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## Goodness

### Introduction

It would be easy to get people to agree to the idea that goodness plays a central role in morality. When thought of as a quality of persons, it is something moralists teach us to admire in others, and to cultivate in ourselves. However, for all that these opinions about the role of goodness in morality are common, there are difficulties. There is the obvious difficulty of deciding which specific quality of a person counts as goodness – what the content of this notion is. And there is the distracting further fact that goodness can be spoken of in wholly non-moral ways, as when one speaks of the goodness in the food we are about to eat. But these are only a part of the story, and the real difficulty starts further back.

The place to begin is with the adjective ‘good’ which is after all the place from which much of our talk of goodness arises. Like many other adjectives, ‘good’ has a special affinity with, and dependence on, the nouns it qualifies. Thus, consider expressions like ‘good knife’, ‘good computer’, ‘good athlete’, or, to put it more generally, ‘good X’. First, notice that from the claim, for example, that John is a good athlete we don’t infer *both* that John is an athlete *and* that John is good. That he is an athlete does follow, thus showing how good differs from adjectives such as ‘fake’ or ‘alleged’. (When something is described as a ‘fake diamond’, we most certainly cannot infer that it is a diamond.) But it

Philippa Foot, ‘Utilitarianism and the Virtues’, *Mind* 94 (1985), 196–209. An earlier version appeared in the Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 57 (1983). Copyright: Philippa Foot.

would take a very strange view of athletic prowess to justify the move from John is a good athlete to John is good. In short, in the ordinary run of cases, the adjective 'good' cannot intelligibly be separated from the noun it qualifies.

The second thing to notice arises from this inseparability, and perhaps partly explains it. In claims of the form, 'O is a good X', we have to look to what replaces X to give us some grounds for deciding whether what is claimed is true or false. To be a good knife is, presumably, to do whatever it is that knives do, and do it well; to be a good computer is to do well whatever is wanted in a computer, and to be a good athlete is to be an athlete who, for example, wins, or breaks records, or has certain outstanding physical characteristics. Clearly, it can be a matter of dispute what it takes in each case to count as a good X, but in every case we look to features of whatever X is to guide that discussion.

These features of the adjective 'good', lead directly to problems for the idea of goodness as an independent property which might figure in claims about morality. Taking 'goodness' to be the nominalization of the adjective 'good', we would expect it to retain, in some form, the features of the adjective, as this is pretty much what we find in the case of other nominalized adjectives. Thus, when Brown insists on her ecological credentials by claiming that she owns a *small* car, we have no trouble in understanding this as interchangeable with the claim that *smallness* is a property of the car. But just as the adjective 'small' requires its noun 'car' to give us some idea of the relevant standard of size, we must understand 'smallness' here as related to cars, and not as a self-standing property. If *smallness* were self-standing, then by choosing a different reference class – perhaps 'possession' – since the car is a large possession, we would end up saying that the car had the self-standing properties both of *smallness* and *largeness*, a conclusion that is surely unacceptable.

Taking 'good' to follow the model of 'small', the aptness in a specific case of the description 'good human being' cannot be understood as making reference to some independent property – goodness – which this human being happens to have. That is, from the claim that 'X is a good human being', we can infer that 'X is a human being', but not that 'X is good', i.e. has a self-standing property of goodness.

Why does this matter? Don't we think that the kind of goodness we are interested in is anyway a property of human beings? It is at this point that the second feature of the adjective 'good' comes into play. A good knife is one which does well – or to some high standard – what knives do. Similarly, then, a good human being must be one which does well – or to some high standard – what human beings do. Obviously, trying to say what it is that human beings do is not going to be as easy as it is for knives, but that is only part of the problem. Given that we are interested in the ways in which goodness might help us understand morality, there are two more pressing and interconnected issues. First, there are ways in which one might judge a

human life as conducted well, or to some high standard, that have little directly to do with morality. Second, insofar as we restrict our interest in standards to those that have moral relevance, we will in effect be defining goodness in terms of a prior conception of morality, and this undermines the thought that we can get some kind of leverage on the moral by appealing to a notion of goodness. Both of these points are worth further comment.

Leaving moral issues on one side for the moment, we surely recognize that human lives can take many forms: some people set out to gain the recognition of others, either by the things they do, or by the things they produce; some aim at the accumulation of wealth; some seek power, whether political or economic; and some aim to acquire knowledge. In respect of each of these ways of life, it is possible to imagine standards of achievement: some lives of these kinds fulfil these standards to a high degree, and, with respect to the relevant aims, these lives would be judged good. Thus, we find it natural to speak of good artists, writers, actors, politicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, and, not least, good philosophers. Moreover, though we might think that pursuing one of these to the exclusion of any other is unreasonable, it is difficult to deny that some combination of these activities might well constitute a good human life. Yet there is so far no explicit mention of what we might call 'moral goodness', and this might well make one doubt that the notion of human goodness is going to tell us much about morality.

To assuage this doubt, an obvious next move would be to insist that the above descriptions of a good human life are incomplete: in addition to achieving some high standard in one or more of those activities, there must be some kind of moral engagement. Thus, one might insist that to be a good human being one has also to possess virtues such as justice, benevolence and kindness, or generally know what is right, and do it. This would then constitute a composite account of what goes to make up human good.

This move certainly seems sensible enough, but it is just here that the second of the above points comes into play. The intuition that we can understand moral assessment by deploying a conception of human good requires that we start with some idea of what constitutes that goodness. One idea would be, for example, that we could use goodness to define rightness: an action is right if it leads to more good than any other available action. But if the only way we can spell out a plausible conception of human goodness is to build into it, from the start, some kind of moral assessment, this project won't work. In using human good to define right, but having already needed the notion of right to define the good, any such proposal would be unhelpfully circular.

Aside from this problem of circularity, the composite conception of human good might be thought problematic on its own. When people speak of someone as a good person, this assessment tends to be understood as a moral one: a person can be judged good, even if that person's life is not marked by high achievement in the arts, politics, business, education, science or in any other

non-moral sphere. Yet if we follow the trail suggested by the adjective ‘good’, it does take us to something like the composite view. In finding the standard needed to make sense of ‘good’, we must make reference to human beings’ lives, and the things they pursue, so goodness is bound to include more than a merely moral dimension of assessment.

Faced with these problems, someone might just refuse to follow the adjectival trail: though in many ordinary contexts ‘good’ seems to require a noun to give it some determinate sense, perhaps things are just different when the subject matter is morality. Perhaps ‘goodness’ is simply a self-standing property that some human beings have, and others lack, so that when we say ‘X is a good person’ – and intend the moral sense of ‘good’ – it does follow both that X is a person and X is good. Such a view might also help to explain something you may have already noticed: there is a certain awkwardness in speaking sometimes about a ‘good human life’ and sometimes about just plain ‘goodness’. As we saw, a good human life includes some degree of achievement in activities that are not directly relevant to morality, but human goodness, even if it often seems in short supply, is most often understood as a singularly moral notion. Of course, ‘good’ does function adjectivally. So, any refusal to accept the consequences of this must be accompanied by an account explaining why ‘goodness’ does not derive its sense directly from adjectival uses of ‘good’.

Whether we insist on understanding ‘good’ in a way which sweeps up all of its uses, as well as our use of ‘goodness’, or whether we think there is a kind of ambiguity in this adjective, an ambiguity that might well be brought out by the different ways in which the nominal ‘goodness’ is sometimes used, or whether the truth goes beyond either of these, each of these will have consequences for the role that goodness can play in moral thought. For, as we have seen, goodness certainly seems to have a close relationship with rightness and the virtues, and there can be no doubt that this trio of notions, and their inter-relationships, would be central to any account of morality.

### Introduction to Aristotle

Aristotle was born (384 BCE) in Stagira in the Chalcidicean peninsula of Macedon – now northern Greece – but his philosophical career is firmly associated with Athens. Arriving there when he was eighteen, he was a distinguished pupil of Plato’s at the Academy for nearly twenty years, until the latter’s death. On being passed over for the position of head of the Academy, Aristotle left Athens and was eventually summoned to the court of Philip II of Macedon to serve as the tutor to his son, the thirteen-year-old Alexander. When the latter embarked on the military campaigns that, as it were, transformed him into the young Alexander the Great, Aristotle returned to Athens (in 335 BCE) and founded his own institution, the Lyceum. Alexander was not

popular in Athens, and when news of his death in 323 BCE reached that city, Aristotle thought it prudent to leave, reputedly insisting that in doing so he would avoid Socrates' fate, and therefore prevent Athens from 'sinning twice against philosophy'. He himself died the following year.

Further details about his life are matters of speculation. Much has been written both about what some regard as the strained relationship between Plato and Aristotle, and about the extent of Aristotle's influence on Alexander the Great. But the one thing we can be sure of is that, together with Plato, Aristotle transformed the Greek philosophical scene, and, as a result, the whole of philosophy up to the present. His work covered what today would be regarded as natural and social science, as well as the more conventional philosophical topics of logic, metaphysics, ethics, the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of art. Very unfortunately, we seem to have only about a fifth of the writings he was known to have produced, and much of what we do have seems to be notes for lectures given in the Lyceum, perhaps even lecture notes taken by students.

The text below is taken from the work known as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a treatise probably dedicated to his son Nicomachus (who was himself named after Aristotle's father). As you will see, the selection is very brief. It is intended to get us started asking a certain kind of question about goodness, but you are very strongly encouraged to read the whole of this work, one still regarded as a central work in moral philosophy.

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## Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (extracts from Book I)

- a → 1. Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity – as bridlemaking and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others – in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued.

It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

- [b]→ 2. If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more god like to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry aims, since it is political science, in one sense of that term.

[...]

- [d]→ 4. Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour; they differ, however, from one another – and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great ideal that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another

which is self-subsistent and causes the goodness of all these as well. To examine all the opinions that have been held were perhaps somewhat fruitless; enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to be arguable.

- f → 5. Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed. To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life – that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some ground for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus. A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honour; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honour rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him. Further, men seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honoured, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate, virtue is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honour, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. But enough of this; for the subject has been sufficiently treated even in the current discussions. Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later.

[...]

7. Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others – if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

h→ Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all

things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as ‘life of the rational element’ also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say ‘so-and-so’ and ‘a good so-and-so’ have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

[i]→

[j]→

But we must add ‘in a complete life’. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.

### Commentary on Aristotle

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is divided into ten books, and our text consists of only a few of the numbered sections of Book I. Taking the first step in laying the groundwork for what follows, and to a large extent laying the groundwork for much of moral philosophy, Aristotle, at [a]→, makes what seems a straightforward enough claim.

