

**CONTEMPORARY
ENGLISH ETHICS: A
DISSERTATION**

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Contemporary English Ethics: a dissertation by Daniel Rees

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DANIEL REES

**CONTEMPORARY
ENGLISH ETHICS: A
DISSERTATION**

CONTEMPORARY
ENGLISH ETHICS.

A DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER I.

UTILITARIANISM.

"Kant, in the *Metaphysics of Ethics*, lays down an universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation; it is this:—'So act, that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings'. But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the *consequences* of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur."

So run the opening sentences of Mill's treatise on *Utilitarianism*. They point to an implied contrast in the views of the two writers, to a totally different standpoint. When dealing with the Practical Reason Kant alights upon a "factum" of consciousness: the moral law he regards as an indisputable fact of reason in its practical application. And just as the slightest admixture of the empirical, as a condition in a mathematical demonstration, would lower the value of the proof and do away with its universal cogency, so the slightest consideration of the pleasure or pain that might result as the consequence of any particular action would mar the worth of moral judgment, would, in fact, appeal not to the reason which is universal in man but to the sensibility of the individual, to what is ever changing in him, varying with every

variation in the conditions of his existence, external and internal. Mill maintains that the result of Kant's procedure ends in something only short of the grotesque. Ethics can not be thus formulated without regard to the conditions of organic life and the thousand considerations which arise in consequence of differences in the conditions which hem in the individual or assist him in his growth. Rather than proceed then from the consciousness of the individual regarded as free from the limitations of space and time—with unbounded indifference to the conditions of earthly existence —, Mill prefers to give the problem a complete turn, to take as his basis the firm ground of experience. 'Give me a *πῶν στῶ*', said the ancient Greek philosopher, contemplating the possibilities of the lever, 'and I will move the world'. Here at length we have a solid basis to work upon—the experience of past generations as represented in the institutions of to-day, and a never-failing power to work our machinery—the ever-present desire of the individual for pleasure and his aversion to pain. Not that we have here anything particularly new: we simply have forces old as the life of man, and carefully observed in their working ever since the ancient Greeks came to look at nature intelligently. We proceed to show, briefly, how Mill dealt with the materials at hand.

"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."¹⁾ We are to regard man, for ethical purposes, as a creature of impulses and desires. As an individual he is not self-sufficient, but related to the external world; it is there his impulses for the most part find their playground; it is thence his desires gain satisfaction. Desire is always for pleasure. Desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as

¹⁾ *Utilitarianism*, p. 9.

painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable: to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility. Accordingly desires would seem to allow of being arranged according to a graduated scale, or rather two scales—that of intensity and that of worth. “Utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, &c., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. 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 recognise the fact that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.”¹⁾ This distinction of quality among pleasures is essential—though perhaps suicidal—to Mill’s system; it attracts in cases where simple quantitative happiness would be out of question; it surrounds pleasure with a certain halo of moral worth. It is this consideration that attests the reasonableness of employing the higher faculties: but its introduction only tends greatly to increase the difficulties of the hedonistic calculus. With these difficulties in the way of hedonism Mill does not busy himself: it is enough for him that the case is so. “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. Each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This 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. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct. But it has not, by this alone, proved itself to be the sole criterion.”²⁾

¹⁾ Ibid. p. 12. ²⁾ p. 52.

So far we have kept well within the lines of egoism. How are we to make the passage to disinterestedness? Instead of following Hobbes' method and invoking the aid of the state for the maintenance of public morality, Mill prefers to make use of the psychological law elaborated by Hartley—the law of the "*association of ideas*". "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 they are capable of covering, and even in intensity." This principle explains the miser's love of money: this is the spring whence flows the love of power or of fame. "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; and with this difference between it and the love of money, of power, or of fame, that all of these may, and often do, render the individual noxious to the other members of the society to which he belongs, whereas there is nothing which makes him so much a blessing to them as the cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue. And, consequently, the utilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up to the point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness than promotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness."¹⁾

From the *psychological* point of view, then, the barrier that separates self-interest from altruistic affection does not appear insurmountable: from the nature of the case I pursue my own

¹⁾ p. 57.

happiness, and owing to the acknowledged working of the laws of association, my conduct may be such as to bring about the happiness of others; but when we are enjoined and required to cultivate this disinterested love of virtue, in other words, to adopt the utilitarian standard, we are justified in asking why *ought* we to pursue the happiness of others rather than our own. What *ethical* justification is there for the exclusive adoption of one out of two possible and perfectly "natural" courses? Different answers may be given:—

(a.) An attempt may be made to show that in the long run a person most devoted to the "greatest happiness" principle might somehow or other obtain the greatest happiness for himself. Mill does not make the attempt. Rather, "the utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind."¹⁾

(b.) "No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person 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 persons."²⁾ This is a surprising syllogism from Mill: it contains the fallacy of *quaternio terminorum*, and credits "the aggregate of persons" with a power of collective willing which, to say the least of it, is extraordinary.

(c.) Another method would be to empty the individual of all characteristic content, to ignore the disturbing element in

¹⁾ p. 24. ²⁾ p. 52.