

Utilitarianism as an esoteric doctrine

I Sidgwick

... no one doubts that it is, *generally speaking*, conducive to the common happiness that men should be veracious, faithful to promises, obedient to law, disposed to satisfy the normal expectations of others, having their malevolent impulses and their sensual appetites under strict control: but it is thought that an exclusive regard to pleasurable and painful consequences would frequently admit exceptions to rules which Common Sense imposes as absolute. ...

the cases in which practical doubts are likely to arise, as to whether exceptions should be permitted from ordinary rules on Utilitarian principles, will mostly be those ... where the exceptions are not claimed for a few individuals, on the mere ground of their probable fewness, but either for persons generally under exceptional circumstances, or for a class of persons defined by exceptional qualities of intellect, temperament, or character. In such cases the Utilitarian may have no doubt that in a community consisting generally of enlightened Utilitarians, these grounds for exceptional ethical treatment would be regarded as valid; still he may, as I have said, doubt whether the more refined and complicated rule which recognises such exceptions is adapted for the community in which he is actually living; and whether the attempt to introduce it is not likely to do more harm by weakening current morality than good by improving its quality. Supposing such a doubt to arise, either in a case of this kind, or in one of the rare cases discussed in the preceding paragraph, it becomes necessary that the Utilitarian should consider carefully the extent to which his advice or example are likely to influence persons to whom they would be dangerous: and it is evident that the result of this consideration may depend largely on the degree of publicity which he gives to either advice or example. Thus, on Utilitarian principles, it may be right to do and privately recommend, under certain circumstances, what it would not be right to advocate openly; it may be right to teach openly to one set of persons what it would be wrong to teach to others; it may be conceivably right to do, if it can be done with comparative secrecy, what it would be wrong to do in the face of the world; and even, if perfect secrecy can be reasonably expected, what it would be wrong to recommend by private advice or example. These conclusions are all of a paradoxical character: there is no doubt that the moral consciousness of a plain man broadly repudiates the general notion of an esoteric morality, differing from the one popularly taught; and it would be commonly

agreed that an action which would be bad if done openly is not rendered good by secrecy. We may observe, however, that there are strong utilitarian reasons for maintaining generally this latter common opinion.... Thus the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this; that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret; and similarly it seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept esoteric. ... a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands.¹

2 Singer

A different objection ... is that it is poor policy to advocate a morality that most people will not follow. If we come to believe that, unless we make real sacrifices for strangers, we are doing wrong, then our response may be, not to give more, but to be less observant of other moral rules that we had previously followed. Making morality so demanding threatens to bring the whole of morality into disrepute. This objection effectively concedes that we ought to do a great deal more than we are now doing but denies that advocating this will really lead to the poor getting more assistance. The question then becomes: What policy will produce the best consequences? If it is true that advocating a highly demanding morality will lead to worse consequences than advocating a less demanding morality, then indeed we ought to advocate a less demanding morality. ... Sidgwick's point holds good: there is a distinction between 'what it may be right to do, and privately recommend', and 'what it would not be right to advocate openly'.²

¹Henry Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics*. (1907), Book 4, Ch. 5, §3, paragraphs 1, 8.

²Peter Singer. *One World* (2002), pp. 191-2.