While Aristotle's claim in the sentence at [a]→ can seem uncontentious, can you think of any way in which it might be challenged?

It might be thought that Aristotle is here making the very strong claim that there is some single thing – the good – at which everything we do aims. However, while there is more to say about this interpretation, it doesn't seem to be what Aristotle has in mind at [a]→. For, only a couple of sentences later, he insists that there are as many ends – things we aim at – as there are actions, arts and sciences. So, at least initially, it is more plausible to treat his opening sentence as the claim that every art, inquiry and action has something or other it aims at, and that for each of these, we can understand that as the good appropriate to that activity. But even under this weaker reading what he claims might be challenged. Is it really the case that everything we do aims at some good or other? Might we not sometimes just do things without any thought about what we are aiming to achieve? Obviously, these are difficult questions, but the fact that Aristotle's claim invites them suggests that his claim is a substantial one. It gives the notion of the good a clear and central place in understanding human endeavour.

Aristotle then takes an important further step. Between [a]→ and [b]→ he prepares the ground for this step by asking us to recognize that the good we aim at in some of our activities (e.g. bridle-making) is subordinate to the good of those more general activities which encompass the former (e.g. riding, and ultimately military strategy). Thus, faced with an activity and the good we expect in pursuing it, it is always possible to ask after the point of that good, and to get an answer in terms of some further activity which subsumes the original one. However, at [b]→ he claims that there is indeed a 'chief good', a good which stops the potentially infinite regress that the questions lead to. Such a chief good is the one which we pursue without it being necessary to ask what it is itself good for; it is something good for itself and the good of everything else is ultimately to be explained by reference to it. Speaking metaphorically, he notes ([c]→) that knowing such a good will make us like archers who have a mark to aim at. Or, less metaphorically, we can say that someone who knows what constitutes the good – that for the sake of which everything we do is done – will be in a strong position to live a fulfilled life.

Aristotle goes on to claim that politics is the science which is most likely to be concerned with this kind of goodness; he describes it as the 'master art'. We won't stop here to consider why, given the Aristotelian notion of politics, this is more plausible than it might seem now, familiar as we are with the often unedifying nature of political discourse.

Can you imagine a conception of politics and its aims which would have encouraged Aristotle to have regarded it as the master art? (Hint: read carefully what Aristotle says between [c]→ and [d]→.)

At [d]→, Aristotle, returning from a digression, begins the next stage of his account of goodness. Having, as he thinks, established that the good is to be understood as that for the sake of which we do everything, he sets out to give some content to this notion. For up to this point the notion of the good has only been a kind of place-holder: using Aristotle's metaphor, we can say that 'good' labels the fact that we aim at some target or other, though it doesn't yet tell us what the target is like.

Aristotle begins to flesh out his account (at [e]→) by noting something that he believes would command almost universal assent: the good for human beings is happiness. And, with this apparently simple move, he opens up a Pandora's box of philosophical and interpretative issues.

Can you imagine anyone who would not go along with Aristotle's claim about happiness being the good at which we aim in everything we do?

It is very difficult to resist taking our word 'happiness' as the label for some psychological state, something we experience in reaction to, for example, some success or piece of good news. However, taken in this way, it is easy to imagine someone challenging Aristotle's claim by insisting that there are more important things in life than happiness – that, for example, devoting oneself to a cause, or to knowledge, or to one's family count more than happiness. So, given that Aristotle regards his claim as one which commands general agreement, the suspicion must be that he is not speaking about happiness in the merely psychological sense. Moreover, given that this suspicion is well and truly borne out by all the things that Aristotle says about it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one might wonder whether 'happiness' is the best translation of Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*. The problem is that, on the one hand, there seems no better alternative (we will discuss this shortly); and, on the other hand, our notion of happiness can in fact be used in ways that are closer to Aristotle's intent.

Some have suggested 'living well' as a translation – and it works well enough when understood as an almost technical term by Aristotelian commentators – but in ordinary use this phrase conjures up images of a life of ease and plenty that is far removed from Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. The English word 'happiness' can mislead in respect of Aristotle, but at least there is a use of this term which fits some of the things that Aristotle intends. When, at the very end of our text (at [j]→), Aristotle notes that a complete human life can be judged as good or happy, we find no difficulty in what he says, even though he clearly does not have in mind a kind of feeling that comes and goes depending on our emotional state at any particular moment. As he often says, happiness for a human being consists in leading a certain kind of life, and there is no guarantee that such a life will be one of continuous happiness in the narrower psychological sense. Indeed, when one might think one is challenging Aristotle's identification of the good with happiness by pointing out the 'other things' in

life that matter, one is in fact agreeing with him. For when he leaves behind his verbal point – when he sets out to find out what human happiness is – he makes very clear that it is much more than the kind of psychological state often described as ‘pleasure’ or ‘contentment’.

Just after the point marked [f]→, Aristotle identifies three kinds of life, each of which might be regarded by some as happy and as cases in which a human being lives well. One is a life spent in the pursuit of pleasure, and he dismisses this as a life suitable to beasts, even though he also notes that one can sometimes find those who should know better devoting themselves to such a pursuit. The second suggestion is that of a life spent in the pursuit of honour and the third is a contemplative life, one spent in pursuit of knowledge.

What do you think Aristotle means by a life spent in pursuit of honour?

Aristotle describes honour as the end of political life, and this might suggest to us a life spent pursuing honour as one spent in trying to achieve public office, and everything that goes with it. However, while this is not simply wrong, it narrows the conception of honour to one that makes it difficult to understand why it figures so centrally in Aristotle’s list. But if one thinks of the pursuit of honour as more general – as the pursuit of recognition for one’s achievements including those in the arts, sciences, or in public life generally – this provides a better idea of what Aristotle has in mind. And we will be able to understand why he thinks such a pursuit is at most second best. For, as he says, what one is doing in seeking such recognition is looking to others to judge one’s abilities, and accepting their verdict as a way of ensuring that one is worthy. But he notes (at [g]→) that finding our merits in the judgements of others is superficial, and that the good should be ‘something proper to a man and not easily taken from him’.

Say what you think Aristotle means by claiming this.

You can get an idea of what he has in mind by looking further ahead to [h]→. In the passages between [g]→ and [h]→, Aristotle offers a number of interesting further considerations for his conclusion that happiness is what we aim at in everything we do. These arguments seek to establish that happiness is ‘final and self-sufficient’; it is something which we choose not for the sake of something else, but for itself, and which is itself most desirable, rather than being one good among a number of others. However, having done this, he returns to the question of how to fill out our account of what actually constitutes happiness. And at [h]→ he offers a new approach: he says that we could better answer our question if we could ‘first ascertain the function of man’.

As we have seen, it is not always easy to find good translations for Aristotle’s terms, and this is especially true in the present instance. Using ‘function’ as a translation of Aristotle’s *ergon* can be justified, but can also

be highly misleading. In certain contexts, we tend to think of the function of a thing as the purpose for which it was designed, or is employed: the function of a telephone is to allow us to speak across distances; that of a car is to travel those distances. Against this kind of background it is all too easy to think that Aristotle's thought is something like this: human beings are in some sense designed to do, or achieve, certain things, and once we have worked out what we are designed to do or achieve – something we are supposed to be able to work out independently of knowing what human goodness or excellence is – we can understand a good human being as one who fulfils that function most successfully. On this understanding, what Aristotle offers at [h]→ is a way to fill in what he had so far left blank, namely, a specific understanding of the good for humankind.

Tempting though this picture might be, there is reason to think that it is not what Aristotle had in mind in using *ergon* in the way he does. Look at the passage beginning at [h]→ and going to [i]→. There is no suggestion here that 'function of human beings' means the specific purpose that human beings were designed to fulfil. More importantly, Aristotle does not use the so-called 'function argument' to give us a detailed picture of the good (for human beings). He does say that human life is distinctive in involving the exercise of rational activity. This is what distinguishes us from plants and other animals. And he does go on to say that human goodness therefore consists in the 'good and noble' performance of the rational activity that is definitive of our nature. But nowhere does he indicate exactly what this rational activity involves; whether, that is, it involves living one's life in one kind of way or another.

Aristotle concludes the function argument by saying that 'human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue'. Does this give us any guidance about what it is that we do or should pursue in aiming at the good?

It is difficult to see that it does. Given that 'activity of the soul' here refers to the rational activity that makes us what we are, and, given that 'virtue' could as well be translated here by 'excellence', this claim repeats the point discussed above. Human good consists in achieving a kind of excellence in the exercise of our rational natures. But nothing is said, at any rate here, about what makes up the exercise of these faculties. So, while the discussion has been moved along, it hasn't reached any very definite conclusion.

At [j]→, he does add that we cannot judge a person to have been happy except in relation to a complete life, and this certainly shows why it is wrong to treat 'happiness' as the ephemeral psychological notion it is sometimes taken to be. But it also shows why this English word is not simply a mistranslation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. For, while we do describe people as happy (or not) on a day-to-day basis, we also recognize the wisdom in Aristotle's metaphorical insistence that one swallow does not make a summer.

Where does this leave us? Well, in spite of the controversy that surrounds the interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is perhaps fair to say two things. First, in treating the notion of the good in the way he did, Aristotle has made that notion central to what we might now describe as the project of morality. Second, he has given us some idea of where to look for an understanding of the good. It is, for example, not to be found in a kind of life we share with plants – namely growth – nor in the appetitive nature of animals. It has, therefore, an intrinsic connection with what is rational, since this is something that marks off human nature from that of other beings. But there are many different kinds of life that could be judged consistent with this requirement, and, at least in Book I, Aristotle has said very little about choosing between them.

### Introduction to Mill

John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806 and died in Avignon in 1873. His Scottish father, James Mill, was a distinguished writer and civil servant who, with Jeremy Bentham, was deeply involved in the political reform movement of the 1830s. James Mill and Bentham arranged for John Stuart Mill to be carefully educated, without what they saw as distracting contact with companions of his own age, so as to carry on the work of this movement. In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill described his education – which most would regard as extraordinarily intensive – as one suitable for any normal child. That said, he also records a period of extreme depression that he suffered as a young man, and many now regard that depression as the direct result of his lack of anything one would count as a childhood. (Aside from its relevance to Mill's thought, the *Autobiography* is an interesting account of his political and social context. Moreover, not counting very recent philosophers, proper autobiographies are rather rare in philosophy.)

