

VOLUME II

History of Ethics

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Contents Volume II

PART FOUR: MODERN THEORIES

X. Utilitarian and Subjectivist Ethics in Britain	11
XI. German Idealistic Ethics	35
XII. Franco-Latin Spiritistic Ethics	55
XIII. Societal Ethics in Europe	77

PART FIVE: CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

XIV. Axiological Ethics	105
XV. Self-Realization and Utilitarian Ethics	123
XVI. Naturalistic Ethics	143
XVII. Analytic Ethics	167
XVIII. Existential and Phenomenological Ethics	191
<i>Notes</i>	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	237
<i>Index</i>	285

Part Four
Modern Theories

CHAPTER X

Utilitarian and Subjectivist Ethics in Britain

It was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the contrast between the utilitarian and the intuitionist approaches to ethics came to the fore. This division is not restricted to British thinkers but it is most evident in their attempts to do practical philosophy. The utilitarian thinks that judgments about human actions to the effect that they are good, right, and ought to be done (or contrariwise, that they are bad, wrong, and ought to be omitted) are justified by considering the knowable consequences of such actions to the agent or to other persons, or to both. These consequences or results may be viewed either in terms of the advantage of the individual agent (egoistic utilitarianism), or in the light of the advantage of a plurality of persons other than the agent (universal utilitarianism). Sometimes the first type is called hedonism and the second simply "utilitarianism."¹ In its broadest sense utilitarianism maintains "that the right or wrong of an action is to be judged by its utility in the production of happiness."² J. S. Mill thought that he had picked up the term "utilitarianism" from John Galt's novel *Annals of the Parish* (1821), but it had been used as early as 1781 by Jeremy Bentham.³

Ethical intuitionism, on the other hand, is the view that a person directly knows or feels the good (or "oughtness") of an action or moral judgment, without any need to consider other items, such as consequences, in justifi-

cation. As Henry Sidgwick understood the term: "Writers who maintain that we have 'intuitive knowledge' of the rightness of actions usually mean that this rightness is ascertained by simply 'looking at' the actions themselves, without considering their ulterior consequences."⁴ Broadly understood, intuitionist ethics would include some right reason theories, some types of deontology, moral sensism, and psychological approbative types of ethics. For the present chapter, we will simply understand intuitionism as the ethics that concentrates on the subjective attitude of the moral agent, rather than on the results of his action, in discussing what is morally good or bad. In the eighteenth century, what is under discussion is not always the individual action but may be the premises of moral reasoning. This is why the term "subjectivist" is used in the title of this chapter: it simply means an ethical approach that starts from something experienced within the moral person or subject. We shall see that many ethicists manage to combine intuitionism with utilitarianism; it is only as pure positions that they are mutually incompatible.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Richard Cumberland had introduced the theory, but not the name, of universal utilitarianism into English ethics. In his Latin *Treatise of the Laws of Nature* (1672), he had argued that it is not "possible to determine what is the best thing a man can do in each instance, unless the effects, remote as well as near, which may result in every variety of circumstances, be foreseen and compared among themselves."⁵ This statement of the method of utilitarianism is followed by a remarkable enunciation of the principle of the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Cumberland calls this proposition the "fountain of all natural laws."

The greatest benevolence of every rational agent towards all, constitutes the happiest state of all in general and of each in particular, as far as is in their power to procure it; and it is necessarily requisite in

order to attain the happiest state, to which they can aspire; and therefore the common good of all is the supreme law.⁶

This brand of utilitarianism (combined in Cumberland with a right reason view of moral law) was not acceptable to David Hume (1711-1776). He tended to distrust deductive reasoning in ethics and he could not see why the common good should take precedence over private interests. The complicated ethical position which Hume eventually reached is still a most important factor in the thinking of twentieth-century British ethicists. He rejected the notion that reason can command or move the human will and insisted that ethics should concentrate on certain impressions or feelings of approval or disapproval within the agent. In Hume's thinking, "an action, or sentiment, or character, is virtuous or vicious, because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind."⁷ He adopted, then, an ethical position which is subjectivist in the sense that we have just seen.

The problem of interpreting Hume's ethics is made more difficult by his own later dissatisfaction with the doctrine of his famous *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-1740). Its third book is frequently made the basis for explications of Hume's ethical position but Henry Sidgwick⁸ claims that the *Treatise* was "expressly repudiated" (apparently referring to Hume's admitted disappointment with the reception of the *Treatise*, as noted in the *Autobiography*), and Sidgwick confines his analysis to the *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). We will take a look at the doctrine of both works. There is also some material of ethical significance in the popularly written *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741-1742).

