of old times. Familiarity deprives them of their charm 22

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<p>THE MORAL VIRTUES AND RELIGION.—Utilitarian moral virtue of course promotes happiness or we should have a contradiction in terms. Utilitarians must determine praise and blame by the same standard as they apply to other acts. Unswerving truth and entire avoidance of deceit are probably more felicitous than the slightest modification of truth by other considerations. Justice as understood by the utilitarian means distribution productive of general happiness, however contrary that distribution may be to ordinary ideas of justice. Benevolence in the form of charity is, as a rule, doubtfully felicitous and needs careful limitation. In its other forms, including politeness, it is more clearly felicitous as revealing and increasing sympathy. The increase of sympathy promotes happiness, but it is not easy to increase sympathy except by the instrumentality of religion, which may with great force promote, not only sympathy, but the highest utilitarian morality, and so add more than anything else can do to the happiness of the world</p>	163
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THE PROMOTION OF GENERAL HAPPINESS

CHAPTER I.

UTILITARIANS regard the increase of the happiness of the world as the only reasonable end of conduct, as the only object desirable in itself. According to them even virtue itself would not be desirable unless it promoted the happiness of the world, and, if it had the contrary effect, would be the reverse of desirable. This extreme opinion is only held by a fraction of civilised men, a large number of whom consider that not only virtue but also knowledge and art are desirable for their own sake. But even those who regard virtue, knowledge, art and other objects as desirable for their own sakes regard general happiness as also desirable for its own sake. Some might possibly prefer or think they prefer in certain cases increase of virtue, knowledge, and art to increase of happiness, but, if they saw that a certain action would increase happiness and would have no prejudicial results in any other directions, they would think such an action ought to be done. Even the sternest moralists and religious teachers, who show us the admirable discipline afforded by pain, do not appear to be exceptions. For, though they think pain sometimes desirable in the interests of virtue and religion, they would prefer happiness if it