

Utilitarianism

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## UTILITARIANISM

A. C. EWING

CERTAINLY the most popular and perhaps the most plausible view among thinkers on ethics has been utilitarianism. This term is used in a narrower and in a wider sense. It may stand for hedonistic utilitarianism, which regards pleasure as the only good and pain as the only evil, or it may stand for any view which makes the rightness of an act depend solely on its conduciveness to good without committing one to any particular theory as to what things are good. I shall use it in the wider sense in this article. The term "ideal utilitarianism" has often been used in recent years to stand for those forms of utilitarianism which are not hedonistic.

Hedonistic utilitarianism is, in any case, incredible to me. The analytic form of hedonism according to which "good" just means "pleasant" or "conducive to pleasure"<sup>1</sup> is obviously false and has in fact not been held consistently by any important thinker; but it has been a common view that the only characteristic which makes something good (otherwise than merely as a means) is its pleasantness and that its goodness is in proportion to the latter. This seems to be what is meant by saying that pleasure is the only good. Some thinkers (e.g., Hume and, in modern times, Schlick) have given a naturalistic definition of "good" as that for which people feel approval and have then on the basis of an empirical survey of what people generally approve inferred the truth of hedonism. The naturalist premise I have criti-

cized elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> but, even granting its truth, it seems quite clear that it would not lead to hedonism as ordinarily understood. Examining the question purely empirically, it may well be the case that people only feel approval for the kinds of action and qualities of character which will in general bring pleasure to someone; but it is certainly not true that the approval is proportionate to the amount either of actual or of anticipated pleasure, and on such a theory of good this ought to settle the matter. On the other hand, where a person who does not commit himself to a naturalistic theory of good is a hedonist, as in the case of Sidgwick, his hedonism must involve falling back on an intuition that at least pleasure is good; and it is therefore vulnerable to criticism on the ground that, if we accept this intuition, we must in consistency accept other, equally respectable, ethical intuitions which imply that it is not the only good.

It is easy to give imaginary illustrations which show that hedonism is not an adequate ethical theory either from the point of view of the nonnaturalist or from that of the man who identifies "good" with "actually desired," "approved," or "liked by most people." If, in regard to each of the examples I shall give, we ask either whether most people would in fact feel as they should on the hedonist theory or whether it would be right to judge as the hedonist theory requires, it seems to me that the answer can only be in the negative.

<sup>2</sup> See my book, *The Definition of Good* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1947).

<sup>1</sup> Including under this the avoidance of pain.

Suppose, in the first place, I were offered as alternatives thirty years more of life as pleasant as the most pleasant week I have ever experienced on condition that I went mad or could only enjoy the pleasures of a pig and twenty-nine years of life equally pleasant with the pleasures of a good and reasonably cultivated human being. Would it not be rational and right to choose the second alternative rather than the first even though the pleasure was *ex hypothesi* less and even if my choice neither increased nor diminished the pleasures of others? The fact that I should in practice soon get bored by the life of a pig and cease to enjoy it much is irrelevant; it is logically, if not practically, possible that this might be countered by subjecting me to a psychological or physiological treatment which would change my nature and make me totally content with it. But we can still see that it would be better, even apart from the effects on others, not to sacrifice my rational nature rather than for the sake of a little additional pleasure to submit myself to the treatment in question. And I am sure that I myself and most other people would feel disapproval on contemplating such a course, so that, even if "good"—which heaven forbid!—does mean that "which is an object of the attitude of approval," it will still follow that the course is not the better one to adopt.

Or suppose two communities: the members of one unjust, selfish, stupid, and addicted almost solely to animal pleasures, the members of the other intelligent, artistic, loving, and highly moral; but suppose that the amount of pleasure enjoyed in the two communities were so similar that we could not say which we enjoyed more, and similarly with pain. It might be objected that a community whose members had the good

qualities mentioned would naturally as a consequence of these qualities be happier than the community whose members had the opposite bad ones, but we may suppose that the latter community lived under much less favorable external circumstances than the former and so were subjected to ills which the other escaped and that this occurred to an extent just sufficient to outweigh the hedonistic effects of their good qualities. It may also be objected that we cannot measure different pleasures so exactly as to talk about their equality, but this can be met by substituting for "equal" "such that we could not on hedonistic grounds prefer either to the other." We need not argue against a person who held that there could be no comparison, even a rough one, between such different pleasures, since he could not possibly be a hedonist. Now it is obviously a possible situation that the pleasure of the two communities might correspond sufficiently closely for us at any rate not to be able to say which community was happier, but in that case it would still be perfectly obvious both that we should in fact prefer and that it would be right to prefer the latter as having more intrinsic value in their lives.