To understand Hume's argument in his practical philosophy we should think briefly of his view of man. Both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) give a phenomenalist account of the

human agent. Hume tried to use Newton's method of empirical science in the whole field of philosophy. What is given in initial human experience is a series of "perceptions." These are both cognitive and emotional presentations. They combine in various patterns of association and thus form more complicated events in experience. Psychology (not yet developed as a distinct discipline in Hume's day) would be the study of these atoms of experience and their various modes of association. There is no mind, in the sense of an immaterial substance or power that thinks or feels these data; there is no person, in the sense of an individual being endowed with intelligence and volitional freedom. Hume continues to speak of persons and selves but in a very special way. A mind or person is a series of separately existing and discrete perceptions, occurring in such a way that one perception seems to give rise to the next.⁹ When perceptions occur forcefully they are called impressions; when they are weak they are termed ideas. Perceptions are related according to three modes of association: resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause-effect.

In Book III of the *Treatise* (sec. 1) we are told that "reason or science is nothing but the comparing of ideas, and the discovery of their relations." So viewed, reason is wholly inactive and cannot be a source of moral experience. As Hume now says:

Those who affirm that virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason; that there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things which are the same to every rational being that considers them; that the immutable measures of right and wrong impose an obligation, not only on human creatures, but also on the Deity himself: All these systems concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discerned merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison. . . . Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the

actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence.¹⁰

This neatly disposes of Cudworth and all such rationalists. From this point onward, in British ethics, it will be generally agreed that Hume has shown the folly of speaking about natural laws, right reason, and all such nonsense.

In this same section of the *Treatise*, Hume introduces the approbative portion of his theory. To say that an act or character is vicious simply means that one has a feeling or sentiment of blame in viewing it. Vice and virtue are perceptions in the mind, just as sensible qualities (sounds, colors, heat) are perceptions and not present in objects. So, in the second section of Book III, he offers his version of a moral sense theory. This is the function of feeling pain at the perception of an action which is then called vicious, and of feeling pleasure in viewing another action which is virtuous. Some such moral feelings are original instincts and are "natural"; other virtuous feelings arise by means of artifice from the needs of mankind and are called "artificial." Justice is an example of such an artificially contrived virtue.¹¹

Book II of the *Treatise* is devoted to the passions as moral principles. If reason cannot be a source of action, then feelings can. Some passions are primary and simple feelings and others are derivative and follow upon ideas. There are also self-regarding and other-regarding feelings. Of the latter, sympathy is important in Hume's ethics. As he sees it, sympathy arises when there occur ideas of the effects in others of something such as a painful surgical operation: these ideas may give rise to stronger impressions which, in turn, precede feelings of pain in the observer who is not under surgery.¹² As a vicarious emotion and other-directed, sympathy is an important principle for moral feelings and actions. Along with self-interest and

custom, sympathy is used to explain the working of moral sense.¹³

One final contribution of the *Treatise* to the history of ethics may be noted. In a famous passage he states the "is-ought" problem very clearly:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. . . . As this *ought* or *ought not* expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it.¹⁴

Many ethicists, particularly in the twentieth century, have attempted to solve this problem of the relation of *ought* to *is*. In alternative terminology it may be stated as the problem of how to get *values* from *facts*.

The *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* is Hume's own revision of the third book of the *Treatise*, done after ten years in which few readers paid any attention to this new start in British ethics. There are important differences between the two works. Instead of "sympathy" the *Enquiry* dwells upon "humanity" as a sentiment which all men have in common and which gives a sort of open and public character to moral attitudes. The distinction between "natural" and "artificial" is excluded as a verbalism in the *Enquiry*. More important, the handling of justice shifts from a Hobbesian emphasis on self-interest modified by sympathy as a basis for the virtue of justice to

the concept of utility to society.¹⁵ Utility has the meaning of "tendency to *ulterior* good"; it is the basis for several moral virtues but it is not the sole source of virtue; other qualities—courtesy, modesty, cheerfulness—contribute to virtue.

The following summary passage shows how Hume tried to combine a sentimental approbative theory of ethics with a measure of public agreement that is closely related to utility.

The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established.¹⁶

Hume's influence in ethics has been extensive and profound. His stress on social utility leads into British utilitarianism in its several varieties. His emphasis on feelings of approval or disapproval is eventually taken up by psychological approbative ethics and, especially, by the school of emotive ethicists. In the *Essays, Moral and Political* ("Of the Original Contract") these two aspects of his thought are clearly brought out. Of two kinds of moral duties, one proceeds from natural instinct and is quite independent of ideas of obligation or public utility: love of children, gratitude to benefactors, and pity for the unfortunate are given as examples. A second type of moral duty is performed solely from a sense of obligation, an awareness of the necessities of human society. This is Hume's ethics in brief.

