Nietzsche's Critique of Utilitarianism

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Nietzsche's scattered, caustic remarks on utilitarianism pervade his philosophical corpus and tend to be sweepingly critical. Until recently, however, scholars have generally ignored Nietzsche's critique because it consists largely of undeveloped arguments and *ad hominem* attacks against particular utilitarians.[1] This is unfortunate, since his critique of utilitarianism is linked in important ways to his critique of Christianity.

This essay examines the main sources of Nietzsche's fierce opposition to utilitarianism, without considering any alternative normative position he may have advanced.[2] The absence of sustained discussion in this essay of a positive alternative should not, however, be taken to imply that he rejects morality altogether. Nietzsche parries this common interpretation in *Daybreak* by conceding, "in this book faith in morality is withdrawn—but Why? *Out of morality!*"(*D* 4).[3] Instead of criticizing utilitarianism by contrasting it with alternative moral values, however, Nietzsche primarily attacks utilitarianism by querying its internal coherence, and by raising the possibility that utilitarians are driven by motives at odds with their overt concern with the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The charges of theoretical and motivational inconsistency, which I discuss in Sections 1 and 3, respectively, comprise Nietzsche's main objections to utilitarianism. In Section 2, I discuss a more general argument, loosely related to Section 1, according to which Nietzsche criticizes English utilitarians for failing to countenance the "evil" that utility maximization requires. In Section 4, I attempt to fortify the interpretation of the first three sections by exposing the weaknesses of a recent account of Nietzsche's critique of utilitarianism advanced by Frank Cameron. Finally, in Section 5, I begin by staving off another alternative interpretation of Nietzsche's critique of utilitarianism, and then proceed to characterize Nietzsche's hostility toward *English* utilitarians as typifying his general suspicion of any attempt by a particular group to impose a single moral standard on all people.

1. The Utility of Neighborly Love

> In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.[4]
>
> —John Stuart Mill

In interpreting Nietzsche's attacks on utilitarianism, it is crucial to understand the (often tenuous) connection Nietzsche makes between utilitarianism and Christianity. Because Nietzsche considers utilitarianism a secular offspring of Christian morality, many of his global attacks on utilitarianism resemble his more familiar critique of Christian "slave morality"—the morality of the herd. In particular, Nietzsche contends that utilitarianism inherited Christianity's commitment to the equal worth of each person, and perpetuated its erroneous assumption that a timeless, universal criterion for morality is tenable.

Nietzsche's preliminary account of the difference between master morality and slave morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* culminates with the conclusion that "[s]lave morality is essentially a morality of utility" (260). Although Nietzsche develops the notorious distinction between master and slave morality most fully in the *Genealogy*, he articulates the sense in which he considers utilitarianism a form of slave morality in a revealing passage in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here he speculates that the noble, aristocratic man first identifies himself and those like him (powerful, proud, distinguished men) as good, and then contrasts himself with those he contemptuously regards as "the cowardly, the timid, the petty" and, above all, "those who think only of narrow utility" (*BGE* 260). The noble's power consists not only in his ability to exploit others with his superior acumen or physical strength but also in exercising "power over himself," by refraining from acting on the inclination of pity that characterizes those whom he despises. The slave, conversely, identifies himself negatively; he is part of the group that resents those who unabashedly exercise their power. Nietzsche scorns slave morality because its proponents meekly resign themselves to whatever master morality is not, and yet consider their own moral principles universally binding rather than acknowledging them as narrowly useful for members of their own group. In the Christian tradition, "pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, friendliness come into honor—for these are the most *useful* qualities [for the slave]" (*BGE* 260).

Although Nietzsche thinks utilitarians share these values, he does not consider their values coextensive with Christian morality, since hedonistic utilitarianism is concerned with maximizing the very sensation that Christian morality aims to suppress: pleasure (*WP* 35).[5] The partial coincidence between Christian and utilitarian values results in part, Nietzsche thinks, from the fact that utilitarians construe "utility" in exceedingly familiar terms. The pleasure they seek is not that of the voluptuary or conqueror, but that of the "herd animal"— the "boring" and "mediocre" enjoyment of people who have yet to awaken from the "soporific" spell of slave morality (*BGE* 228).[6]