Again, is it not the case that, of two modes of distribution which produce the same total amount of pleasure, one may be intrinsically preferable to the other because it is fairer? Would the state of Cambridge be as good as it is if nobody in the town except me had any pleasure at all but if I had pleasure seventy thousand times as intense as the average pleasure which the seventy thousand or so inhabitants now enjoy? If I could have a little more pleasure than the sum total of that enjoyed by the inhabitants at the expense of everybody else in the town losing all chance of pleasure, would it be my duty to bring this about, as it

would have to be on the hedonist view that it is always our duty to do what will produce the greatest pleasure?

Suppose, again, two men, A and B, shipwrecked with only one life-belt between them. Suppose A to be the father of a large family of young children and to hold a position of great responsibility with great prospects of useful service before him and B to have no dependents and no important responsibilities. Would there not still be a great difference in value between the action of B if he voluntarily sacrificed the life-belt to A and the action of A if he took the life-belt by force from B, even though the results of the two actions were similar? Finally, suppose two men who are deriving at the moment equal pleasure, one from enjoying the company of friends he loves and the other from torturing enemies he hates. Let us abstract from consequences and ask about the value or disvalue of the state of mind itself as a temporary condition apart from all consequences. This is a perfectly legitimate question to ask, at least on the hedonist view, for hedonism depends on a separation of what is good only as a means from what is good as an end. Then, is it not perfectly plain that, although the pleasure enjoyed by the two men at the time is equal, the state of mind of the one at the time, even apart from its consequences, is very much less desirable than the state of mind of the other? This would be true even if the victims of the man's hate did not suffer from the proceedings but he only believed they did, as, for example, a witch doctor might who thought he could bring great suffering on his foes by roasting images of them over a slow fire.

If a person examines these cases carefully, it is difficult for me to see how, unless he is in some way confused or determined to stick to his theory at all costs,

he can resist the conclusion that, whatever ethical theory be true, hedonism is false. And even if it were said that to call something "good" just meant that people generally feel an emotion of approval for it, it would be easy to retort by showing from these illustrations that people's emotions of approval were not determined solely by the pleasure-giving capacity of a thing, anticipated or actual. For it is clear that their feelings of approval and disapproval would agree rather with my verdict than with the verdict which a consistent hedonist should give.

But utilitarianism in the wider sense is much more plausible than the hedonistic variety. Utilitarianism in general may be defined as the view that the right action is always the action most conducive to the good and that this is what makes it right. Utilitarians have sometimes stated their theory in a way which laid it unnecessarily open to objections; but I think that the best way of further defining the position would be to say that it means that the only factors which determine whether an action is right or wrong are (*a*) the amount of good or evil it is likely to produce relative to that which its alternatives are likely to produce and (*b*) the degree of probability of the production of each item of this, a diminution in the probability of occurrence of a good or evil counting as if it were a proportionate diminution in its amount. If the view could be applied mathematically, the amount of a good or evil would be multiplied by the fraction expressing the probability of producing it and the products added in the case of good and subtracted in the case of evil. This would be done with all the items of good or evil which the action had, as far as we could see, any chance of producing, until we had completed the sum for each alternative proposed action. The utilitarian would

then pronounce that action obligatory in a given situation which was represented by the greatest positive quantity, or, if the situation was so unfortunate that there were no possible actions represented by positive quantities, that action which was represented by the least negative quantity. If several possible actions were in this calculus represented by equal quantities, greater if positive or less if negative than the quantity of any other alternative, they would all be right and none of them obligatory; but it would be obligatory to perform one or other of them though it would not matter which was performed. Such mathematical calculations in ethics are unfortunately impracticable; but, on the other hand, it is clear that we can to some extent rationally compare different goods and evils and, allowing for their relative probability, judge one greater than another, and the utilitarian usually seems to mean that these two circumstances—namely, the amount of good or evil and the probability of either—are the only factors which determine whether an action is right or wrong. For example, the relation of a possible act to a past event—to a promise or to a wrong done in the past for which the act is supposed to constitute reparation—is to him quite irrelevant except in so far as it provides a reason for thinking that the good or evil done by it is likely to be greater or less than it otherwise would be.