An almost immediate reaction to Hume's ethics is found in the *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1758)

by a Unitarian minister named Richard Price (1723-1791). Price disagrees with the epistemology and psychology which he finds in Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. Bluntly, Price says that Hume's assertion that all our ideas are either impressions or copies of impressions is "destitute of all proof."¹⁷ Combining in a surprisingly consistent way the views of Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, and Butler, Price proposes a theory of "eternal and immutable" morality. He tries to reinstate "understanding" as the human power to grasp the unchanging natures of actions and realities. What Price contributes to the discussion is something which may have been implicit in earlier writers but is only now made explicit. The "understanding" is not the same as the "power of reasoning." By the latter we investigate certain relations between objects—but that is not what understanding does. As he explains it, to understand is to see something:

As bodily sight discovers to us visible objects; so does understanding (the eye of the mind, and infinitely more penetrating) discover to us intelligible objects; and thus, in a like sense with bodily vision, becomes the inlet of new ideas.¹⁸

In effect, Price teaches that men enjoy an intellectual intuition of certain principles of moral judgment. This, plus his insistence that "rectitude" must be the motive for virtuous activity, may be the reason why some historians treat Price as a precursor to Kant.¹⁹

More impressed by Hume's position was Adam Smith (1723-1790), who is well known as a pioneer political economist but not so well recognized as an ethician. Smith was professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow and wrote his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) long before his famous *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Taking the principle of "sympathy" from Hume's *Treatise*, Smith investigated this altruistic feeling at great length and made it the sole foundation of ethical judgment.²⁰ He did not accept a special "moral sense," as such, but spoke of a sense of

propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility. In fact, Adam Smith disliked the idea that usefulness to society might be taken as a criterion of morality. We make certain judgments of approbation or disapprobation of the conduct of other persons and these other-directed views and feelings are fundamental to ethics. When we attempt to judge our own conduct, we reverse the process, as it were, and try to see ourselves as others see us. Here Smith made considerable use of the "impartial spectator"—a disinterested observer whose attitudes provide a foundation for the sense of obligation and for ethics.²¹ David Hume had used the idea of the impartial spectator throughout the third book of the *Treatise*. Adam Smith was the last important exponent of the moral sense theory, even though he substituted other terms (such as the sense of propriety) for it.²² Smith's "impartial spectator" was not far removed from an active Presbyterian conscience, and that is close to a sense of morality.

Much of the activity in British ethics at this time centered in Scotland. Adam Smith's successor as professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow was Thomas Reid (1710-1796), founder of the school of "common-sense" philosophy. (Actually, a French Jesuit named Claude Buffier had first proposed the appeal to common sense against Cartesianism. Buffier's ideas are found in the *Traité des premières vérités* published in 1717. Both Reid and Dugald Stewart read Buffier.) The platform of this "common-sense" philosophy was very much like one part of the teaching of Boethius. In reaction to what seemed the excessive subtlety and complication of British epistemology from Locke to Hume, Reid asserted (in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764) that it is wrong to make "ideas" the objects of human knowledge. As far as Reid was concerned, when I see a tree I know an existing thing and not an idea.²³ In the moral area, there are certain universally accepted principles which need no philosophic proof. An example is: "No man

ought to be blamed for what it was not in his power to hinder."²⁴ Man's moral faculty is his conscience which, on the basis of the common principles of right and wrong, dictates man's duty. Moral instruction and guidance are needed to develop good ability in moral reasoning but the whole business is not as tricky and sophisticated as Hume would suggest.²⁵

At Edinburgh, Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) taught moral philosophy from 1764 to 1785 and was much influenced by his friend David Hume. Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) became professor in 1785 and introduced a modified version of Reid's common-sense ethics. His *Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man* (1828) was one of the first English textbooks in ethics used in the United States. Stewart taught that ethical propositions are just as true as mathematical ones: "In both cases we have a perception of *truth*, and are impressed with an irresistible conviction that the truth is immutable and independent of the will of any being whatever."²⁶ Stewart's pupil Thomas Brown (1778-1820) carried on the common-sense tradition at Edinburgh and exerted some influence on French ethicists of the nineteenth century, such as Victor Cousin. At Aberdeen, James Beattie (1735-1803) was a critic of Hume and taught ethics in the common-sense tradition.

In 1768 John Witherspoon (1723-1794) came to America from Scotland to serve as president (and *ex officio* to teach philosophy) at the College of New Jersey, later to be known as Princeton University. A century later, James McCosh (1811-1894) brought the common-sensism of the Scottish school to the same American institution.²⁷ In this manner, the realistic, Biblically oriented, middle-of-the-road ethics from Scotland became a pioneer influence on higher education in the United States.