What does it mean to espouse the values of a herd animal? We have already encountered some of the values Nietzsche associates with slave morality—humility, industriousness, pity, but in what sense are they "herd" values? If the fundamental goal of an animal within a herd is its own preservation, and if its own preservation depends upon the health of the herd of which it is a member, then, Nietzsche supposes, the moral principles of that group will tend to reflect the kind of egalitarianism embodied in Bentham's dictum, "Everybody counts for one, and nobody for more than one."[7] Nietzsche considers this the essence of herd mentality: "[I]t is the instinct of the herd that finds its formula in this rule—one is equal, one takes oneself for equal" (*WP* 925). According to Nietzsche, this egalitarian formula originates from the benefit that comes from reciprocal cooperation among equals in a group, but has been extended by Christian morality to apply to all people—including *un*equals. Nietzsche thus construes the golden rule as a precept of "prudence" or mutual advantage, observing that "John Stuart Mill believes in it" as the basis of morality, but that he fails to grasp its prudential origin (*WP* 925).[8]

Nietzsche also portrays egalitarian values as myopic, dangerous, and potentially self-subverting. This is because, Nietzsche thinks, the opposite of these values—pain, suffering, inequality; in short, "evil"—is equally indispensable for the survival and happiness of the very herd that seeks to eradicate it. Accordingly, Nietzsche sharply criticizes Bentham's hedonic calculus (which correlates happiness maximization with pain minimization) as inconsistent with utilitarian goals. In its place, Nietzsche stresses the necessity of physical suffering and intellectual struggle for the self-improvement of each and, by extension, the vitality and happiness of the group. He accordingly rebukes the proponent of any morality that makes the reduction of suffering its fundamental goal: "[I]f you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, worthy of annihilation and as a defect of existence, then it is clear that besides your religion of pity you also harbor another religion in your heart that is perhaps the mother of the religion of pity: the *religion of comfortableness*"(*GS* 338). This religion—or, more specifically, *moral-ity*—of comfort thwarts its own goals by attempting to eliminate *all* suffering (*BGE* 44).[9] In a passage that anticipates what we now call the "hedonic paradox," according to which pleasure is diminished when we pursue it directly, Nietzsche ridicules those who, like Bentham, seek to maximize individual or collective happiness by minimizing pain: "[H]ow little you know of human happiness, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together" (*GS* 338).[10] He goes on to underline the idiosyncratic nature of suffering and the simplemindedness of those who heedlessly strive to relieve the suffering of others. "It never occurs to them," Nietzsche adds, "that . . . the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell" (*GS* 338).

Nietzsche's critique of utilitarianism is so far only as strong as his caricature of certain of its advocates. Even if some utilitarians (Bentham perhaps) believed happiness is maximized by eschewing pain and directly pursuing pleasure, others (such as Mill) have stressed the indirect felicific effects of intellectual struggle.[11] Moreover, sophisticated utilitarians since Mill have been remarkably willing to accommodate empirical data by adjusting their practical prescriptions. They concede that if aggregate utility fails to be maximized when each person devotes him or herself to minimizing the pain of others, then utilitarians must reject the blind benevolence Nietzsche criticizes. Sidgwick even embraces the possibility that "a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally [if their rejection will ultimately lead to greater aggregate happiness]."[12] In short, the fact that utilitarianism may require its own suppression as a basis for practical decision-making does not undermine utilitarianism as a *standard of value*, even if it undermines utilitarianism as a *decision procedure*.[13] As we shall see, however, Nietzsche thinks that adherents of utilitarianism are driven by concerns that are incompatible even with their philosophical commitment to utilitarianism as a standard of value.

2. The Utility of "Evil"

Nietzsche begins *The Gay Science* with the shocking statement, "Hatred, the mischievous delight in the misfortunes of others, the lust to rob and dominate, and whatever else is called evil belongs to the most amazing economy of the preservation of the species" (*GS* 1). In *Beyond Good and Evil,* he confirms that "everything evil, dreadful, tyrannical, beast of prey and serpent in man serves to enhance the species 'man' as much as does its opposite" (*BGE* 44).[14] The careful way in which Nietzsche frames these passages indicates that he is not (straightforwardly) advocating what the powerless consider evil, but highlighting how their own continued existence as part of the human species depends upon the very aspects of existence they denounce as "evil." The utilitarians he criticizes allegedly accept the Darwinian idea that survival is essentially a struggle, concede that nature is "red in tooth and claw,"[15] yet (subconsciously) strive to ensure the survival of their own species by minimizing the kind of suffering, exploitation, and mutual tyranny that has ensured the evolution and survival of the human herd.