The chief argument for utilitarianism is that it seems very difficult to resist the conviction that it must be wrong deliberately to produce less good when I could produce more. For is not this equivalent to deliberately throwing away or destroying some good? While we obviously have an obligation to do good, it is difficult to see what point or sense there could be in doing anything which did not pro-

duce good and a fortiori in doing something which diminished the amount of good available. Now to produce less good when we could produce more is equivalent to diminishing the amount of good available. That it tends to produce a good seems not only a reason but the only ultimate reason for doing anything, and, if so, it seems to follow that the only ultimate ground which makes an action obligatory must be its conduciveness to the production of good. This is at least a very plausible position to take up. Further, the view can be interpreted in a way which adequately explains and co-ordinates our different duties.

Let us, however, now consider criticisms which have been brought against it. One is that, if the view were true, we could never know what we ought to do or even have a well-founded opinion on the subject. For we can only at the best forecast the consequences of an action for a very limited period of time, yet the consequences are infinite. The immediate effects of my action will influence the events which come next, these the events afterward, and so on *ad infinitum* (or at least until the end of the world), and how can I possibly know that some event in, say, A.D. 2000 or 10,000 will not, because of my action now, be materially different from what it would have been in such a way as to produce an amount of evil which will altogether outweigh the foreseeable advantages of the action which I now perform?

However, this objection, if valid at all, will hold not only against utilitarianism but against any view which makes consequences relevant at all in determining what is right to do. Even if the good produced is not the sole factor in deciding what is right, it is surely an important one. Even if utilitarianism is rejected, it is difficult, indeed, to have an

ethics which will take no account of consequences. But, if we take any account of consequences at all, may not an action which would otherwise be right be rendered wrong by the occurrence in the remote future of consequences which nobody could at the time of action have predicted? It is therefore incumbent on all writers on ethics to consider the objection seriously and not merely treat it as a convenient stone to throw at utilitarianism.

I think the answer is that what is relevant to the rightness of an action is not its actual consequences but the consequences the likelihood of which could, humanly speaking, be foreseen. If I ask somebody to call on me and he is run over and killed on his way to my house, this does not make my action in inviting him a wrong one. In determining what is right, we can ignore unforeseeable consequences because we can have no reason for anticipating that they will be bad rather than good or good rather than bad. By the rule of probabilities they should not influence us because the uncertainty affects *all* alternative actions equally. Since unknown consequences may be good as well as bad, the prospect of them does not even favor inaction against action. Besides inaction itself also has its unforeseeable consequences.

There are two further points which help to assuage the doubts aroused by this question of unpredictable consequences. First, the importance of remote consequences in deciding what is right is greatly diminished by the fact that a particular action can never be more than a small part of the total cause of these and will as such grow progressively less important in proportion to their remoteness. The farther removed they are, the greater will be the number of other contributory causes, and so the smaller the

share of our act in their production. It is no doubt true that what is in itself a very minor matter might, given a certain situation, just "turn the scale" and precipitate a great disaster. But the odds against any particular act producing such important effects are enormous, unless we have some special information which makes it likely; and in that case we are not discussing possible totally unknown effects but possible effects of which we can reasonably be expected to take some account. Even if one carries the effects of my action to infinity, one only makes them an infinitesimally small part of the cause, and therefore negligible, and makes the chance that they will produce a decisive effect on anything in the infinitely removed future by just turning the scale, as I have suggested, infinitesimally small.

Second, there is some reason to think that the unknown effects are more likely to be favorable to an alternative which is on the ground of the foreseeable consequences judged to be right than to an alternative judged to be wrong, since good tends to produce further good and evil further evil effects. I think that this is both a justified empirical induction and a true metaphysical principle. Therefore, in so far as this is true, the likelihood of unknown consequences, so far from adding to the uncertainty, only constitutes an additional reason in favor of the act already judged to be right. This has, however, a rather different bearing on cases in which we are inclined "to do evil so that good may come." In such a case it is well to remember that we can forecast only a small part of the total consequences and that, although we cannot foretell what specific bad effects the evil in our means will have, we have good reason to think that it is likely to cause some unanticipated bad re-

sults; and the probability of this must be set against the good which we expect to achieve by our action. This does not justify the conclusion that it is always wrong to adopt evil means for a good end (e.g., lie or use violence); but it should make us at least very cautious about doing so.