The great conservative thinker in British politics, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), was not a great ethician but he deserves to be mentioned here. He was not—contrary to

what one recent study has tried to show—an exponent of the ethics of Thomas Aquinas.²⁸ There are superficial resemblances among all supporters of tradition and of natural law—but the differences can be more remarkable. Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) and his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1790) reveal a man who is eager to reinstate the classical function of "understanding" into English practical philosophy.²⁹ The idea that "utility" is the criterion of moral judgment is clearly under widespread discussion at this time, for Burke takes a whole section to reject it. He shares, however, his era's general distrust of any attempt to found ethics on metaphysical abstractions, as this text from the *Appeal* indicates:

Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like the ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions are not made by the process of logic, but by the rules of prudence.³⁰

Much more confident of his knowledge of ethics was the Anglican cleric and Cambridge tutor William Paley (1743-1805). He is usually remembered for his version of the argument for the existence of God from mechanical design in the universe; however, Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) was used as a textbook at Cambridge for more than fifty years.³¹ Rejecting the notion of a moral sense, Paley made "utility" (in regard to both the particular and the general consequences of actions) the test of moral goodness.³² The will of God determines the difference between moral right and wrong. It is conveyed to men in two ways: as revealed in Scripture and as known through the "light of nature." Virtue consists in "doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will

of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness." The ethics of William Paley is a neat combination of Christian morality with the principle of social utility.

A major figure in the history of British ethics, even though he did not pretend to be an ethician, was Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). His primary interest was in the philosophy of law and politics but this required him to develop certain notions as to the relationship between morality and social organization. Estimates of the value of his suggestions in ethics vary widely. John Stuart Mill has called Bentham "the great subversive," yet Mill learned a great deal from Bentham.³³ It has been asserted that Bentham deliberately reduced all moral problems to technical ones.³⁴ In any case, the treatise that is ethically significant is Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). John Bowring's compilation, entitled *Deontology* (1834), is of doubtful value as a source.

In an anonymous publication in the year 1776 (*Fragment on Government*), Bentham revealed his early distrust of "natural law" thinking. The *Fragment* is an open attack on Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780) for his advocacy of natural law in his famous *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769). Blackstone had maintained that

the law of nature being coeval with mankind, and dictated by God himself, is of course superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times: no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this; and such of them as are valid derive all their force and all their authority, mediately or immediately, from this original.³⁵

At one point in the *Fragment* Bentham characterized a view such as Blackstone's as "a sink that with equal facility will swallow any garbage that is thrown into it."³⁶

Bentham helped to introduce the teaching that all laws

governing human conduct are commands of a sovereign, backed by sanctions, and retained by a habit of obedience. The test of a good law is its "utility," which means "that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness . . . to the party whose interest is considered."³⁷ The interest involved may be that of the individual person or that of the community but Bentham is inclined to take the interest of the individual as more basic, since the community is nothing more than a collection of individuals. He admits that he took the notion of "utility" from the French thinker Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771), who had defined probity as that which has some usefulness (*utilité*) for the individual or his country.³⁸ In his treatise *De l'Homme* (1772), Helvétius described virtue in terms of "the confused idea of some quality useful to society."³⁹ In point of fact, the notion of utility as an ethical principle was becoming a commonplace in the late eighteenth century.

Perhaps Bentham is best known in ethics for his description of pleasure and pain in terms of quantity, and for his consequent theory of a "calculus of pleasures." As Mill noted,⁴⁰ Bentham could see no qualitative distinctions in pleasures: "quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry." So Bentham developed a method of calculating the amount of pleasure to the individual by using the four determinants: (1) intensity, (2) duration, (3) certainty or uncertainty, and (4) propinquity or remoteness. In relation to the interest of a group of persons, Bentham added two more circumstances of pleasure to be included: (5) fecundity and (6) purity. To decide morally between two proposed actions, then, one has only to add up and compare their respective quantities of pleasure and select the greatest!

Motivation is not ignored by Bentham; the tenth chapter of his *Principles of Morals* is devoted to this subject. He thinks that "motive" has two senses: literally it means an incident that tends to arouse pleasure or pain, and so move

the will; figuratively motive designates any fictitious entity within the mind (such as avarice, indolence, benevolence) considered as prompting the mind to take a certain course. Bentham makes an extended list of such motives at the end of his *Principles of Morals*.

Perhaps the most competent follower of Bentham was James Mill (1773-1836), the father of John Stuart. The elder Mill published an *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829) which simplified associationistic psychology by concentrating on the relation of contiguity. Personal pleasure and pain clearly function as the internal motives of moral action. Education is the chief means for the development of a better awareness of how to employ the utilitarian principle.