A central philosophical view of the reformist movement of James Mill and Bentham was known as 'utilitarianism', and John Stuart Mill made a major contribution to this doctrine as well as to politics, economics, women's rights, philosophy and logic. He was by any standards a prolific writer and had an enormous influence on social and political life in nineteenth-century Britain and on the European continent.

*Utilitarianism* was originally published over three issues of the monthly *Fraser's Magazine* in 1861, and then collected together as a short book in 1863. It should be noted that Mill's aim in *Utilitarianism* was to expound and defend the doctrine of utilitarianism for the more general public, rather than to construct arguments for narrowly philosophic purposes. And it should be remembered that, whatever view one comes to about its philosophical content, in its time the doctrine was, and was seen to be, radical and utopian by both its adherents and its detractors.

## J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (extracts from Ch. 2, 'What Utilitarianism Is')

[...]

a)→ 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 the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

b)→ 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 grovelling; 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 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. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. 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. 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 pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

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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.

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. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable: we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them.

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 a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

[...]

- [e]→ I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of
- [f]→

human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

[g]→ 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 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.

[h]→ Against this doctrine, however, arises another class of objectors, who say that happiness, in any form, cannot be the rational purpose of human life and action; because, in the first place, it is unattainable: and they contemptuously ask, what right hast thou to be happy? a question which Mr Carlyle clenches by the addition, What right, a short time ago, hadst thou even to be? Next, they say, that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and could not have become noble but by learning the lesson of Entsagen, or renunciation; which lesson, thoroughly learnt and submitted to, they affirm to be the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

The first of these objections would go to the root of the matter were it well founded; for if no happiness is to be had at all by human

beings, the attainment of it cannot be the end of morality, or of any rational conduct. Though, even in that case, something might still be said for the utilitarian theory; since utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness; and if the former aim be chimerical, there will be all the greater scope and more imperative need for the latter, so long at least as mankind think fit to live, and do not take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by Novalis. When, however, it is thus positively asserted to be impossible that human life should be happy, the assertion, if not something like a verbal quibble, is at least an exaggeration. If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.

The objectors perhaps may doubt whether human beings, if taught to consider happiness as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it. But great numbers of mankind have been satisfied with much less. The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility in enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both; since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other. It is only those in whom indolence amounts to a vice, that do not desire excitement after an interval of repose: it is only those in whom the need of excitement is a disease, that feel the tranquillity which follows

excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement which preceded it. When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind – I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties – finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind, past and present, and their prospects in the future. It is possible, indeed, to become indifferent to all this, and that too without having exhausted a thousandth part of it; but only when one has had from the beginning no moral or human interest in these things, and has sought in them only the gratification of curiosity.

Now there is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation, should not be the inheritance of every one born in a civilized country. As little is there an inherent necessity that any human being should be a selfish egotist, devoid of every feeling or care but those which centre in his own miserable individuality. Something far superior to this is sufficiently common even now, to give ample earnest of what the human species may be made. Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible, though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, every one who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws, or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escape the positive evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering – such as indigence,

disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection. The main stress of the problem lies, therefore, in the contest with these calamities, from which it is a rare good fortune entirely to escape; which, as things now are, cannot be obviated, and often cannot be in any material degree mitigated. Yet no one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits. Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even that most intractable of enemies, disease, may be indefinitely reduced in dimensions by good physical and moral education, and proper control of noxious influences; while the progress of science holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe. And every advance in that direction relieves us from some, not only of the chances which cut short our own lives, but, what concerns us still more, which deprive us of those in whom our happiness is wrapt up. As for vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect either of gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of bad or imperfect social institutions.

 i → All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow – though a long succession of generations will perish in the breach before the conquest is completed, and this world becomes all that, if will and knowledge were not wanting, it might easily be made – yet every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and unobtrusive, in the endeavour, will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself, which he would not for any bribe in the form of selfish indulgence consent to be without.

And this leads to the true estimation of what is said by the objectors concerning the possibility, and the obligation, of learning to do without happiness. Unquestionably it is possible to do without happiness; it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of mankind, even in those parts of our present world which are least deep in barbarism; and it often has to be done voluntarily by the hero or the martyr, for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness. But this something, what is it, unless the happiness of others or some of the requisites of happiness? It is noble to be capable of

resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men can do, but assuredly not an example of what they should.

Though it is only in a very imperfect state of the world's arrangements that any one can best serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own, yet so long as the world is in that imperfect state, I fully acknowledge that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue which can be found in man. I will add, that in this condition the world, paradoxical as the assertion may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realizing, such happiness as is attainable. For nothing except that consciousness can raise a person above the chances of life, by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not power to subdue him: which, once felt, frees him from excess of anxiety concerning the evils of life, and enables him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire, to cultivate in tranquillity the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end.

Meanwhile, let utilitarians never cease to claim the morality of self-devotion as a possession which belongs by as good a right to them, as either to the Stoic or to the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognize 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.

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[k]→ 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 neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the, impugners of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its, true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it; what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.

[l]→ The objectors to utilitarianism cannot always be charged with representing it in a discreditable light. On the contrary, those among them who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character, sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confound the rule of action with the motive of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths

of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them. It is the more unjust to utilitarianism that this particular misapprehension should be made a ground of objection to it, inasmuch as utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble; he who betrays the friend that trusts him, is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations.

But to speak only of actions done from the motive of duty, and in direct obedience to principle: it is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought, to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large. The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is, the legitimate and authorized expectations, of any one else. The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to. Those alone the influence of whose actions extends to society in general, need concern themselves habitually about large an object. In the case of abstinences indeed – of things which people forbear to do from moral considerations, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial – it would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practised generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the obligation to abstain from it. The amount of regard for the public interest implied in this recognition, is no greater than is demanded by every system of morals, for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society.

The same considerations dispose of another reproach against the doctrine of utility, founded on a still grosser misconception of the purpose

of a standard of morality, and of the very meaning of the words right and wrong. It is often affirmed that utilitarianism renders men cold and unsympathizing; that it chills their moral feelings towards individuals; that it makes them regard only the dry and hard consideration of the consequences of actions, not taking into their moral estimate the qualities from which those actions emanate. If the assertion means that they do not allow their judgement respecting the rightness or wrongness of an action to be influenced by their opinion of the qualities of the person who does it, this is a complaint not against utilitarianism, but against having any standard of morality at all; for certainly no known ethical standard decides an action to be good or bad because it is done by a good or a bad man, still less because done by an amiable, a brave, or a benevolent man, or the contrary. These considerations are relevant, not to the estimation of actions, but of persons; and there is nothing in the utilitarian theory inconsistent with the fact that there are other things which interest us in persons besides the rightness and wrongness of their actions. The Stoics, indeed, with the paradoxical misuse of language which was part of their system, and by which they strove to raise themselves above all concern about anything but virtue, were fond of saying that he who has that has everything; that he, and only he, is rich, is beautiful, is a king. But no claim of this description is made for the virtuous man by the utilitarian doctrine. Utilitarians are quite aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable, often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. When this is apparent in any particular case, it modifies their estimation, not certainly of the act, but of the agent. I grant that they are, notwithstanding, of opinion, that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions; and resolutely refuse to consider any mental disposition as good, of which the predominant tendency is to produce bad conduct. This makes them unpopular with many people; but it is an unpopularity which they must share with every one who regards the distinction between right and wrong in a serious light; and the reproach is not one which a conscientious utilitarian need be anxious to repel.

- If no more be meant by the objection than that many utilitarians look on the morality of actions, as measured by the utilitarian standard, with too exclusive a regard, and do not lay sufficient stress upon the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being lovable or admirable, this may be admitted. Utilitarians who have

cultivated their moral feelings, but not their sympathies nor their artistic perceptions, do fall into this mistake; and so do all other moralists under the same conditions. What can be said in excuse for other moralists is equally available for them, namely, that, if there is to be any error, it is better that it should be on that side. As a matter of fact, we may affirm that among utilitarians as among adherents of other systems, there is every imaginable degree of rigidity and of laxity in the application of their standard: some are even puritanically rigorous, while others are as indulgent as can possibly be desired by sinner or by sentimentalist. But on the whole, a doctrine which brings prominently forward the interest that mankind have in the repression and prevention of conduct which violates the moral law, is likely to be inferior to no other in turning the sanctions of opinion again such violations. It is true, the question, What does violate the moral law? is one on which those who recognize different standards of morality are likely now and then to differ. But difference of opinion on moral questions was not first introduced into the world by utilitarianism, while that doctrine does supply, if not always an easy, at all events a tangible and intelligible mode of deciding such differences.

[...]

[p]→ 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. This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which anything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments. 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. Even then I do not think that he would find the question very puzzling; but, at all events, the matter is now done to his hand.

It is truly a whimsical supposition that, if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young, and enforced by law and opinion. 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 generalizations entirely, and endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgement of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveller 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 Almanack. 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.

[...]

### Commentary on Mill

Mill's firm assertion at (a)→ of at least part of the doctrine of utilitarianism gives a prominent place to the notion of happiness which he goes on to describe as 'pleasure, and the absence of pain'. We will address the full doctrine later on, but first we should look more closely at the notion of happiness.

As we saw, happiness is one translation of Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* – a notion intended by him to be the good at which human beings aim in their activities. For this reason, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether Mill's conception of happiness is the same as, or overlaps with, Aristotle's.

On the basis of the paragraph beginning at (a)→, do you think Mill's conception of happiness does coincide with Aristotle's?

Straight off, there are two features of Mill's notion which would give one pause about answering this question affirmatively. First, the equation of happiness with pleasure (and the absence of pain) certainly seems to mark a difference. For pain and pleasure are most often taken to be feelings – states of mind which one experiences as reactions – and this would seem to place Mill's conception at odds with Aristotle's.

Though one naturally takes 'pleasure' and 'pain' to be feelings, can you think of broader ways in which we use these terms?

Think here of the way some speak of the pleasures of running marathons or climbing mountains, even though these same people would be the first to admit that these involve more than a little physical pain. Or think of the way we speak of losses, whether of loved ones or treasured possessions, as painful.

Second, Mill claims that happiness is central to morality in this way: it figures in the very definition of what it is right (or wrong) to do. This somewhat narrow conception of morality has no obvious counterpart in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle certainly considered the idea of agents making choices, but he mainly focuses on the character of such agents – on their virtues (or vices) – and on the kinds of lives that they do, or ought to, lead.