So, to sum up, the existence of unforeseeable consequences generally either makes no difference to what we ought to do or constitutes an additional reason for choosing the course already judged to be right on other grounds. But where we are inclined to judge it right to use bad means for the attainment of some good end, the existence of unforeseeable consequences justifies further doubts against this, in any case, questionable procedure, since evil is liable to produce evil.

Another objection which has been brought against utilitarianism is that it does not do justice to the unconditional character which duty bears, since, according to it, duty still depends on an end beyond itself. But the unconditionality of duty does not mean that no conditions affect the question of what our duty is, but only that, once granting a certain act to be our duty for whatever reasons, it is unconditionally obligatory on us. The duty, for example, to take certain measures to save a life is nonetheless unconditional because it has an object, the saving of the life, and may not be universal. Even if not a duty in all cases, in those cases where it is a duty it will still apply with undiminished force. Duty is unconditional in the sense that the fact that something is our duty is a sufficient reason, though not necessarily a sufficient psychological cause, for acting in that way, whatever our desires and whatever the circumstances. It does not need the concurrence of any other conditions (e.g., profitableness to the agent).

It may indeed be the case that one of the data I ought to take into account before deciding whether I ought to do something is the state of my desires. This is highly relevant in such cases as the choice of a wife or the choice of a profession, and people have often acted in these matters in a way which was not merely detrimental to their own happiness but morally wrong because they suppressed certain desires for the sake of economic advantage, as when a man marries a rich woman whom he does not love. But if, having once taken my own desires into account, where necessary, among other data, I have decided that I ought to do something, I must not take my desires into account again and say "I ought to do this, but I have such a strong desire not to do it that it outweighs the obligation." To take this line would be, having decided that my desire not to do something is outbalanced in importance by other factors, to treat my desire after all as if it were more important than all the other factors put together, despite my decision that they are more important than it. Duty has a certain authority and compelling power which is well brought out by writers like Kant and Butler, but this authority attaches to whatever is our duty, and the recognition of it cannot tell us what our duty is. To this last question the answer of the utilitarian seems much more satisfactory than that of Kant and is defensible against at least any of the more obvious objections.

If the objection is raised that a "categorical imperative" cannot be based on what is merely probable, we must reply that no system of ethics can possibly avoid basing at least some of its duties on what is merely probable. If I fire at a private enemy, it is not certain that I shall kill or wound him; if I give medicine to a sick person, it is not certain that I

shall benefit him. But does this make it not a duty to abstain from the one action and perform the other? And surely the former would not be a violation of duty but for the probable or possible consequences in the way of injury, and the latter not a fulfilment of duty but for the probable or possible benefit to the patient.

Another difficulty is raised by the diversity of the goods which have to be taken into account. Can we compare and measure against each other such different kinds of good as virtue and pleasure, scientific knowledge and love; and, if we cannot do this, how can we, when a number of different goods are involved, decide which course is likely to produce the greatest good? This difficulty has been used as an argument for utilitarianism of the hedonistic type, but it is not really removed even if we adopt that view. We should find it almost as hard to compare two experiences of very different kinds in respect of pleasure and quite as hard to say how much pain it would be worth incurring to gain a certain pleasure or how much pleasure it would be worth missing to escape so much pain. Further, we should note that there are cases of comparison among different kinds of values which even a thoroughgoing hedonist can hardly reduce to a comparison of pleasures, for example, marking examination papers. Here we are often certain that one candidate is on the whole much better than another, though in some respects he may be much worse, that is, he may be less accurate about details but show more grasp of the subject as a whole or be less systematic but have more originality and common sense. I do not claim that examiners are infallible in their decisions or deny the existence of many very difficult border-line cases, but every person who has taken part in

examining will know that it is possible to form a tolerably reasonable estimate of the comparative merits of different candidates despite the fact that this involves to some extent the balancing against one another of qualities of quite different kinds. Such a comparison obviously cannot be reduced to a comparison of pleasures or pains, even if that were possible with more specifically ethical reasoning, as the hedonist would maintain. It is certainly not a question of judging how much pleasure or pain the different characteristics of the candidates' work give to the examiner or to anybody else or of estimating the ultimate hedonic effects of the mental qualities displayed in the examination. Even if the value in life of these qualities were dependent only on their pleasure-giving capacity, we are certainly able to compare them in examining without any reference to this.