Not all British practical thinkers at this time agreed with Bentham. William Godwin (1756-1836) was also a utilitarian in his ethics, and, like Bentham, he was not primarily interested in ethical theory. Godwin's *Inquiry concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* first appeared in 1793. It was intended as a rebuttal to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Godwin was an ardent advocate of political and social freedom. However, he disagreed with Bentham's espousal of individual pleasure and pain as the key factors in moral judgment. Godwin's utilitarianism used the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, long before John Stuart Mill formulated it. Of course, it should be remembered that this formula occurs in Bentham. The first note (written by Bentham) to the *Principles of Morals* speaks of "the greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle" and explains it.⁴¹ However, Bentham had put little stress on the social dimension of utility, whereas Godwin insisted that personal pleasure and pain are not morally good motives for action. The latter thought that "reason" was the best moral motivation and in this he approached the better-known position of Immanuel Kant.⁴²

One of the first British scholars who really knew something about Kant's ethics was the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). As his *Philosophical Lectures* (1818) reveal, Coleridge was reading Kant as early as 1804. He was much taken by Kant's arguments and tried to make them known in England. However, it was not until late in the nineteenth century that Kant's ethics made much impression on the British universities. Professors of ethics (John Grote, 1813-1866, at Cambridge; and James Ferrier, 1808-1864, at St. Andrews) distrusted the apparent agnosticism in the sage of Königsberg. Another well-known philosopher, Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856), was somewhat influenced by Kant but chiefly in the area of epistemology and in the direction of phenomenalism. Hamilton's views were brought to a wider audience by means of J. S. Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). As far as ethics is concerned, Hamilton combined Kant's teaching on the absolute and necessary character of primary moral principles with the down-to-earth moderation of Reid.

The "positivistic" quality of Bentham's theory of law was found also in the writing of John Austin (1790-1859). His *Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832) is not only the initiation of analytic jurisprudence; it is a forthright essay in utilitarianism. More clearly than Bentham, Austin taught that whatever the sovereign commands and can enforce is the law. This is what "positivism" means in the philosophy of law: there can be no appeal to a law of nature, a "higher law," or to the will of God. Even in morals, what the state law enjoins is what is right. Austin obviously influenced John Stuart Mill. One commentator writes that "Mill learned more of moral philosophy [from John Austin] than he could have learned from Bentham."⁴³

A British Catholic thinker who had some impact on the ethics of this period was John Henry Newman (1801-1890). At Oxford he had been a pupil of Richard

Whately (1787-1863), who was an outstanding logician and an authority on the ethics of Paley.⁴⁴ So, the ethics that Newman originally learned was doubtless a Christian approbative theory. However, in his *Grammar of Assent* (1870) Newman showed a highly personal approach to some of the problems of ethics. First of all, he distinguished notional from real assent: the former is abstract and unrelated to life, the latter is directed toward things and is concrete and unconditional.⁴⁵ There is a certain impatience with conceptual knowledge and system building, in Newman, that resembles the attitude of the twentieth-century existentialist. Reason is able to create a world of ideas for itself; it is also able "to investigate its reasonings."⁴⁶ It is the second function that interests Newman. He thinks that informal inference is more important (especially in practical matters) than the syllogistic of Aristotle. So, we are offered the theory of the "illative sense"—the mind's power of concluding to a concrete and certain judgment. As Newman sees the matter:

An ethical system may supply laws, general rules, guiding principles, a number of examples, suggestions, landmarks, limitations, cautions, distinctions, solutions of critical or anxious difficulties; but who is to apply them to a particular case? Whither can we go, except to the living intellect, our own, or another's? . . . It is a capacity sufficient for the occasion, deciding what ought to be done here and now, by this given person, under these given circumstances.⁴⁷

Newman adds that this illative sense (which is a function of reason) is very much like Aristotle's *phronēsis*, the habit of reasoning well about practical matters. It is not really ethical theory, then, but the problem of applying any theory to life, that concerns Newman. In this he much resembles St. Augustine. His influence on the moral thinking of recent Catholic philosophers, such as Maurice

Blondel (1861-1949) and Erich Przywara (1889-), is widely recognized.