Although Nietzsche's critique of the utilitarian concern to reduce collective suffering (*BGE* 225) often seems cruel or barbaric, his central criticisms are innocuous; he merely underscores the inconsistency of utilitarianism with other beliefs that many of its exponents hold dear. For example, from a Darwinian standpoint, Nietzsche speculates, innovation is essential for the adaptation and survival of any species. Yet slave moralities suspiciously brand cultural novelties "evil" because they threaten to perturb the existing social order (*GS* 4). This criticism chimes with Nietzsche's account of slave morality (according to which "evil" is a signification for all things feared by the powerless) in the sense that a novel idea or physical mutation is the cultural or biological analogue of a noble's ostensive power; it *may* be used to harm the powerless, but this "harm" may ultimately help them. Nietzsche explains:

> Nowadays there is a profoundly erroneous moral doctrine that is celebrated in England: this holds that judgments of "good" and "evil" sum up experiences of what is "expedient" and "inexpedient." One holds that what is called good preserves the species, while what is called evil harms the species. In truth, however, the evil instincts are expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable to as high a degree as the good ones; their function is merely different. (*GS* 4)

The crucial point to consider in interpreting this passage is that Nietzsche initially surrounds the terms "good" and "evil" with quotation marks to emphasize that he is referring to the judgments made by utilitarians as exemplars of slave morality.[16] The problem Nietzsche raises is general but important. If we take natural selection for granted, as did many of the English utilitarians Nietzsche has in mind, it seems naive to dismiss each novelty—*especially* those that produce inequality between individuals—as an evil to be eliminated. Nietzsche suggests that the utilitarian conviction in the equal value of each person might lead to an evolutionary catastrophe, not merely the exaltation of mediocrity and comfort (which he finds distasteful).

Thus Nietzsche thinks utilitarians are committed to ensuring the survival and happiness of human beings, yet they fail to grasp the unsavory consequences which that commitment may entail. In particular, utilitarians tend to ignore the fact that effective long-run utility promotion might require the forcible destruction of people who either enfeeble the gene pool or who have trouble converting resources into utility—incurable depressives, the severely handicapped, and exceptionally fastidious people all seem potential targets. Nietzsche also, however, criticizes utilitarianism by questioning the psychological possibility of the sort of disinterested altruism he thinks utilitarians endorse.

3. Egoistic Altruism

> In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which feeling, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included.[17]
>
> —John Stuart Mill

Utilitarianism, according to Nietzsche, is predicated upon the belief that purely disinterested altruistic action is possible. Nietzsche expresses suspicion about this kind of altruism by rhetorically asking, "Our love of our neighbor— is it not a lust for new *possessions?*"(*GS* 14). He explicates the metaphor of subjugating our neighbor by benefiting him in a passage ironically entitled *The good-natured*: "What is the difference between those good-natured people whose faces radiate good will, and other people?" Nietzsche answers, "[W]hat distinguishes [the 'good-natured' from others] is a rapid succession of the following states: the wish to appropriate (they do not scruple over the worth of the other person), quick appropriation, delight in their new possession, and action for the benefit of their latest conquest" (*GS* 192). His claim is that neighborly love is (often, at least) merely an oblique expression of the universal drive to conquer, an alternative manifestation of the will to power—a label Nietzsche attached to the underlying force that drives all biological phenomena.

In a section of *Daybreak* dubbed *Morality of sacrificial beasts*, Nietzsche explicitly links this primordial drive with the self-sacrificial beneficence praised by Christians and utilitarians alike:

> By devoting yourselves with enthusiasm and making a sacrifice of yourselves you enjoy the ecstatic thought of henceforth being at one with the powerful being, whether a god or a man, to whom you dedicate yourselves: you revel in the feeling of his power, to which your very sacrifice is an additional witness. The truth of the matter is that you only seem to sacrifice yourselves: in reality you transform yourselves into gods and enjoy yourselves as such. (*D* 215)

Nietzsche augments this analysis of altruism with the observation that "[t]he praise of the selfless . . . certainly was not born from the spirit of selflessness. The 'neighbor' praises selflessness because it brings him advantages" (*GS* 21).[18] Accordingly, Nietzsche suggests that "the *motives* of this morality stand opposed to its *principle*" (ibid.). Nietzsche is not necessarily criticizing benevolence as an impossibility. After all, he occasionally praises powerful or noble people for their ability to channel their impulse to cruelty back onto themselves—to "sublimate" it in the form of generosity—rather than using it to dominate their neighbors (*BGE* 229).[19] His criticism seems rather to be that the proponents of altruism (including utilitarians) are not straightforwardly motivated by the interests of others.