The ideal utilitarian will insist that we cannot deny the fact that we do compare different kinds of good and evil; and, even if we are not ourselves ideal utilitarians, we can hardly help admitting that we must do this if we are to decide rationally many of the practical questions which we all claim to decide. Even those who are not utilitarians will find it hard to maintain an ethics which does not admit at least the *relevance* of consequences, though they may not be all-important; and, if they are relevant at all, we must compare their value in order to determine their importance.

It is sometimes objected that utilitarianism depends on the distinction between what is good in itself and what is good only as a means and that no such sharp distinction between ends and means can be maintained. Now it is no doubt true that most things which are good as ends are good also as means and that many things which are good as



means are good also as ends. But the utilitarian can allow for this in his calculations and, in computing what good something will do, add its own value as an end-in-itself to the value of its consequences. It is also urged that the goodness of something good depends on its context and that we cannot hold that in a different context it would necessarily be good at all or at least that the degree of its goodness would remain the same. Can anything be good in itself when nothing exists or could exist by itself apart from other things? Now "good in itself" may have sometimes been used in such a way as to call for these criticisms, but it need not be. The utilitarian may mean by this phrase simply "good itself" (in opposition to what has not the characteristic of goodness itself, e.g., pulling a tooth out, but produces other things which have it). He may still hold that something can really have the characteristic in some contexts, not in others, or that the degree of its goodness may vary according to the context and in some contexts even give place to badness. The goodness or badness of something, that is, need not depend only on its qualities; it may depend partly on its relations to other things.

Some opponents of utilitarianism have maintained that they could see no connection between good and ought, but I must say that the connection has always seemed to me quite evident. Nor do I find it necessary, like some people, to introduce "ought to be" as a mediating term and argue that the good is what ought to be and therefore I ought to produce it. I do not attach any meaning to "ought to be" except "ought to be produced by someone," but it seems to me evident that the fact that something is good directly carries with it the conclu-

sion that I ought to produce it if I can, other things being equal.

Perhaps those who cannot see this in the case of good might find it easier to see it if they considered the parallel case of evil. Suppose there is some great evil about to befall which they and they alone could avert without violating any other obligation or producing any harmful consequences whatever. Surely it follows at once that they are under an obligation to prevent the disaster; surely this is implied by the very nature of evil! If this applies to great evils, it will apply also to small, except that the obligation to avert them would be the more likely to be outweighed by other obligations or even by the fact that this would always involve a certain amount of trouble and expenditure of time for the person who did it, which might, if the evil was very small, really not be worth while; but that would be because the evil to be averted was a lesser evil than the evil involved in taking action. If the threat of evil thus necessarily carries with it an obligation, why not the promise of good? I myself cannot see any better reason for producing something than that it is good. That, other things being equal, we ought to do what good we can seems to me to be one of the few propositions outside mathematics which we really see to be true a priori.

The doctrine of utilitarianism is, of course, quite compatible with the stern duty of sacrifice, for, though the right act is intended to produce the greatest good, this may involve the sacrifice of one's own good and even the incurring of great suffering one's self for the greater good of others. The utilitarian will indeed hold that we are never required to sacrifice our own *greater* good for the *lesser* good of others, but this does not seem an unreasonable view. More difficult to accept

is the logical corollary of utilitarianism—that it is not only not obligatory but actually wrong to sacrifice one's own greater good for the lesser good of another—but the paradox is softened if we remember that wrong actions are not necessarily morally blameworthy. To do this would only be morally blameworthy for a utilitarian who thought it morally wrong and yet did it, and we should presumably have to admit that, if he thought it morally wrong, it was morally wrong and blameworthy for him to do it. We may therefore substitute "mistaken" for "wrong," and then the assertion does not seem so obviously unjustified. Our tendency to praise a person for making sacrifices which go even beyond what is required may be explained by the fact that it suggests a good disposition and that most people are far more likely to go wrong through sacrificing themselves too little than through sacrificing themselves too much, so that we admire and encourage the other tendency even to excess, provided the good sacrificed is not moral but hedonistic. Further, a person who is always making nice calculations as to whether he has not sacrificed to another more of his own advantage than he is ethically required to do is not the best type of character, nor is he likely to produce the greatest good in practice.