Another British ethicist, James Martineau (1805-1900), produced a much read survey of the subject in his *Types of Ethical Theory* (1885). Besides its obvious historical value, his work brings the whole problem of psychological motivation to the forefront in British ethics. To Martineau, morality is not an affair of the consequences, or even of the human action in itself. "That in which we discern the moral quality is, we have found, the *inner spring of action*. . . ."⁴⁸ The motive is known as good or evil by an immediate intuition. In addition to this view, Martineau is also recognized for his advocacy of indeterminism in the perennial problem of free will.⁴⁹

The outstanding personality in nineteenth-century British ethics, however, was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). A precocious child educated under the direction of his father, James, but without any training in revealed religion, John Stuart Mill made ethics the focal point of his personal interests. His contributions to theory of knowledge, psychology, and logic are well known. Against the realism of Hamilton, he argued that what we know consists of mental states, and his notion of man and his mind is basically that of David Hume. In logic Mill's theory of induction is a landmark.

We will confine our examination of Mill's ethical theory to the two key works. *On the Logic of the Moral Sciences* is actually the last part of his *System of Logic*, first published in 1843. At this time he was in close touch with the French social positivist Auguste Comte, and Mill's treatment of the methods of social science shows this influence. The other work is from twenty years later: it is the essay entitled *Utilitarianism* (1863).

The *Logic of the Moral Sciences* is prefaced by a lengthy quotation in French from Antoine Nicholas de Condorcet (1743-1794), who, in his *Historical Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1794), had insisted that the phi-

losopher should form his opinions on the basis of experience. With this empirical note established, Mill argues that a general science of human nature is possible, and that within this science the subject of psychology would be "the uniformities of succession, the laws, whether ultimate or derivative, according to which one mental state succeeds another—is caused by, or at least is caused to follow, another."⁵⁰ Next, Mill proposes a new science, "Ethology," which is to study the formation of character, national and collective, as well as individual character. This ethology is to be deductive in its method, contrasting with psychology, which is inductive, as Mill sees it.⁵¹ Character study, however, is not ethics. Mill proceeds to discuss the methodology of the various social sciences: economics, sociology, political science, and also history. He does not think that they should, or can, use purely experimental methods; nor need these social sciences pretend to the sort of accuracy that is characteristic of chemistry.

The twelfth chapter brings Mill to moral knowledge and he immediately makes it clear that he regards ethics as an "art" and not a science. Ethics employs the imperative mood and this is typical of an art. Where there is an established law or rule (e.g. in a court of law) the process of reaching a judgment is ratiocination or syllogism. This contrasts with the procedure of the legislator whose function of establishing laws employs the opposite method. The legislator must look for the reasons or grounds for his rule. Matters of fact (expressed in terms of "is") are quite different from ought-propositions. Even in injunctions and recommendations (where "ought" is employed) some matter of fact is asserted, of course, namely "that the conduct recommended excites in the speaker's mind the feeling of approbation."⁵² This is not enough; ethics must find general premises and deduce certain principal conclusions from them, in order to form a body of doctrine which will be the "Art of Life." It will have three

divisions: morality, policy, and aesthetics—corresponding to the Right, the Expedient, and the Beautiful. This ethics as the art of life remains to be developed. Intuition of moral principles, if possible, would only take care of the start of the division of morality. Practical policy (prudential judgment) and aesthetics would require a different sort of principle. So, John Stuart Mill admits:

I merely declare my conviction, that the general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings: in other words, that the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology.⁵³

This is as far as the principle of universal utilitarianism is developed in Mill's *Logic*.

We have noticed how John Austin influenced John Stuart Mill. In Bentham there was always some ambiguity as to whether resultant utility was a test of the morality of a proposed individual action, or of a general type of activity. Speaking of human action, Austin said:

Trying to collect its tendency . . . we must not consider the action as if it were *single* and *insulated*, but must look at the *class* of actions to which it belongs. The probable *specific* consequences of doing that single act, or forbearing from that single act, or of omitting that single act, are not the objects of the inquiry. The question to be solved is this:—If acts of the *class* were *generally* done, or *generally* forbore or omitted, what would be the probable effect on the general happiness or good?⁵⁴

This helps us to understand the approach to the subject which Mill used in his *Utilitarianism* (1863).

First, Mill rejects the moral-sense theory: the existence

of such a sense is not proved and even if we take it to be a function of our reason the deliverances of such a moral faculty would only be "the general principles of moral judgments."⁵⁵ The question of the morality of an individual action is not to be solved by direct perception but by applying a law to this case. Mill thinks that both ethical intuitionists and inductivists agree on this point. So he puts forth the utilitarian "creed" as his solution to the problem, after warning that it has nothing to do with the popular notion of "utility" as opposed to pleasure. Here is Mill's best statement of what it does mean:

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.⁵⁶

To this Mill adds two clarificatory points. What is involved is not the greatest happiness of the individual agent but "the greatest amount of happiness altogether." Moreover, there are different kinds of pleasure; variations in quality must be noted, as well as in quantity. On this point Mill is departing from Bentham.