This criticism seems inconsistent with Nietzsche's previous postulation of an *unconscious* motivation among utilitarians to benefit the herd.[20] The problem is that Nietzsche often rebukes utilitarians for expounding a principle—the greatest happiness of the greatest number—that conflicts with their supposedly unconscious desire to secure the safety and strength of the herd, yet he also implicitly accuses utilitarians (as champions of altruism) of being unconsciously motivated by self-interest. Nietzsche confirms this puzzling accusation in a section of *Daybreak* in which he begins by alleging that "in England [it was] John Stuart Mill who gave the widest currency to the teaching of the sympathetic affects and of pity or the advantage of others as the principle of behavior" (*D* 132),[21] and then proceeds to characterize pity (which he considers the primary motive for altruistic action) as an indirect manifestation of self-interest. "The truth is: in the feeling of pity—I mean in that which is usually and misleadingly called pity—we are, to be sure, not consciously thinking of ourself [*sic*] but are doing so *very strongly unconsciously*"(*D* 133). If this is so, how can Nietzsche also maintain that utilitarians are unconsciously driven by concern for the good of the herd?

There are several ways of resolving this apparent contradiction. One is to say that Nietzsche posits a number of conflicting drives at work in the human psyche. He might argue that (most) people are unconsciously driven by a concern for the "herd," but that this concern is a manifestation of a still deeper drive to ensure their own preservation and power. Indeed, the hypothesis that both conscious and unconscious concern for others must have arisen from the benefit each tends to get from participating in mutually beneficial endeavors has gained currency among some contemporary biologists.[22]

Another, less satisfactory way of resolving the apparent conflict between the widely shared and largely unconscious drives to benefit both the herd and the self is to argue that Nietzsche did not believe either hypothesis, but that he was simply stepping into the perspective of a psychologist in order to criticize utilitarians from different viewpoints—if one explanation seemed weak, perhaps his readers would accept another.

While it is true that Nietzsche often vacillates between incompatible perspectives in order to oppose the principles of his philosophical opponents, the two psychological explanations in question seem to be stable features of Nietzsche's thought.[23] This is not to say that he was unwilling to revise either hypothesis, but rather that the paradox of supposing that Nietzsche deliberately and perpetually contradicted himself is even greater than the *prima facie* paradox engendered by Nietzsche's complex remarks about the unconscious concern for both social and selfish ends. The upshot of Nietzsche's dissection of altruism (which he considers the central utilitarian value) is that utilitarians are driven by inconsistent motives: each claims that we ought to be concerned with the happiness of others, but each actually does act to increase the happiness of others only when it leaves him or herself feeling better.[24]

4. Perfection and Culture

This set of interpretations challenges recent Nietzsche scholarship. In *Nietzsche and the "Problem" of Morality*, Frank Cameron argues that Nietzsche attacks utilitarianism, like Christianity, not because it involves theoretical or motivational inconsistency, but rather "on account of its harmful consequences for the exemplary human being."[25] In his discussion of Nietzsche's attitude toward utilitarianism, Cameron cites a passage in *The Will to Power* in which Nietzsche rebukes utilitarians because they "have not considered the conditions under which the perfect man will be in the majority" (*WP* 339). Cameron goes on to state that Nietzsche's "emphasis on the 'perfect man' or higher type is, I believe, the central motivation underlying his critique of utilitarianism, as I had argued was the case for his general critique of morality."[26]

The evidence with which Cameron supports his interpretation is interesting but ambiguous. For instance, in the passage cited above in which Nietzsche mentions "the perfect man," he is in fact criticizing utilitarians along with socialists for their faith in an ideal human type rather than advancing his own ideal. Nietzsche confronts "the very obscure and arbitrary idea that mankind has a single task to perform," and concludes that, although today "one believes one knows what the ultimate *desideratum* is with regard to the ideal man,... this belief . . . is only the consequence of a dreadful deterioration through the Christian ideal" (*WP* 339). The context of the fragment cited by Cameron—"utilitarians haven't considered the conditions under which the perfect man will be in the majority"—makes it clear that Nietzsche is not exhorting us to substitute the alleged utilitarian saint with his own vision of the perfect man, but arguing that all such ideals are equally naive.