These are clearly differences between Mill's and Aristotle's projects, but they are not quite as stark as the paragraph at (a)→ might suggest. And even before we investigate these matters further, it is important to bear in mind that Mill certainly thought of his project in the same general terms as Aristotle. That is, Mill intended his notion of happiness as a way of understanding what constituted human good. In the first chapter of *Utilitarianism* he speaks of the search for the *summum bonum* – our greatest good – and he,

like Aristotle, thought it reasonable to equate this with human happiness. Moreover, though they have different conceptions of it, both thought that the best way to understand human ethical life was via an understanding of what constitutes human good.

Perhaps sensitive to the very kind of misgiving that Aristotle had about counting pleasure as the highest human good, Mill's defence of utilitarianism opens with a lengthy, and controversial discussion, of this notion.

Read the text from [b]→ to [c]→. Do you find what Mill says an adequate defence of his equation of pleasure and good?

Mill's predecessor, Bentham, had insisted on the equation of pleasure and goodness, and argued that one activity is better than another simply insofar as it gives participants a greater *quantity* of pleasure. A notorious consequence of this is that Bentham had little defence against those who worried that this equation would lead to an overvaluing of bodily pleasures. For in respect of the more elusive pleasures of the intellect – and perhaps engaged as you are in grappling with philosophy, you can well understand this – one finds struggle, and thus a sort of pain.

Just past [c]→, Mill suggests that utilitarians are not limited to distinguishing 'higher pleasures' in terms of their 'greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc.'. These features, if they are indeed features of higher pleasures, are not intrinsic to them. That is, they are features that make no special reference to the intrinsic value of the kind of pleasure they are. However, he claims that there is a way of comparing pleasures which can show us that pleasures differ, not only quantitatively, but in quality. The discussion of this begins at [d]→ and finishes at [e]→.

Do you think that Mill makes out a good case for the quantity/quality distinction with respect to pleasure?

Whether or not you think that Mill's way of making this distinction is a good one, the very fact that he makes it raises two further issues. One has important consequences for the consistency of his utilitarianism – and this will be discussed later – and the other is more directly relevant to our attempt to understand what Mill means by happiness.

Mill says that failure to see that higher pleasures – those which depend on our 'higher' faculties – are superior even to a greater quantity of lower pleasures comes from confusing the idea of happiness with that of contentment. And this leads him to conclude (at [e]→): 'it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.' In arguing so vehemently for his conclusion, Mill certainly brings his account of happiness closer to Aristotle's. Though he began by defining happiness in terms of pleasure, he now insists that an obviously psychological

notion – contentment – is in fact not what he had in mind when he said that human goodness consisted in happiness. Without insisting that they are saying exactly the same thing, Aristotle’s idea of human good as the exercise of our rational faculties, and Mill’s idea of it as defined, not by the quantity, but the quality of pleasure, are closer than one might first have thought. Note too that in the paragraph before the conclusion at [e]→, Mill speaks of ‘human dignity’ as an essential part of happiness. This is scarcely the kind of contentment that someone would make if he took pleasure in the narrow sense to be definitive of happiness.

Mill’s insistence upon the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, and his championing of the former as necessary ingredients of happiness, certainly does move him in the direction of the Aristotelian conception. But it is not yet clear that Mill is entitled to maintain this distinction consistently with his utilitarianism.

Why do you think a utilitarian might not be entitled to this distinction between higher and lower pleasures?

At the very beginning of the text Mill claims that utilitarianism offers a criterion of morally right action: such an action is the one which produces the most happiness. In the passage at [f]→, and even more clearly at [g]→, Mill stresses what is a crucial feature of the criterion: the happiness to be maximized is not the agent’s own happiness, but rather ‘the greatest amount of happiness altogether’. Looking ahead (at [k]→) he explains this in the clearest terms: in assessing the amount of happiness that might result from a course of action, an agent must not favour his own happiness: ‘As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.’

Utilitarianism thus seems to involve two ingredients: the identification of human good with happiness, and the idea that in choosing morally we are required to maximize that good, i.e. to maximize the quantity of happiness. The problem that many writers have with Mill’s quantity/quality distinction lies in this second ingredient. For how can one maximize the quantity of happiness while insisting that there are constituents of happiness that are qualitatively, but not quantitatively, superior? In the paragraph at [g]→, he does seem to recognize this difficulty, and states his utilitarian principle in a way that appears to take account of both quantity and quality. But many have found difficulties with what he says about the ‘rule for measuring’ the one against the other.

Do you think that what Mill says explains how to accommodate – consistently and satisfactorily – the quantity/quality distinction within utilitarianism?

At [h]→, Mill outlines certain other objections to utilitarianism. The basis of these objections is, as he puts it, that happiness is unsuitable to serve as ‘the rational purpose of human life and action’. And this is because happiness is either actually unattainable, and/or because it is not something to which we have any right.

In the paragraphs that follow (up to [k]→), he confronts these objections, and, in doing so, takes the opportunity to draw a more rounded, even inspirational, picture of utilitarianism, one which reveals its deep connections to the social and political reform movement of its time. For example, at [i]→, he claims that human suffering, real as it is, is ‘almost entirely conquerable by human care and effort’. And, further on, he finds it entirely reasonable to imagine someone sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others, noting, at [j]→, that if a sacrifice does not increase the sum total of human happiness, it would be considered ‘wasted’.

Before we take up discussion further along, say whether you think Mill deals adequately with the objections that he mentions at [h]→?

In the paragraph marked [l]→, Mill considers an objection that probes a different aspect of his view. As we have seen, Mill’s utilitarianism has two main ingredients: an identification of human good with happiness, and the claim that in choosing what it is morally right to do one does, or ought to, choose that action which maximizes the total amount of human happiness. Much of the discussion above is concerned with the nature of happiness and whether it is an appropriate way to capture the notion of human good. However, at [l]→ Mill imagines an objector who sees utilitarianism as setting a standard ‘too high for humanity’ and as being too ‘exacting’.

What exactly is the objection that Mill is here considering?

As we have seen, many find the identification of human good with happiness problematic. But, in trying to understand the present objection, we can put these worries on one side. For the problem Mill identifies at [l]→ concerns the second ingredient of utilitarianism. Supposing, as he does, that rightness does consist in acting so that the consequences of our actions maximize human good in general, Mill imagines someone doubting whether we are capable of being motivated by a disinterested concern for human good.

What is Mill’s answer to this objection?

His attempts to deal with this objection are deceptively complicated. Straight off, he argues that the objection confuses the motive of duty towards doing what is right with the understanding of what actually makes an action right. The utilitarian tells us about the second of these, but makes no commitment

to the first. Thus, at [m]→, he says: ‘He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble.’ However, he obviously doesn’t regard this as a complete answer.

At [n]→, he says something which shows a slightly different way of taking the objection, one that has been a persistent worry about utilitarianism. Not so much a confusion about motive and rightness, the issue now is whether, in deciding what is right, one has to consider ‘so wide a generality as the world, or society at large’.

Why would this be a problem for the utilitarian?

There are two interconnected reasons for the problem. On the one hand, if deciding what is right requires us to consider the effect of what we do on the whole of society, it will be very difficult to determine what is in fact right in any given case. And, on the other hand, given that everything we do has consequences, even if tiny, for the whole of society, every decision about what to do – and not only those which we intuitively think of as moral – will take on a moral dimension. Together these make the practice of utilitarianism very demanding indeed, and Mill does try to deal with them, albeit briefly (in the remainder of the paragraph after [n]→). What he suggests is that the field of action available to most of us is rather narrower than that of the whole of society, let alone generality of the world. Mill notes that our actions typically have consequences ‘for the interest or happiness of some few persons’, and therefore that we need only attend to these consequences in deciding what to do.

Is this an adequate reply to the objection that utilitarianism is too demanding?

If what one does actually has consequences, even if slight, that extend beyond a narrow circle of individuals – and most of our actions do have these consequences – then many feel we would need a utilitarian justification for ignoring them. That is, one would have to show that ignoring them can be seen to maximize the good. However, it is unclear how this would work, since one is here tampering with the very notion of maximization that is needed to define what is right.

In the final paragraphs, Mill considers two further objections, one in the paragraphs surrounding the place marked [o]→, and one beginning at [p]→. To the first, Mill says: ‘If no more be meant by the objection than that many utilitarians look on the morality of actions, as measured by the utilitarian standard, with too exclusive a regard, and not lay sufficient stress upon the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being lovable or admirable, this may be admitted.’ So far, then, from being an objection,

Mill claims that the utilitarian criterion of rightness takes precedence over considerations of character and virtue.

The second objection is that, in having to choose a course of action, there is usually no time for the detailed calculations that the utilitarian thinks are necessary for determining the right thing to do. Mill's way of dealing with this objection introduces what many take to be a novelty into the utilitarian doctrine. After defensively pointing out that Christian ethics does not require one to re-read the bible before deciding what it is right to do, he writes (further along, at [q]→): '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'. And, in the next paragraph, he compares these rules of morality to a sailor's use of the 'nautical almanack': '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.' In the extensive literature on utilitarianism, what Mill says here is often taken as evidence of his being a 'rule utilitarian'. This is the view that we should use the utilitarian 'greatest happiness' principle primarily to assess our general rules of conduct, rather than applying it, case by case, to specific possible actions.

Is this 'rule-utilitarianism' consistent with the fundamental utilitarian principle that an individual action is right if it maximizes the good, that is, collective happiness?

Aristotle saw good as the central notion in any more detailed account of how our lives should be lived; Mill modified this thought in two important ways. First, he offered a conception of human good which is at once more specific and more controversial than Aristotle's; and, second, he linked this conception more directly to morality. Mill assumes that any moral outlook must be based on a principle which determines, in any specific circumstance, which action is right, and he takes the maximization of happiness to be that criterion. Underlying this idea of maximization is a thought that can seem incontrovertible: given that we have identified what it is that makes various states of affairs good (or bad), then the right action is that which has the best states of affairs as consequences.

### Introduction to Foot

Philippa Foot (née Bosanquet, in 1920) is a British philosopher (though she is also the granddaughter of the American President Grover Cleveland) who was educated at Somerville College, Oxford. Most of her academic career has been shared, each year, between a Fellowship at Somerville College and the

Griffin Professorship at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). She now holds emeritus positions in both institutions. Mrs Foot (as she is most widely known) is a distinguished moral philosopher whose contributions to the subject have always been at once morally serious, philosophically insightful and thoroughly accessible. One way in which her seriousness has shown itself is in the thoughtful development of her career-long search for an objective foundation to morality.