The main way of justifying the principle of utility seems to Mill to consist in an examination of its ultimate sanction. He frankly asks: "What is the source of its obligation?"⁵⁷ The only answer that he can give is that his test is "the same as of all other moral standards—the conscientious feelings of mankind." Mill is convinced that it is generally agreed that men do desire happiness—and he concludes that virtue is what is truly conducive to happiness.

The fifth chapter of *Utilitarianism* associates utility with the notion of justice. Mill is well aware that many people have thought that men have a natural instinct or

feeling for the just. He offers a very thoughtful account of the historical origin of men's acceptance of justice. Stressed in this is the idea that intelligent beings tend to grasp a "community of interest" and to develop the capacity to sympathize with human beings generally.⁵⁸ He even suggests that Kant's formula "So act, that thy rule of conduct might be adopted as a law by all rational beings" is an acknowledgement of the interest of mankind collectively. At the end, Mill decides that the duties of justice are simply the highest kind of social utilities; there are other things to do that are of utility, besides the obligations of justice. Justice has more definite commands and its sanctions are sterner.

Probably the outstanding British follower of John Stuart Mill was Alexander Bain (1818-1903). His *Mental and Moral Science* (1868) combined two works that developed the psychological and ethical implications of Mill's thought. Bain's *John Stuart Mill, A Criticism: With Personal Recollections* (1882) is a still-useful introduction to utilitarianism. It was Bain who introduced this way of thinking into the universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen.

Some people think that Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) was the greatest of British ethicists. Certainly he was one of the best informed historically and the most learned. His *Methods of Ethics* (1874) and *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (1886) are evidences of the scholarship that he brought to his teaching at Cambridge. Sidgwick felt that, in the long run, there were really only three distinct approaches to the central problem of ethics, which is the justification of ethical or moral judgment. These are egoistic hedonism, universalistic hedonism (or utilitarianism), and intuitionism.⁵⁹ Of these, Sidgwick bluntly rejected Hobbes's egoism. This seemed to Sidgwick to be no ethics at all. Like a good academician, he tried to combine the best features of the other two theories, intuitional and utilitarian ethics. Yet he differed from John Stuart

Mill on the matter of the ground of the greatest happiness principle. Mill, he thought, had confused the issue by attempting to show what men *ought* to desire from what they *do* desire. In other words, Sidgwick was concerned about something like the naturalistic fallacy well before G. E. Moore invented that striking name.

It was to avoid what seemed a circle in Mill's argument (happiness is desirable because we all desire it) that Sidgwick claimed an intuition of the principle of utility.⁶⁰ Of course, there are places in Mill's *Utilitarianism* where some recognition is given to the suggestion that we instinctively intuit the ground of moral obligation. But of all his predecessors, Samuel Clarke was the moral philosopher who seemed to Sidgwick to have had the most to offer. In this judgment, Sidgwick was also passing sentence on British ethics of the nineteenth century.

In his poem entitled *The Latest Decalogue*, Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) expressed his cynical verdict on the utilitarian ethics of his century:

Thou shalt have one God only; who
 Would be at the expense of two?
 No graven images may be
 Worshipped, except the currency:
 Swear not at all; for, for thy curse
 Thine enemy is none the worse:
 At Church on Sunday to attend
 Will serve to keep the world thy friend:
 Honour thy parents; that is, all
 From whom advancement may befall:
 Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive
 Officiously to keep alive:
 Do not adultery commit,
 Advantage rarely comes of it:
 Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,
 When it's so lucrative to cheat:

Bear not false witness; let the lie
 Have time on its own wings to fly:
 Thou shalt not covet, but tradition
 Approves all forms of competition.

CHAPTER XI

German Idealistic Ethics

In the nineteenth-century German tradition ethics remained very much under the influence of Kant. The theoretical philosophy is generally idealistic, i.e. most thinkers in this period take it as granted that the objects of understanding and reasoning are ideas of some sort. Philosophy was considered to begin with an investigation of the inner presentations of human consciousness. These "ideas" were not merely cognitive, of course; they revealed feelings, volitions, human attitudes, laws, and obligations. A good deal of the German philosophy of this century was subjectivistic but there were attempts to reach an objective ground for both speculative and practical knowledge. Much of it was also dialectical, in the sense that some sort of step-by-step pattern of development was attributed to the ongoing process of reality. Finally, German ethics in this century becomes more and more divorced from the religious commitments of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is not universal but the general trend is toward a secular ethics.