That there is another side to the picture must not, however, be overlooked. A generous willingness to sacrifice one's self on the part of potential cannon fodder without due inquiry as to the worth of the ends for which one is to be sacrificed is a chief prop of aggressive militarism. Few men could be more self-sacrificing on occasion than a really fanatical Nazi, yet few could be more evil. Again, when excessive sacrifices are

made for the sake of an individual, as sometimes in family life, they may easily have the undesired effect of increasing the selfishness of their recipient. At any rate, my good is as much a good as anybody else's. Even if it is held that it is not morally blameworthy to sacrifice my own pleasure provided no other harm is thereby done, it is certainly morally blameworthy for me, deliberately and uselessly, to sacrifice any other intrinsic good of mine (e.g., the moral, aesthetic, and intellectual goods of which I am capable).

Another objection that may be advanced against the utilitarian is that the rightness or wrongness of an action does not depend on its results but on its motives. That it depends only on its motives is obviously false but that it should depend partly on its motives and partly on its consequences is not necessarily incompatible with utilitarianism, though it is with the hedonistic form of utilitarianism. If pleasure is not the only good, among the things which are intrinsically good may well be actions done from certain motives, and any intrinsic goodness of the action itself would have to be taken into account in computing the total amount of good likely to be produced. It follows that, if I act from a bad motive and could have acted from a better, I am not acting rightly. Even if my action is outwardly exactly the same as the right action, still the good produced will be less than it would have been if I had acted from the right motive, for in that case, over and above the good in the consequences, there would have been present intrinsic good instead of intrinsic evil in the action or (if we prefer to say that) in the state of mind accompanying the action. This is quite apart from the fact that the motive is

liable in various subtle ways to affect, even against the agent's intention, the consequences of the action.

The attack on the nonhedonistic varieties of utilitarianism has, however, been based mainly on the existence of certain duties (e.g., keeping promises) which do not seem to be wholly dependent on, and subordinate to, the production of good. It does seem clear that we ought in general to keep promises and abstain from cheating even where, as far as we can tell, we should do more good by cheating or breaking a promise. I do not say that there are no conceivable circumstances under which it would be right to cheat or to break promises; but I do say that it would certainly not be the mark of a good man to do such things on every occasion when he thought their consequences would be more good than evil. Is it really right, it may be asked, to further the greatest good by all means in our power including, if necessary, the most caddish and abominable, and, if not, how can utilitarianism be defensible? The utilitarian can meet the argument, at least up to a certain point, by saying that in fact we can very rarely produce the greatest good by caddish means, and that, even if in some cases we can, it is best to go on the general rule that we cannot, because, if we tried to decide each particular case on its individual merits, we should, owing to the difficulties in the way of calculating consequences, go wrong more frequently than if we stuck to the general rule. Few, whether utilitarians or not, would go so far as to say that a man ought not to fire in order to save his own life if attacked by a homicidal maniac or tell a lie to prevent a murder, but that does not prevent one from saying that in all cases where there are not the strongest and

clearest reasons against it it is more useful to abide by the general rule. An important reason for this is that there are good empirical grounds for thinking that cheating is liable to have bad consequences over and above any particular effects we can foresee from the specific action.

Most people, however, cannot really rid themselves of the idea that certain actions of the type commonly called "unjust," "dishonorable," "caddish," and "dirty" are intrinsically evil; that there is something bad over and above the consequences in, for instance, knowingly condemning an innocent man or robbing a friend who had completely trusted you. This has won support for antiutilitarian views, but even the utilitarian is not bound to think only of consequences. Actions have as much claim as anything has to be classed among the things which can be intrinsically good or evil, and their intrinsic goodness or badness will have to be considered in computing the total good produced. Cheating, lying, and unjust and caddish conduct generally are evil in themselves and, though this evil can hardly be great enough to outweigh all possible good consequences, yet, when we have taken into account the circumstances relating to consequences of which I have spoken above, it may be sufficient to outweigh any which are, in most cases, likely to accrue.