The article from which our text is taken plays an especially important role in this development, and in the topic of this chapter. Having early on decided that the best way to approach moral objectivity is by beginning with our concept of virtue, she found it necessary to say what kind of contribution the virtues make to human good. Given the link that Mill and other utilitarians have forged between the good and happiness, it would have been natural to think that she could find what she needed in utilitarianism. Yet her resistance to utilitarianism has been a cornerstone in her moral philosophy: it is connected to her deepest convictions about the subject, and her anti-utilitarian arguments are more than merely intelligent.

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## P. Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues' (extracts)

It is remarkable how utilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it. It is as if we for ever feel that it must be right, although we insist that it is wrong. T. M. Scanlon hits the nail on the head when he observes, in his article 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', that the theory occupies a central place in the moral philosophy of our time in spite of the fact that, as he puts it, 'the implications of act utilitarianism are wildly at variance with firmly held moral convictions, while rule utilitarianism ... strikes most people as an unstable compromise'.<sup>1</sup> He suggests that what we need to break this spell is to find a better alternative to utilitarian theories, and I am sure that that is right. But what I want to do is to approach the business of exorcism more directly. Obviously something drives us towards utilitarianism, and must it not be an assumption or thought which is in some way mistaken? For otherwise why is the theory unacceptable? We must be going wrong somewhere and should find out where it is.

[a]→

[b]→

I want to argue that what is most radically wrong with utilitarianism is its consequentialism, but I also want to suggest that its consequentialist element is one of the main reasons why utilitarianism

<sup>1</sup> T. M. Scanlon, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', pp. 103–28.



had to be looked after in a way that was so far impossible within even the modified versions of utilitarianism.

It was therefore suggested, by Amartya Sen, that ‘goal rights’ systems should be considered; the idea being that the respecting or violating of rights should be counted as itself a good or an evil in the evaluation of states of affairs.<sup>3</sup> This would help to solve some problems because if the respecting of the rights of the subject were weighted heavily enough the cancer experiment could not turn out to be ‘optimific’ after all. Yet this seems rather a strange suggestion, because as Samuel Scheffler has remarked, it is not clear why, in the measurement of the goodness of states of affairs or total outcomes, killings for instance should count so much more heavily than deaths.<sup>4</sup> But what is more important is that this ‘goal rights’ system fails to deal with certain other examples of actions that most of us would want to call wrong. Suppose, for instance, that some evil person threatens to kill or torture a number of victims unless we kill or torture one, and suppose that we have every reason to believe that he will do as he says. Then in terms of their total outcomes (again consisting of the states of affairs made up of an action and its consequences) we have the choice between more killings or torturings and less, and a consequentialist will have to say that we are justified in killing or torturing the one person, and indeed that we are morally obliged to do it, always supposing that no indirect consequences have tipped the balance of good and evil. There will in fact be nothing that it will not be right to do to a perfectly innocent individual if that is the only way of preventing another agent from doing more things of the same kind.

Now I find this a totally unacceptable conclusion and note that it is a conclusion not of utilitarianism in particular but rather of consequentialism in any form. So it is the spellbinding force of consequentialism that we have to think about. Welfarism has its own peculiar attraction, which has to do with the fact that pleasure, happiness, and the satisfaction of desire are things seen as in some way good. But this attraction becomes less powerful as distribution principles are added and pleasures discounted on an *ad hoc* basis to destroy the case for such things as public executions.

If having left welfarist utilitarianism behind we still find ourselves unable, in spite of its difficulties, to get away from consequentialism, there must be a reason for this. What is it, let us now ask, that is so compelling about consequentialism? It is, I think, the rather simple thought that it can never be right to prefer a worse state of affairs to

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<sup>3</sup> A. Sen, ‘Rights and Agency’. [...]

<sup>4</sup> S. Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, pp. 108–12.

a better.<sup>5</sup> It is this thought that haunts us and, incidentally, this thought that makes the move to rule utilitarianism an unsatisfactory answer to the problem of reconciling utilitarianism with common moral opinion. For surely it will be irrational, we feel, to obey even the most useful rule if in a particular instance we clearly see that such obedience will not *have the best results*. Again following Scheffler we ask if it is not paradoxical that it should ever be morally objectionable to act in such a way as to minimize morally objectionable acts of just the same type.<sup>6</sup> If it is a bad state of affairs in which one of these actions is done it will presumably be a worse state of affairs in which several are. And must it not be irrational to prefer the worse to the better state of affairs?

This thought does indeed seem compelling. And yet it leads to an apparently unacceptable conclusion about what it is right to do. So we ought, as I said, to wonder whether we have not gone wrong somewhere. And I think that indeed we have. I believe (and this is the main thesis of the paper) that we go wrong in accepting the idea that there *are* better and worse states of affairs in the sense that consequentialism requires. As Wittgenstein says in a different context, ‘The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent’.<sup>7</sup>

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Let us therefore look into the idea of a good state of affairs, as this appears in the thought that we can judge certain states of affairs to be better than others and then go on to give moral descriptions to actions related productively to these states of affairs.

We should begin by asking why we are so sure that we even understand expressions such as ‘a good state of affairs’ or ‘a good outcome’; for as Peter Geach pointed out years ago there are phrases with the word ‘good’ in them, as, e.g., ‘a good event’, that do *not* at least as they stand have a sense.<sup>8</sup> Following this line one might suggest that philosophers are a bit hasty in using expressions such as ‘a better

<sup>5</sup> The original version continued ‘How could it ever be right, we think, to produce less good rather than more good?’. I have excised this sentence because in the context the use of the expression ‘doing more good’ suggested an identification which I was at pains to deny. At all times I have allowed *doing good* as an unproblematic notion, because although it does raise many problems, e.g. about different distributions of benefits, it does not raise the particular problems with which I am concerned. I want to insist that however well we might understand what it was to ‘do as much good as possible’ in the sense of producing maximum benefit, it would not follow that we knew what we meant by expressions such as ‘the best outcome’ or ‘the best state of affairs’ as these are used by moral philosophers. Cf. the discussion on page 000 of the present version of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Macmillan, 1953, and Blackwell, 1958), § 308.

<sup>8</sup> P. Geach, ‘Good and Evil’, *Analysis* 17 (1956), 33–42.

world'. One may *perhaps* understand this when it is taken to mean a 'deontically better world' defined as one in which fewer duties are left unfulfilled; but obviously this will not help to give a sense to 'better state of affairs' as the consequentialist needs to use this expression, since he is wanting to fix our obligations not to refer to their fulfilment.

Nevertheless it may seem that combinations of words such as 'a good state of affairs' are beyond reproach or question, for such expressions are extremely familiar. Do we not use them every day? We say that it is a good thing that something or other happened; what difficulty can there be in constructing from such elements anything we want in the way of aggregates such as total outcomes which (in principle) take into account all the elements of a possible world and so constitute good states of affairs? Surely no one can seriously suggest that 'good state of affairs' is an expression that we do not understand?

It would, of course, be ridiculous to query the sense of the ordinary things that we say about its being 'a good thing' that something or other happened, or about a certain state of affairs being good or bad. The doubt is not about whether there is some way of using the words, but rather about the way they appear in the exposition of utilitarian and other consequentialist moral theories. It is important readily to accept the fact that we talk in a natural and familiar way about good states of affairs, and that there is nothing problematic about such usage. But it is also important to see how such expressions actually work in the contexts in which they are at home, and in particular to ask about the status of a good state of affairs. Is it something impersonal to be recognized (we hope) by all reasonable men? It seems, surprisingly, that this is not the case at least in many contexts of utterance of the relevant expressions. Suppose, for instance, that the supporters of different teams have gathered in the stadium and that the members of each group are discussing the game; or that two racegoers have backed different horses in a race. Remarking on the course of events one or the other may say that things are going well or badly, and when a certain situation has developed may say that it is a good or a bad state of affairs. More commonly they will welcome some developments and deplore others, saying 'Oh good!' or 'That's bad!', calling some news good news and some news bad, sometimes describing what has happened as 'a good thing' and sometimes not. We could develop plenty of other examples of this kind, thinking for instance of the conversations about the invention of a new burglar alarm that might take place in the police headquarters and in the robbers' den.

At least two types of utterance are here discernible. For 'good' and its cognates may be used to signal the speaker's attitude to a result

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judged as an end result, and then he says 'Good!' or 'I'm glad' or 'That's good' where what he is glad about is something welcomed in itself and not for any good it will bring. But a state of affairs may rather be judged by its connection with other things called good. And even what is counted as in itself good may be said to be bad when it brings enough evil in its train.

Now what shall we say about the truth or falsity of these utterances? It certainly seems that they can be straightforwardly true or false. For perhaps what appears to be going to turn out well is really going to turn out badly: what seemed to be a good thing was really a bad thing, and an apparently good state of affairs was the prelude to disaster. 'You are quite wrong' one person may say to another and events may show that he *was* wrong. Nevertheless we can see that this quasi-objectivity, which is not to be questioned when people with similar aims, interests, or desires are speaking together, flies out of the window if we try to set the utterances of those in one group against the utterances of those in another. One will say 'a good thing' where another says 'a bad thing', and it is the same for states of affairs. It would be bizarre to suggest that at the races it really *is* a good thing that one horse or the other is gaining (perhaps because of the pleasure it will bring to the majority, or the good effect on the future of racing) and so that the utterance of one particular punter, intent only on making a packet, will be the one that is true.

This is not to say, however, that what a given person says to be a good thing or a good state of affairs must relate to his own advantage. For anyone may be *interested in* the future of racing, and people commonly are *interested in*, e.g., the success of their friends, saying 'that's a good thing' if one of them looks like winning a prize or getting a job; incidentally without worrying much about whether he is the very best candidate for it.

Now it may be thought that these must be rather special uses of expressions such as 'good state of affairs', because we surely must speak quite differently when we are talking about public matters, as when for instance we react to news of some far-away disaster. We say that the news is bad because a lot of people have lost their lives in an earthquake. Later we may say that things are not as bad as we feared and someone may remark 'that's a good thing'. 'A bad state of affairs', we might remark on hearing the original news about people dead or homeless, and this will usually have nothing to do with harm to us or to our friends.

In this way the case is different from that of the racegoers or the cops and robbers, but this is not of course to imply that what we say on such occasions has a different status from the utterances we have

considered so far. For why should its truth not be ‘speaker-relative’ too, also depending on what the speakers and their group are *interested in* though not now on the good or harm that will come to them themselves? Is it not more plausible to think this than to try to distinguish two kinds of uses of these expressions, one speaker-relative and the other not? For are there really two ways in which the police for instance might speak? And two ways in which the robbers could speak as well? Are we really to say that although when they are both speaking in the speaker-relative way they do not contradict each other, and may both speak truly, when speaking in the ‘objective’ way one group will speak truly and the other not? What shows that the second way of speaking exists?