There is, however, better evidence for Cameron's interpretation. Cameron cites a passage in an early work in which Nietzsche explores Schopenhauer's proposition that the goal of "culture" is "to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature" (*SE* 5). Nietzsche argues that utilitarian and socialist moral theories oppose this widely shared ethic of self-realization: "[E]verything resists this conclusion: here the ultimate goal is seen to lie in the greatest happiness of all or the greatest number [utilitarianism], there in the development of great communities [socialism]" (*SE* 6). Although this statement is merely a descriptive assessment of allegedly incompatible normative theories, Nietzsche quickly proceeds to criticize utilitarianism and socialism by taking for granted the truth of Schopenhauer's teleological view of culture. Nietzsche announces his allegiance to Schopenhauer in answering a question posed to his readers: "[H]ow can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be least squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority" (*SE* 6). This apparently corroborates Cameron's interpretation that Nietzsche opposed utilitarianism primarily because it impedes the development of those rare specimens that Schopenhauer considered the goal of culture, and for whom Nietzsche shared Schopenhauer's reverence: the artist, the philosopher, and the saint.

Nietzsche's somewhat mystical account of the "purpose" of culture as a handmaiden to nature is, however, as Kaufmann has said, "at best poetic,"[27] and probably not part of his mature philosophy. Nietzsche uses words like "melancholy" and "extravagance" to explain Nature's inefficiency at "producing" the rare specimens who "redeem" the culture that gives birth to them. Similarly, modern scientists often use such teleological metaphors as "parsimonious" and "economical" to describe the paucity of natural laws governing physical objects, without implying any belief in a designed or purposive nature. Nevertheless, the young Nietzsche does seem to indicate his faith in Schopenhauer's conception of a natural *telos* by stating that, "although the artist and the philosopher are evidence against the purposiveness of nature as regards the means it employs,... they are also first-rate evidence as to the wisdom of its purpose" (*SE* 6). Nietzsche surely came to repudiate Schopenhauer's teleological notion of culture as a metaphysical theory, even if he continued to embrace the (elitist) values it expresses. Long after he had distanced himself from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche described the "higher types" produced by culture as "fortunate accidents," rather than the intended consequences of a natural process (*A* 4, 5).

Regardless of whether Nietzsche had ever accepted Schopenhauer's teleological conception of culture as a metaphysical doctrine, a close reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator* reveals a deep ambiguity in Nietzsche's superficially normative claims. Nietzsche's language often obscures whether he is treating Schopenhauer's theory as a reflection of how we *experience* culture, or whether he accepts it as a correct account of the antecedent *goal* of culture that we discover through our participation in it:

> [A]ll who participate in the institution have . . . to help to prepare within themselves and around them for the birth of the genius and the ripening of his work. Not a few, including some from the ranks of the second- and third-rate talents, are destined for the task of rendering this assistance and only in such a subjection do they come to *feel* they have a duty and that their lives possess significance and a *goal*. [*SE* 6][28]

This passage suggests that the "goal" of which Nietzsche speaks is something that is *felt* rather than *understood*; that is, a description of how we think about culture rather than a metaphysical fact about it. Whether he takes Schopenhauer's theory of culture in the first or second way—as a phenomenal account of how we experience culture or a teleological theory about the goal of culture—Nietzsche's strongest arguments do not depend on the truth or superiority of his own views. Instead, as I have argued in the first three sections, his most important criticisms attempt to highlight the inconsistency between the overt goal of utilitarianism and the ultimate motives and goals of its proponents.

5. Moral Criteria

In a late note to himself, Nietzsche provisionally answers the question *What is the criterion of moral action?* by identifying two features: *universal validity* and *disinterestedness* (*WP* 261). Such considerations may underlie Tracy Strong's suggestion that Nietzsche criticizes utilitarianism because its practical principles may conflict with what he takes to be an essential feature of morality: universalizability. According to Strong, Nietzsche "implicitly accepts Kant's argument that the structure of moral action must be universalizable."[29] If Strong is right, Nietzsche rejects utilitarianism simply because it lacks the requisite theoretical structure to qualify as a moral doctrine. In making this claim, however, Strong fails to disentangle Nietzsche's many uses of "morality"—most notably, Nietzsche's generic use of "morality" as an anthropological concept, in contrast to his frequent use of "morality" to refer to one or more of a handful of contemporary European moral theories that purportedly descend from Christianity.[30]

Nietzsche follows up his question about the criterion of morality with the comment that "this is armchair moralizing. One must study peoples to see what the criterion is in every case" (*WP* 261). This does not mean that he thinks we will find a common criterion if we look hard enough, but rather that we must examine each culture or people to understand the genesis of their particular moral principles. Nietzsche's chief complaint against utilitarians concerns their insistence that a single set of moral principles, which arise from the interests of particular groups of people, is *universally applicable*, not that morality essentially consists of *universalizable principles of action*. Since Nietzsche does not consider Kant's universalizability requirement for maxims constitutive of morality, it can in no way motivate his rejection of utilitarianism as a moral theory.