I have already pointed out that the utilitarian may consistently ascribe intrinsic goodness or badness to actions on account of their motive, but this is not enough here, since it is a question of deciding what is right objectively. Granted the motive of the agent is simply to do what is right because it is right, he will still have to decide the question of whether it is right or wrong to lie in a

particular case where the consequences of lying seem good, and merely to refer to his motive will not help. To tell me that I ought to act from a desire to do what is right will not of itself inform me as to what is right. But the utilitarian may consistently hold that value, or its opposite, belongs to certain actions not only because of their motives but because of certain relations they have to persons. This is seen not least in the cases where we think it legitimate, owing to the special circumstances, not to be quite straightforward or quite just. In such cases we, in so far as we are moral, shall still regard the deceit or injustice as regrettable and intrinsically undesirable, even if we honestly think it necessary to avoid a greater evil in the particular case. The action does not contain so much intrinsic evil as if we thought the lie, etc., wrong, but it still, we feel, contains some. There seems to be a special evil about lying, for example, apart from that which belongs to all morally wrong acts merely as such, and this evil may well be part of the reason why lies are usually wrong. This can be maintained without a vicious circle, for the evil does not result from the lie being a wrong act but simply from its being a lie, as the specific value of an aesthetic or intellectual experience is due, not to its being morally right to produce or undergo that experience, but simply to the character of the experience as aesthetic or intellectual, which in its turn is part of the reason why it is right to bring about such experiences.

The view that we know a priori that certain kinds of actions are wrong in absolutely all circumstances irrespective of their consequences has been generally discarded by philosophers, but there is an alternative, more defensible view

which is commonly opposed to utilitarianism of any variety. It is the theory put forward in Great Britain by Sir David Ross, according to which we have, independently of the good or evil produced, not, indeed, obligations which hold absolutely in all cases but what he calls "prima facie duties." What is meant by a prima facie duty is an obligation which we ought to fulfil, other things being equal, but which may be overridden by a superior obligation, so that, except in the cases where only one prima facie duty is involved, we have to determine what is absolutely right by balancing against each other different prima facie duties and trying to decide between them. The prima facie duties include certain obligations to produce good, but they include also, as ultimate, obligations to keep promises, to make reparation for wrong done, to show gratitude, and to assign just rewards and punishments. While Ross, of course, admits that the fulfilment of these obligations is likely to do good, he does not base their obligatoriness on the amount of good they produce, and holds that there are cases where it is our duty, for example, to keep a promise though we might do more good by breaking it, as far as we can possibly foresee. Other obligations may therefore clash with those based entirely on the production of good, and in that case it will not necessarily follow that the latter are to be fulfilled. We cannot say either that we ought always without exception to keep promises or that we ought always to break them when this course is the most conducive to the production of good. We are left by Ross to decide each case on its own merits.

Now, if the utilitarian maintains that only consequences count, Ross's view

certainly accords better with the way in which we actually think in ethical matters, and I myself should reject that type of utilitarianism. But if the utilitarian admits that actions, as well as their consequences, are sometimes intrinsically good or bad, and allows for this goodness or badness in computing the total good likely to be produced and therefore their rightness or wrongness, the controversy between him and Ross seems to have reached a stalemate. A consideration of the ethical judgments that we feel bound to make in particular cases may lead us to the conclusion that all that is relevant to deciding what we ought to do cannot lie in the consequences alone; but if the utilitarian then says that this only shows that in such cases the action is itself intrinsically good or bad, how is he to be refuted? It is very difficult to see how we are to decide

whether it is intrinsically bad or only prima facie wrong to break promises. Perhaps the answer is that it does not matter much which we say. There is a considerable difference between the man who says that everything ought to be decided by reference to consequences and the man who insists also on taking the character of actions into account; but once the utilitarian has admitted that actions as well as consequences have intrinsic value or its opposite and the advocate of prima facie duties has admitted that at least one prima facie duty is to produce as good consequences as possible, is there very much to choose between the two? Is there much difference between saying that it is intrinsically good to act justly and honestly and saying that it is prima facie right to do so?

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