What thoughts, one may ask, can we really be supposed to have which must be expressed in the disputed mode? Considering examples such as that of the far-away earthquake we may think that we believe the best state of affairs to be the one in which there is most happiness and least misery, or something of the sort. But considering other examples we may come to wonder whether any such thought can really be attributed to us.

Suppose for instance that when walking in a poor district one of us should lose a fairly considerable sum of money which we had intended to spend on something rather nice. Arriving home we discover the loss and telephone the police on the off chance that our wad of notes has been found and turned in. To our delight we find that it was picked up by a passing honest policeman, and that we shall get it back. ‘What a good thing’ we say ‘that an officer happened to be there.’ What seemed to be a bad state of affairs has turned out not to be bad after all: things are much better than we thought they were. And all’s well that ends well. But how, it may now be asked, *can* we say that things have turned out better than we thought? Were we not supposed to believe that the best state of affairs was the one in which there was most happiness and least misery? So surely it would have been *better* if the money had not been returned to us but rather found and kept as treasure trove by some poor inhabitant of the region? We simply had not considered that because most of us do not actually *have* the thought that the best state of affairs is the one in which we lose and they gain. Perhaps we should have had this thought if it had been a small amount of money, but this was rather a lot.

No doubt it will seem to many that there must be non-speaker-relative uses of words evaluating states of affairs because moral judgements cannot have speaker-relative status. But if one is inclined, as I am, to doubt whether propositions of this form play any part in the fundamentals of ethical theory there is no objection on this score. It is

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important however that the preceding discussion has been about propositions of a particular form and nothing has been said to suggest that all judgements about what is good and bad have speaker-relative status. I have not for instance made this suggestion for what Geach called ‘attributive’ judgements concerning things good or bad of a kind – good knives and houses and essays, or even good actions, motives, or men. If there is some reason for calling these ‘speaker-relative’ the reason has not been given here. Nor has anything been said about the status of propositions about what is *good for* anyone or anything, or about that in which their good consists.

What has I hope now been shown is that we should not take it for granted that we even know what we are talking about if we enter into a discussion with the consequentialist about whether it can ever be right to produce something other than ‘the best state of affairs’.

h→ It might be suggested by way of reply that what is in question in these debates is not just the best state of affairs without qualification but rather *the best state of affairs from an impersonal point of view*. But what does this mean? A good state of affairs from an impersonal point of view is presumably opposed to a good state of affairs from *my* point of view or from *your* point of view, and as a good state of affairs from my point of view is a state of affairs which is advantageous to me, and a good state of affairs from your point of view is a state of affairs that is advantageous to you, a good state of affairs from an impersonal point of view presumably means a state of affairs which is generally advantageous, or advantageous to most people, or something like that. About the idea of maximum welfare we are not (or so we are supposing for the sake of the argument) in any difficulty.<sup>9</sup> But an account of the idea of a good state of affairs which simply defines it in terms of maximum welfare is no help to us here. For our problem is that something is supposed to be being said *about* maximum welfare and we cannot figure out what this is.

In a second reply, more to the point, the consequentialist might say that what we should really be dealing with in this discussion is states of affairs which are good or bad, not simply, but *from the moral point of view*. The qualification is, it will be suggested, tacitly understood in moral contexts, where no individual speaker gives his own private interests or allegiances a special place in any debate, the speaker-relativity found in other contexts thus being left behind. This seems to be a pattern familiar from other cases, as, e.g., from discussions in meetings of the governors of public institutions. Why should it not be in a similar way that we talk of a good and a bad thing to happen ‘from

<sup>9</sup> Cf. footnote 5.

a moral point of view'? And is it not hard to reject the conclusion that right action is action producing *this* 'best state of affairs'?

That special contexts can create special uses of the expressions we are discussing is indeed true. But before we proceed to draw conclusions about moral judgements we should ask why we think that it makes sense to talk about morally good and bad states of affairs, or to say that it is a good thing (or is good that) something happened 'from a moral point of view'. For after all we cannot concoct a meaningful sentence by adding just any qualification of this verbal form to expressions such as these. What would it mean, for instance, to say that a state of affairs was good or bad 'from a legal point of view' or 'from the point of view of etiquette'? Or that, it was a good thing that a certain thing happened from these same 'points of view'? Certain interpretations that suggest themselves are obviously irrelevant, as, for instance, that it is a good state of affairs from a legal point of view when the laws are clearly stated, or a good state of affairs from the point of view of etiquette when everyone follows the rules.

It seems, therefore, that we do not solve the problem of the meaning of 'best state of affairs' when supposed to be used in a non-speaker-relative way simply by tacking on 'from a moral point of view'; since it cannot be assumed that the resulting expression has any sense. Nevertheless it would be wrong to suggest that 'good state of affairs from a moral point of view' is a concatenation of words which in fact has no meaning in *any* of the contexts in which it appears, and to see this we have only to look at utilitarian theories of the type put forward by John C. Harsanyi and R. M. Hare, in which a certain interpretation is implicitly provided for such expressions.<sup>10</sup>

Harsanyi for instance argues that the only *rational* morality is one in which the rightness or wrongness of an action is judged by its relation to a certain outcome, i.e. the maximization of social utility. The details of this theory, which defines social utility in terms of individual preferences, do not concern us here. The relevant point is that within it there appears the idea of an end which is the goal of moral action, and therefore the idea of a best state of affairs from a moral point of view. (It does not of course matter whether Harsanyi uses these words.)

Similarly Hare, by a more elaborate argument from the universalizability and prescriptivity of moral judgements, tries to establish the proposition that one who takes the moral point of view must have as his aim the maximization of utility, reflecting this in one way in his

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., J. C. Harsanyi, 'Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior', *Social Research* 44 (1977), reprinted in Sen and Williams, *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 39–62; and R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

day-to-day prescriptions and in another in ‘critical’ moral judgements. So here too a clear sense can be given to the idea of a best state of affairs from a moral point of view: it is the state of affairs which a man aims at when he takes the moral point of view and which in one way or another determines the truth of moral judgements.

Within these theories there is, then, no problem about the meaning of expressions such as ‘the best state of affairs from the moral point of view’. It does not follow, however, that those who reject the theories should be ready to discuss the pros and cons of consequentialism in these terms. For unless the arguments given by Hare and Harsanyi are acceptable it will not have been shown that there is any reference for expressions such as ‘the aim which each man has in so far as he takes up the moral point of view’ or *a fortiori* ‘the best state of affairs from the moral point of view’.

If my main thesis is correct this is a point of the first importance. For I am arguing that where non-consequentialists commonly go wrong is in accepting from their opponents questions such as ‘Is it ever right to act in such a way as to produce something less than the best state of affairs that is within one’s reach?’<sup>11</sup> Summing up the results reached so far we may say that if taken in one way, with no special reference to morality, talk about good states of affairs seems to be speaker-relative. But if the qualification ‘from a moral point of view’ is added the resulting expression may mean nothing; and it may lack a reference when a special consequentialist theory has given it a sense.

In the light of this discussion we should find it significant that many people who do not find any particular consequentialist theory compelling nevertheless feel themselves driven towards consequentialism by a thought which turns on the idea that there are states of affairs which are better or worse from a moral point of view. What is it that seems to make this an inescapable idea?

Tracing the assumption back in my own mind I find that what seems preposterous is to deny that there are some things that a moral person must want and aim at in so far as he is a moral person and that he will count it ‘a good thing’ when these things happen and ‘a good state of affairs’ either when they are happening or when things are disposed in their favour. For surely he must want others to be happy. To deny this would be to deny that benevolence is a virtue – and who wants to deny that?

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., T. Nagel, ‘The Limits of Objectivity’, p. 131, where he says that ‘... things would be better, what *happened* would be better’ if I twisted a child’s arm in circumstances where (by Nagel’s hypothesis) this was the only way to get medical help for the victims of an accident. He supposes that I might have done something worse if I hurt the child than if I did not do it, but that the total outcome would have been better. It does not, I think, occur to him to question the idea of *things* being better – or *things* being worse.

Let us see where this line of thought will take us, accepting without any reservation that benevolence is a virtue and that a benevolent person must often aim at the good of others and call it 'a good thing' when for instance a far-away disaster turns out to have been less serious than was feared. Here we do indeed have the words 'a good thing' (and just as obviously a 'good state of affairs') necessarily appearing in moral contexts. And the use is explained not by a piece of utilitarian theory but by a simple observation about benevolence.

[k]→

This, then, seems to be the way in which seeing states of affairs in which people are happy as good states of affairs really is an essential part of morality. But it is very important that we have found this end *within* morality, and forming part of it, not standing outside it as the 'good state of affairs' by which moral action in general is to be judged. For benevolence is only one of the virtues, and we shall have to look at the others before we can pronounce on any question about good or bad action in particular circumstances. Off-hand we have no reason to think that whatever is done with the aim of improving the lot of other people will be morally required or even morally permissible. For firstly there are virtues such as friendship which play their part in determining the requirements of benevolence, e.g., by making it consistent with benevolence to give service to friends rather than to strangers or acquaintances. And secondly there is the virtue of justice, taken in the old wide sense in which it had to do with everything *owed*. In our common moral code we find numerous examples of limitations which justice places on the pursuit of welfare. In the first place there are principles of distributive justice which forbid, on grounds of fairness, the kind of 'doing good' which increases the wealth of rich people at the cost of misery to the poor. Secondly, rules such as truth telling are not to be broken wherever and whenever welfare would thereby be increased. Thirdly, considerations about rights, both positive and negative, limit the action which can be taken for the sake of welfare. Justice is primarily concerned with the following of certain rules of fairness and honest dealing and with respecting prohibitions on interference with others rather than with attachment to any end. It is true that the just man must also fight injustice, and here justice like benevolence is a matter of ends, but of course the end is not the same end as the one that benevolence seeks and need not be coincident with it.