Nietzsche often connects the alleged universality (as opposed to the Kantian universalizability) requirement for morality with what he takes to be distinctively *English* morality. Indeed, one of the more striking wars Nietzsche wages against utilitarian morality might be characterized as a rebellion against English moral imperialism. He warns that

although "morality in Europe today is herd animal morality," it is "only *one* kind of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other, above all *higher*, moralities are possible" (*BGE* 202). In *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche associates the philosophical tendency to reify moral doctrines that serve a localized and often transitory function into practical principles that are universally and timelessly binding with the vanity of English genealogists: "These historians of morality (mostly Englishman) do not amount to much.... Their usual mistaken premise is that they affirm some consensus of the nations, at least of the tame nations, concerning certain principles of morals, and then they infer from this that these principles must be unconditionally binding also for you and me" (*GS* 345). Nietzsche elaborates this point elsewhere with specific reference to utilitarians:

> Ultimately they all want *English* morality to prevail: inasmuch as mankind, or "the general utility," or "the happiness of the greatest number," no! the happiness of *England* would best be served; they would like with all their might to prove to themselves that to strive after *English* happiness, I mean after comfort and fashion . . . indeed that all virtue there has ever been on earth has consisted in just such a striving. (*BGE* 228)[31]

In criticizing the English attempt to impose its provincial moral principles on all people, Nietzsche implicitly condemns every attempt to generate a universal criterion of morality as a contrivance arising from the widespread desire for a comprehensive moral standard. Nietzsche observes, "[E]verywhere today the goal of morality is defined in approximately the following way: it is the preservation and advancement of mankind; but this definition is an expression of the desire for a formula, and nothing more" (*D* 106). The need for a formula is a precarious psychological quirk, not a justification for requiring universality of any possible moral theory. On this interpretation, Nietzsche objects not to the theoretical structure of utilitarianism, but rather to the utilitarian aspiration to universalize its principles by grounding them in something more than the contingent needs of a particular group.[32]

Concluding Remarks

Instead of emphasizing Nietzsche's vitriolic (and sometimes personal) attacks on Mill and Bentham, I have tried to synthesize some of his most provocative criticisms into a coherent set of challenges to utilitarianism. These include contesting the utilitarian pretension to ethical universality (Section 5), raising theoretical doubts about the sort of disinterested or purely altruistic action on which he believes utilitarianism is ultimately predicated (Section 3), and questioning whether utilitarians would be willing to take the unpleasant steps that their goal of long-run utility maximization actually requires (Sections 1 and 2).

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NOTES

1. For example, Nietzsche unfairly accuses Bentham's followers in England of having "not a new idea, no trace of a subtler version or twist of an old idea, not even a real history of what had been thought before" (*BGE* 228), and refers to Mill as "the flathead John Stuart Mill" (*WP* 30).

2. This essay is essentially exegetical. It sketches an interpretation of Nietzsche's critique of utilitarianism *as he understood it*,rather than attempting to refute utilitarianism with Nietzsche's help. As I later indicate, sophisticated versions of utilitarianism, such as those developed by Sidgwick and Smart, can only be refuted by denying the validity or authority of the moral intuitions on which they are based, not by pointing out—as Nietzsche often does— an apparent conflict between the moral commitments and the nonmoral beliefs and concerns of its adherents.