I do not mean to go into these matters in detail here, but simply to point out that we find in our ordinary moral code many requirements and prohibitions inconsistent with the idea that benevolence is the whole of morality. From the point of view of the present discussion it would be acceptable to describe the situation in terms of a tension

between, for instance, justice and benevolence. But it is not strictly accurate to think of it like this, because that would suggest that someone who does an unjust act for the sake of increasing total happiness has a higher degree of benevolence than one who refuses to do it. Since someone who refuses to sacrifice an innocent life for the sake of increasing happiness is not to be counted as less benevolent than someone who is ready to do it, this cannot be right. We might be tempted to think that the latter would be acting ‘out of benevolence’ because his aim is the happiness of others, but this seems a bad way of talking. Certainly benevolence does not require unjust action, and we should not call an act which violated rights an act of benevolence. It would not, for instance, be an act of benevolence to induce cancer in one person (or deliberately to let it run its course) even for the sake of alleviating much suffering.

What we should say therefore is that even perfection in benevolence does not imply a readiness to do anything and everything of which it can be said that it is highly probable that it will increase the sum of human happiness. And this, incidentally, throws some light on a certain type of utilitarian theory which identifies the moral assessment of a situation with that of a sympathetic impartial observer whose benevolence extends equally to all mankind.<sup>12</sup> For what, we may ask, are we to suppose about this person’s *other* characteristics? Is he to be guided simply and solely by a desire to relieve suffering and increase happiness; or is he also just? If it is said that for him the telling of truth, keeping of promises, and respecting of individual autonomy are to be recommended only in so far as these serve to maximize welfare then we see that the ‘impartial sympathetic observer’ is by definition one with a utilitarian point of view. So the utilitarians are defining moral assessment in their own terms.

1 → Returning to the main line of our argument we now find ourselves in a better position to see that there indeed is a place *within* morality for the idea of better and worse states of affairs. That there is such a place is true if only because the proper end of benevolence is the good of others, and because in many situations the person who has this virtue will be able to think of good and bad states of affairs, in terms of the general good. It does not, however, follow that he will always be able to do so. For sometimes justice will forbid a certain action, as it forbids the harmful experiment designed to further cancer research; and then it will not be possible to ask whether ‘the state of affairs’ containing the action and its results will be better or worse than one

<sup>12</sup> See Harsanyi, ‘Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior’. Sen and Williams, *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, p. 39.

in which the action is not done. The action is one that *cannot* be done, because justice forbids it, and nothing that has this moral character comes within the scope of the kind of comparison of total outcomes that benevolence may sometimes require. Picking up at this point the example discussed earlier about the morality of killing or torturing to prevent more killings or torturings we see the same principle operating here. If it were a question of riding out to rescue a small number or a large number then benevolence would, we may suppose, urge that the larger number be saved. But if it is a matter of preventing the killing *by* killing (or conniving at a killing) the case will be quite different. One does not have to believe that all rights to non-interference are absolute to believe that *this* is an unjust action, and if it is unjust the moral man says to himself that he cannot do it and does not include it in an assessment he may be making about the good and bad states of affairs that he can bring about.

What has been said in the last few paragraphs is, I suggest, a sketch of what can truly be said about the important place that the idea of maximum welfare has in morality. It is not that in the guise of ‘the best outcome’ it stands *outside* morality as its foundation and arbiter, but rather that it appears *within* morality as the end of one of the virtues.

When we see it like this, and give expressions such as ‘best outcome’ and ‘good state of affairs’ no special meaning in moral contexts other than the one that the virtues give them, we shall no longer think the paradoxical thought that it is sometimes right to act in such a way that the total outcome, consisting of one’s action and its results, is less good than some other accessible at the time. In the abstract a benevolent person must wish that loss and harm should be minimized. He does not, however, wish that the whole consisting of a killing to minimize killings should be actualized either by his agency or that of anyone else. So there is no reason on this score to think that he must regard it as ‘the better state of affairs’.<sup>13</sup> And therefore there is no reason for the non-consequentialist, whose thought of good and bad states of affairs in moral contexts comes only from the virtues themselves, to describe the refusal as a choice of a worse total outcome. If he does so describe it he will be giving the words the sense they have in his opponents’ theories, and it is not surprising that he should find himself in their hands.

We may also remind ourselves at this point that benevolence is not the only virtue which has to do, at least in part, with ends rather than with the observance of rules. As mentioned earlier there belongs to the virtue of justice the readiness to fight for justice as well as to

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed examples of this kind in more detail in ‘Morality, Action, and Outcome’, in T. Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

observe its laws; and there belongs to truthfulness not only the avoidance of lying but also that other kind of attachment to truth which has to do with its preservation and pursuit. A man of virtue must be a lover of justice and a lover of truth. Furthermore he will seek the special good of his family and friends. Thus there will be many things which he will want and will welcome, sometimes sharing these aims with others and sometimes opposing them, as when working differentially for his own children or his own friends.<sup>14</sup> Similarly someone who is judging a competition and is a fair judge must try to see to it that the best man wins. The existence of these ‘moral aims’ will of course give opportunity for the use, in moral contexts, of such expressions as ‘a good thing’ or ‘the best state of affairs’. But nothing of a consequentialist nature follows from such pieces of usage, found here and there within morality.

☐→ An analogy will perhaps help to make my point. Thinking about good manners we might decide that someone who has good manners tries to avoid embarrassing others in social situations. This must, let us suppose, be one of his aims; and we might even decide that so far as manners is concerned this, or something like it, is the only prescribed *end*. But of course this does not mean that what good manners require of anyone is universally determined by this end. A consequentialist theory of good manners would presumably be mistaken; because good manners, not being solely a matter of purposes, also require that certain things be done or not done: e.g. that hospitality not be abused by frank discussion of the deficiencies of one’s host as soon as he leaves the room.<sup>15</sup> So if invited to take part in such discussions a well-mannered person will, if necessary, maintain a silence embarrassing to an interlocutor, because the rule here takes precedence over the aim prescribed. Assuming that this is a correct account of good manners – and it does not of course matter whether it is or not – we can now see the difficulty that arises if we try to say which choice open to the agent results in the best state of affairs from the point of view of manners. In certain contexts the state of affairs containing no embarrassment will be referred to as a good state of affairs, because avoiding embarrassment is by our hypothesis the one *end* prescribed by good manners. But we should not be surprised if the right action from the point of view of good manners is sometimes the one that produces something *other* than this good state of affairs. We have no right to take an end from within the whole that makes up good

<sup>14</sup> See D. Parfit, ‘Prudence, Morality, and the Prisoner’s Dilemma’, and A. Sen. ‘Rights and Agency’.

<sup>15</sup> It is customary to wait until later.

manners and turn it, just because it is an *end*, into the single guide to action to be used by the well-mannered man.

n→ This analogy serves to illustrate my point about the illegitimacy of moving what is found within morality to a criterial position outside it. But it may also bring to the surface a reason many will be ready to give for being dissatisfied with my thesis. For surely a morality is unlike a code of manners in claiming rational justification for its ordinances? It cannot be enough to say that we *do* have such things as rules of justice in our present system of virtues: the question is whether we should have them, and if so why we should. And the reason this is crucial in the present context is that the justification of a moral code may seem inevitably to involve the very idea that has been called in question in this paper.

This is a very important objection. In its most persuasive form it involves a picture of morality as a rational device developed to serve certain purposes, and therefore answerable to these purposes. Morality, it will be suggested, is a device with a certain object, having to do with the harmonizing of ends or the securing of the greatest possible general good, or perhaps one of these things plus the safeguarding of rights. And the content of morality – what really is right and wrong – will be thought to be determined by what it is rational to require in the way of conduct given that these are our aims. Thus morality is thought of as a kind of tacit legislation by the community, and it is, of course, significant that the early Utilitarians, who were much interested in the rationalizing of actual Parliamentary legislation, were ready to talk in these terms.<sup>16</sup> In moral legislation our aim is, they thought, the general good. With this way of looking at morality there reappears the idea of better and worse states of affairs from the moral point of view. Moreover consequentialism *in some form* is necessarily reinstated. For while there is room on such a model for rational moral codes which enjoin something other than the pursuit of ‘the best state of affairs from the moral point of view’ this will be only in so far as it is by means of such ordinances that the object of a moral code is best achieved.<sup>17</sup>

o→ Thus it may seem that we must after all allow that the idea of a good state of affairs appears at the most basic level in the critical appraisal of any moral code. This would, however, be too hasty a conclusion. Consequentialism in some form follows from the premiss that morality is a device for achieving a certain shared end. But why

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Legislation* (1789). ch. 3. Section 1.

<sup>17</sup> For discussions of this possibility see, e.g., R. Adams, ‘Motive Utilitarianism’, and D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 24–8.

should we accept this view of what morality is and how it is to be judged? Why should we not rather see that as itself a consequentialist assumption, which has come to seem neutral and inevitable only in so far as utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism now dominate moral philosophy?

To counter this bewitchment let us ask awkward questions about who is supposed to *have* the end which morality is supposed to be in aid of. J. S. Mill notoriously found it hard to pass from the premiss that the end of each is the good of each to the proposition that the end of all is the good of all.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps no such *shared end* appears in the foundations of ethics, where we may rather find individual ends and rational compromises between those who have them. Or perhaps at the most basic level lie facts about the way individual human beings can find the greatest goods which they are capable of possessing. The truth is, I think, that we simply do not have a satisfactory theory of morality, and need to look for it. Scanlon was indeed right in saying that the real answer to utilitarianism depends on progress in the development of alternatives. Meanwhile, however, we have no reason to think that we must accept consequentialism in any form. If the thesis of this paper is correct we should be more alert than we usually are to the possibility that we may unwittingly, and unnecessarily, surrender to consequentialism by uncritically accepting its key idea. Let us remind ourselves that the idea of the goodness of total states of affairs played no part in Aristotle's moral philosophy, and that in modern times it plays no part either in Rawls's account of justice or in the theories of more thoroughgoing contractualists such as Scanlon.<sup>19</sup> If we accustom ourselves to the thought that there is simply a blank where consequentialists see 'the best state of affairs' we may be better able to give other theories the hearing they deserve.

### Commentary on Foot

At [a]→, Foot describes the central task of the paper as one of 'exorcism'. She believes that we are under the spell of utilitarianism – that something drives us to accept it – and nonetheless she also thinks that there is something fundamentally mistaken in utilitarianism. By exposing this mistake, she believes we can at once understand the utilitarian spell, and free ourselves of it.

<sup>18</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 4.

<sup>19</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; T. M. Scanlon, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism'.

At [b]→ Foot identifies the location of the mistake she finds in utilitarianism. Describe that location.