3. This interpretation often stems from his polemical portrait of himself as an "immoralist" in *BGE* 226 et al. Nietzsche's self-declared "immorality" is usually an abbreviated or impassioned way of expressing his opposition to *Christian* morality and its kindred brands of slave morality. Foot argues that Nietzsche opposes all morality in her essay "Nietzsche's Immoralism" (in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality,* ed. Richard Schacht [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994]). But this may be a semantic dispute. In her essays "Morality and Art" and "Moral Relativism," Foot defends a view of morality that takes for granted the common concepts currently associated with the word "morality" as delimiting its possible extension. However, Nietzsche seems willing to extend the common usage of "morality" to express virtually any strong personal conviction. See, for example, *GS* 338: "my morality says to me," and *BGE* 202. Kathleen Higgins and Robert Solomon distinguish Nietzsche's use of *morality* (lower-case m) as an anthropological concept, from *Morality* ("capital M") as a "bourgeois" doctrine of modern European culture that conceives of moral principles as universally binding. They claim that Nietzsche only attacks the latter. *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 103–5.

4. Danto likewise construes Nietzsche's Immoralism as an attack largely directed against Judeo-Christian morality. He cites a passage in which Nietzsche says, "without the errors which lie in the presuppositions of morality, man would have remained an animal" (*H* 40), in order to show that Nietzsche thinks some kind of morality—some "noble lie" about human purpose—is necessary for human advancement. *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press), 160. See note 30 for more on Nietzsche's variegated use of "morality."
Utilitarianism, in *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill,* ed. Dale Miller (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 250.

5. I use "values" in this section to mean moral or character virtues, as opposed to value judgments.

6. Nietzsche more explicitly associates Christian and utilitarian concepts of the good when he claims that Mill's "insipid and cowardly concept 'Man' . . . is still the cult of Christian morality under a new name" (*WP* 340).

7. Quoted by Henry Sidgwick in *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 417, and again by Mill in *Utilitarianism*, 299. To bolster Nietzsche's characterization of utilitarianism as a species of slave morality with the values of a herd animal, we might note that Bentham defines the interest of each in relation to the group in which he or she lives: "The interest of the community is . . . the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it." *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*,chap. 1, 4.

8. The fact that Nietzsche associates the Golden Rule with Mill (which I quoted at the beginning of this section) suggests that he had in fact read Mill's *Utilitarianism* firsthand. However, in the relevant passage, Nietzsche misleadingly attributes to Mill and Christianity the silver rule—"do *not* do unto others as you would *not* have them do unto you"—rather than the golden rule—"do unto others as you would be done by." Nietzsche's contention that the golden rule is founded in prudence would apply much better to the rule in its negative ("silver") formulation, as Thomas Hobbes characterized it in *Leviathan*.

9. Philippa Foot makes a similar point about Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality: its aim or function is undercut by its own norms, which encourage the expression of power in the form of pity. Pity in turn fosters parasitism and complacence —both of which decrease one's power. See "Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values," in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

10. I should emphasize that Nietzsche does not name Bentham in the passage cited in this paragraph. However, he does explicitly associate utilitarianism primarily with Bentham (*BGE* 228), and characterizes the fundamental utilitarian goal as a desire to "abolish suffering" (*BGE* 225). The evidence suggests that he never read Bentham or Mill directly. See Frank Cameron, *Nietzsche and the "Problem" of Morality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 129n.

11. Utilitarianism, 240–42. Mill also acknowledges that an unhappy but noble character—a dissatisfied Socrates—might contribute to the collective happiness of mankind: "the utilitarian standard . . . is not the agent's own 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" (244). The problem with Mill's assertion is not merely that utilitarians can only tolerate or encourage the development of noble individuals of whom Nietzsche might approve to the extent that they *really do* tend to maximize aggregate happiness, but that—unless he is committed to the view that some kinds of character (like some kinds of pleasure) are intrinsically superior to others, he must redefine "nobleness" to mean something like "that which maximizes aggregate utility." But in this case the compatibility between utilitarianism and nobleness of character is vacuous.

12. *The Methods of Ethics*, 490.

13. In a deeply ambiguous note (*WP* 724), Nietzsche seems to suggest the possibility that utilitarianism's emphasis on outcomes rather than intentions or goals makes it a kind of sham moral theory. Derek Parfit, however, correctly notes that although such consequentialist theories are "self-effacing" they are not *ipso facto* self-undermining, since "it is not the aim of a theory to be believed." See *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 24.

14. In several places Nietzsche suggests that natural selection operates on the level of *species* rather than clans, individuals, or genes. This idea is no longer scientifically credible. The important points are that Nietzsche attributes a concern for the herd, however we demarcate it, and that egalitarian and utilitarian moralists seem particularly motivated by this concern.

15. We owe this famous quotation not to Darwin, but to his contemporary Alfred Lord Tennyson. Bentham, of course, died before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, but utilitarianism in England flourished *after* Darwin's publication. Regardless of Darwin's influence, it is safe to say that most utilitarians were naturalists who understood the ruthless competition between organisms for scarce resources.

16. It might be thought that I am applying Nietzsche's classification of "master" and "slave" morality anachronistically since he does not articulate this distinction until *BGE* 260. But this is not so. First of all, Nietzsche introduces the conceptual distinction (without naming it) as far back as 1878 in *Human, All-Too-Human* (45); second, even if the contrast between master and slave morality was not in the back of his mind while composing this passage, he stipulates that the novel adaptations in question are feared by those who might be "conquered" and who therefore deem them "evil," thus anticipating the distinction which he more fully develops in the *Genealogy*.

17. *Utilitarianism*, 266–67.

18. GM II.18, *D* 215 contain similar accounts of the connection between cruelty and benevolence. Cameron stresses the important point that Nietzsche's *psychological* egoism does not entail *ethical* egoism. See his *Nietzsche and the "Problem" of Morality*, 63. It is unclear, however, what kind of psychological egoism Nietzsche actually defends. Sometimes he seems to think that people only benefit others when they anticipate some benefit for themselves. On other occasions, however, he suggests a less cynical view, like Aristotle's, according to which people's desire to benefit others stems from a self-interested mechanism, but is not a desire to benefit oneself. I am not sure Nietzsche made any such distinctions himself.

19. This point is highly problematic. We have already seen that Nietzsche often praises, or at least acknowledges, the necessity of more powerful people exploiting the weak in various ways. This need not take the form of cruelty, but

would not (indeed *could* not, so long as Nietzsche advanced considerations like those above) involve purposely benefiting those deemed physically or mentally inferior. On Nietzsche's concept of sublimation, see chapter 7 of Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*. It is also worth pointing out the parallel between Nietzsche's concept of sublimation and Aristotle's virtue of megalopsychia.

20. Nietzsche's use of *unbewusst*, which Hollingdale usually translates as "unconscious," is equivalent to what we more often call "subconscious" in English. I use the terms interchangeably.

21. Nietzsche's characterization of Mill seems fairly accurate. Here is an apposite example from Mill: "[E]ducation 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 happiness and good of the whole,... 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" (*Utilitarianism*, 250).

22. See especially Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Robert Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971). Of course, such evolutionary speculation invites the charge that even if Nietzsche is right about the origin of our concern for others, he has not shown that such concern is unjustified.

23. As the range of my quotations suggests, these opinions are expressed at least as early as *Daybreak* (1881), and they pepper his writings until the end of his productive life (1889). Solomon and Higgins claim that Nietzsche rejects *consistency* as a virtue. They cite Nietzsche's tendency to contradict himself in addition to his veneration for Emerson (who said in an essay Nietzsche revered: "[W]ith consistency a great soul has nothing to do") as their primary reasons. *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 45, 181. However, even if it is true that Nietzsche (in an artistic pose) eschewed theoretical consistency in his writings, if we are to extrapolate a distinctively Nietzschean set of objections to utilitarianism, it seems best to do so from a perspective he consistently occupied.

24. Although Mill, for example, argues that altruism is only an instrument to aggregate happiness maximization—that "self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end" (*Utilitarianism*, 248), he also declares self-sacrifice a fundamental utilitarian virtue: "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" (*Utilitarianism*, 249). Were a utilitarian utopia of the sort Mill alludes to ever come into being, it would apparently be achieved by cultivating enough fellow feeling to render altruism superfluous.

25. Nietzsche and the "Problem" of Morality, 84.

26. Ibid., 133.

27. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 146.

28. P. 176. (emphasis added).

29. Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 93.

30. Schacht identifies at least five distinct ways in which Nietzsche uses "morality," one of which refers to principles with which people like Nietzsche identify themselves; i.e., "human beings capable of attaining a higher form of humanity than that which is the general rule." *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 1983), 418. More recently, Frank Cameron has devoted the entire first chapter of his book *Nietzsche and the "Problem" of Morality* to Nietzsche's various uses of "morality."

31. Nietzsche later puts it in *The Twilight of the Idols*, "Mankind does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that."

32. Although utilitarians differ over the boundaries of the class to which the theory applies (all *sentient* beings, all *rational* beings, etc.), none contests the universality requirement for the class of beings whose welfare they seek to advance.

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Note: References to *A, BGE, GM, GS, SE,* and *WP* are by section rather than page number.

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