Utilitarianism is composed of two theses: consequentialism and what Foot calls ‘welfarism’. The first of these is that the right action is in every case that action whose outcome, or consequence, is the best state of affairs. The second is that one compares the amount of good in different possible states of affairs by finding out how much pleasure, happiness, or satisfaction each one contains. Foot thinks that the fundamental flaw in utilitarianism lies with the first of these – with the thesis of consequentialism. However, at [c]→ she notes that it is welfarism that has generally been the target chosen by most critics of utilitarianism.

Give your own summary of Foot’s discussion (between [c]→ and [d]→) of welfarism.

Foot’s discussion of welfarism touches only lightly on issues that themselves have led to a huge literature. Without taking much notice of the differences between pleasure, happiness and satisfaction – different notions that utilitarians have used to capture what they regard as the good – she stresses what are arguably two more structural defects. The first is that utilitarians are forced to distinguish between innocent (‘non-malicious’) pleasures, and those not so innocent, so as to rule out counting as acceptable such things as public executions. And the second is that, though utilitarianism insists that everyone’s good counts equally, there are seemingly endless problems in describing acceptable principles for distributing this good. To take a famous example, is it right to take one patient’s life so as to produce life-saving organs for five others? Mere adding up of pleasure or happiness suggests that it would be, that five lives gained outweigh the one life lost. But sacrificing someone in this way seems thoroughly unacceptable.

As she points out, the welfarist utilitarian is not without resources for trying to patch up these defects, and she briefly considers the idea of a kind of ‘goal-rights’ utilitarianism which attempts to deal with the second of them. However, this leads her to what she has already identified as the fundamental source of utilitarian difficulty – its consequentialism – and this sets the agenda for the rest of this commentary. Moreover, this discussion will lead us back to the topic of goodness.

At [d]→, Foot asks what makes consequentialism seem so compelling, and she answers: ‘It is ... the rather simple thought that it can never be right to prefer a worse state of affairs to a better.’

Between [d]→ and [e]→, and also in footnote 5, Foot says some more about this ‘simple thought’. Explain what she says and try either to give an argument for it or to give some examples that test it.

At [e]→, Foot says: ‘I believe (and this is the main thesis of the paper) that we go wrong in accepting the idea that there are better and worse states of affairs in the sense that consequentialism requires.’ Why precisely do we go wrong? Her detailed answer begins with another question (see the beginning of the paragraph just after [e]→): are we so sure that we even understand what it means to speak of ‘a good state of affairs’? For she rightly notes that unless we can make sense of this expression – the right kind of sense – we will not be justified in speaking of better or worse states of affairs, and the simple thought above will have been shown to be empty.

What reasons does Foot give for thinking that we might not be able to make sense of the idea of a good state of affairs?

As was discussed briefly in the introduction to this chapter, the adjective ‘good’ often depends for its particular sense on the noun to which it is attached. We can make sense of ‘good knife’ because, knowing what knives are for, we have some idea of what would count as fulfilling these purposes to some relevantly high standard. However, it is unclear, to say the least, what would count as being a high standard in states of affairs or events. Foot does note that we might think a good state of affairs was one in which people did what was morally required of them, but this doesn’t advance matters, because we are looking to the very idea of a good state of affairs to help in defining moral rightness.

Is this consideration a decisive reason to doubt the intelligibility of the expression ‘good state of affairs’?

Foot admits that it isn’t decisive, since, as she observes, we do quite commonly speak this way. She notes too that it would be ‘ridiculous’ to query the sense of such ordinary expressions as ‘it would be a good thing’, said of something that we might anticipate happening. Yet, despite these concessions, she insists: ‘it is important to see how such expressions actually work in the contexts in which they are at home’. And the suspicion is that this further investigation will offer little solace to the utilitarian need to make sense of the expression ‘good state of affairs’.

At [f]→, she asks whether a good state of affairs is something impersonal, something to be recognized by all reasonable persons.

Why is it important at this point to speak of something impersonal that putatively makes a state of affairs good?

The discussion from [f]→ to [i]→ both answers this question, and argues that we cannot plausibly identify ‘something impersonal’ in the assessments we commonly make of states of affairs. The arguments proceed in what can be

identified as two stages. First, Foot offers various examples to make a straightforward point about one way in which we commonly speak about good outcomes or good states of affairs. For example, when the horse you bet on wins, you might well describe that state of affairs as good, while from my point of view – having backed another horse – it is anything but. What she takes examples like this to suggest is that there seems to be something ‘speaker-relative’ about our judgements of the goodness of states of affairs. However, if this relativity is really essential to the intelligibility of the phrase ‘good state of affairs’ – if, that is, there is no reason to think such judgements are impersonal – then this spells trouble for the consequentialist. For the appeal to the relative merits of various states of affairs can only ground decisions an agent might make about the rightness or wrongness of some action, if that appeal doesn’t depend on the special needs and interests of the agent. I can scarcely convince you that the *morally* right thing to do is to aim for a good state of affairs, if this latter is understood as one that is in *my* interest (or even in *yours*). So, to justify the use in morality of assessments of states of affairs, these must be ones we make from no particular point of view or, perhaps equivalently, from the moral point of view. These possibilities figure in the second stage of Foot’s argument, one which starts at [h]→.

Summarize these second-stage arguments (from [h]→ to [i]→), and say whether you think them cogent.

Foot’s discussion is summed up at [i]→, but before we consider her next move, let’s look back at a brief but important comment that she makes at [g]→. She notes that her arguments about interest-relativity should not be taken to support the general thesis that all phrases of the form ‘good X’ are interest-relative. Her concern has been solely with the phrase ‘good state of affairs’, and her arguments do not therefore entail that, for example, ‘good knife’, or even ‘good action’ or ‘good person’ are interest-relative. Each such case must be examined on its own merits, and so long as one can tell a story which justifies the adjective ‘good’ in each case without adverting to any interests of one or other person or group, that is fine with her. This point is important both for her remaining arguments, and for our work in this chapter. Aristotle certainly aimed to tell us something about human good – enough perhaps to justify our speaking of ‘good persons’ – and nothing he said there is undermined by Foot’s arguments. With Mill, however, the situation is different. For in spite of his sharing certain general aims with Aristotle, it is important for Mill, and for any consequentialist account of morality, that the notion of a good state of affairs makes sense.

At [i]→, Foot claims that her arguments have shown: either (i) that the expression ‘a good state of affairs’ is interest-relative, and so useless as a way of defining right action; or (ii) that if qualified by ‘from the moral point of

view', it needn't be understood as interest-relative, but is either meaningless, or cannot serve as a criterion of right action in the way supposed by consequentialists. Yet, recalling that her aim is to 'exorcise' the spell of utilitarianism, it is crucial not only that she show why the doctrine is wrong, but why it is so widely held. And this is a task she begins at [j]→.

Foot notes first that a moral person would be expected to want others to be happy, and would thus count as good a state of affairs that included that happiness. She says: 'To deny this would be to deny that benevolence is a virtue.' Following through on this line of thought, she claims (in the paragraph beginning at [k]→) that while our commitment to benevolence can give a perfectly good sense to the expression 'good state of affairs' this commitment is *within* morality, and must be placed alongside commitments to virtues other than benevolence.

Foot clarifies and extends this line of thought in the transition from [k]→ to [l]→. Do you find what she says convincing?

In the paragraph before [l]→, Foot condenses her argument into a comment about the ideal observer. Imagining such an observer is a common device that utilitarians, among others, use to dramatize their view: an outcome is said to be right if, in the view of an ideal, impartial and sympathetic observer, it would result in the greatest happiness. Foot acknowledges that such an observer would take into account the happiness of all humankind, and would not be partial, and she agrees that such an observer would therefore be maximally benevolent. But Foot asks: 'what ... are we to suppose about this person's other characteristics?' That is, what other virtues, if any, would such an observer have to recognize? If one says 'none besides an impartial interest in human happiness', this is to build the utilitarian viewpoint into the assessment from the start. But, as she argues in the paragraphs from [l]→ through [m]→, there is not only no compelling reason to do so, there are good reasons against.

Benevolence is certainly a virtue, but there are others. If we imagine that the impartial observer is just, for example, then there may well be states of affairs which, in being unjust, are simply not best, even if they would result in the greatest happiness. To take one case: because we think it unjust to perform a harmful experiment without a subject's consent, then even if this experiment produces a life-saving cure for many other cancer sufferers, we would expect an impartial observer who is just to forbid it. The experiment's consequence might well be a state of affairs in which the most happiness is produced – it could in this way be thought of as benevolent – but, given its injustice, the idea that we might judge it 'best' is a non-starter.

Foot allows that one can talk about good states of affairs, but only from *within* a moral outlook, one which is itself shaped by the range of virtues it recognizes. Among these virtues benevolence is bound to play an important

part, since this virtue is central to our relations with each other. Foot thinks that it is this special role for benevolence which gives utilitarianism its perennial appeal. If there is no problem about justice in some specific circumstance, then benevolence is often the single consideration determining the best course of action or social policy. However, we make a mistake when we give to benevolence the even greater role of defining rightness in every case.

At [m]→, Foot offers an analogy intended to support her idea that assessments of states of affairs can only be properly intelligible within some institution. Getting away from morality, she asks us to consider the institution of social manners.

Do you think that this analogy is a good one? Does it help to illuminate Foot's thesis about morality?

Whether or not you answer this question affirmatively, the analogy does serve Foot in another way. As she notes at [n]→, it brings out a question about her view – one which becomes an objection to it – which lurks just beneath the surface.

What is this objection?

Foot imagines her objector saying: 'It cannot be enough to say that we *do* have such things as rules of justice in our present system of virtues; the question is whether we should have them and if so why we should.' What this objector takes to be required is some rational basis for morality, one which doesn't simply assume that what we now regard as virtues are definitive. Such a rational basis could well just bypass Foot's account of the virtues, and, as she says (at [o]→), could well make it 'seem that we must after all allow that the idea of a good state of affairs appears at the most basic level in the critical appraisal of any moral code'.

Do you think that Foot successfully counters this objection?

This objection, and her reply, are the opening moves in a complex and fundamental discussion about the relationship between rationality and morality, a discussion that has been central to Foot throughout her career. For more on her view of how best to link rationality and morality, see her book *Natural Goodness* which is listed in the reference list (also see chapter 5 of this book). However, in the present context, she counts it enough to have shown that we have no reason to accept the idea that we can judge states of affairs better or worse from outside any morality. Moreover, at [p]→, she says something which brings us back to the reading that opened this chapter. She writes: 'Let us remind ourselves that the goodness of total states of affairs played no part in Aristotle's moral philosophy ...'