Hundreds of German scholars were occupied with ethics at this time; it had become a popular subject in the university curriculum. We shall concentrate on four key figures: Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer. Less influential ethicists will be noted in passing.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) initiates and per-

sonifies the main tendencies of idealistic ethics. All his writings are of ethical significance but three of them will be sufficient for a brief treatment of his ethics. Almost from the start of his writing career he showed his conviction that the domain of practical reason is most important. We see this in the *Basis of Natural Right* (1796) and the *System of Ethics* (*Das System der Sittenlehre*, 1798). Written in more popular style is the *Vocation of Man* (1800) which, however, presents most of the basic themes of Fichtean ethics. There is, finally, the *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807-1808), in which Fichte tried to rally his fellow countrymen by telling them that the Germans have as their destiny the duty of becoming "culture bearers" to the rest of humanity.

The aim of Fichte's methodology was to develop philosophy into a general theory of scientific knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*). This requires one organizing principle to explain all the presentations (*Vorstellungen*) of consciousness. Such data might be explained dogmatically and deterministically by attributing their origin to the "natural" world of matter. Such a move is repugnant to Fichte. The events of consciousness may also be explained mentally and freely by relating them to the mental character of the self or ego. This is what Fichte decides to do. From the very beginning, he takes the self as free, active, and moral.

One may think of the ego as contrasted with the nonego (or of the subject positing itself as object) within consciousness. One may experience the ego as a mental energy (will) which in acting meets with opposition—which is eventually revealed as but another aspect of will. As object or obstacle the nonego remains a function of the "Ich," the ever-present ego. So, Fichte's philosophy becomes an ethics as soon as it leaves the level of methodology. What is real for him is not some nonmental world of physical matter: the real is the resultant of the expression of volitional energy. He thinks that this is immediately evident within

individual consciousness. "My will is mine, and it is the only thing that is wholly mine and entirely dependent on myself; and through it I have already become a citizen of the realm of freedom and of pure spiritual activity."¹

Ethics deals with the realization of the ideal activity, both in the individual consciousness and in the moral order of the universe, which is a field for the development of infinite will. The ego first "posits" itself and thereby exists (thesis). It next sets up the nonego in opposition to itself, thereby becoming conscious of an otherness within itself (antithesis). Third, there comes an awareness that the ego without limitation (as absolute) must posit a certain limitation (or finitude) in both the ego and the nonego (synthesis). These are the stages of Fichte's dialectic: progress in knowledge and in morality will follow this triadic pattern.

There is an ordinary knowledge of morality common to all men because the "voice of conscience" speaks clearly and unequivocally within each of us.² In the second place, there is a philosophical science of what is right (ethics) that entails the understanding of the ground of morality in terms of Fichte's theory of knowledge. The main purpose of ethics is to show the development and realization of will, or moral consciousness, toward independence (*Selbständigkeit*). The resolve to become independent and free, in this sense, is called "Faith."³ Thus, Fichte's ethical imperative is: "Act according to thine own conviction of duty." To act from motives arising from nature or authority is to abandon what is distinctively moral.

Fichte's moral conception of the state is in direct continuity with the foregoing. Will is not simply your mental energy or mine: there is the greater "will" (obviously reminiscent of Rousseau's general will), which posits itself in the life of the national state. Politics is but an extension of ethics. In the social community, the individual will must learn to limit itself in relation to the interests of other individual wills. Society, then, is "the relation of reasonable

beings to each other . . . a free reciprocal activity founded on ideas."⁴

This ethics of Fichte is an important example of the self-realization theory. The process takes place in the ego, viewed both individually and cosmically. It is also a voluntarism but not an irrationalism, for Fichte's "will" remains within the limits of practical reason. In its social and political implications the doctrine of Fichte influenced some of the theoreticians of Hitler's national socialism. Fichte took a high-minded approach to the idea of a "national will"; it is easy enough to prostitute it. We shall see how the more personal facets of Fichte's voluntaristic ethics appear again in some existentialists of the twentieth century.

If Fichte neglected the Kantian realm of "things-in-themselves" and stressed the basic character of practical reason, one of his contemporaries, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), took the contrary path. His main treatise in ethics is entitled: *Outlines of a Critique of the Doctrine of Morals up to the Present* (1803). Schleiermacher felt that we do know Kant's noumena, and so he was very much opposed to what he saw as Fichte's extreme subjectivism. That philosophy is concerned with a dialectic and that God is the transcendent identity of thought and being, Schleiermacher agreed. It is not through practical reason that we reach God but by way of religious feeling and intuition. Schleiermacher's natural theology has been called a "fusion of Spinozism and idealism."⁵ Although human egos are parts of the universal substance, for Schleiermacher, they remain free, self-determining, and quite individual. Reason is present in a lower sense in nature, and on a higher level in man. All reality is rational; hence, the laws of nature and moral law are entirely compatible. The fundamental imperative in Schleiermacher's ethics is: "Be a unique person and act in accord with your own distinctive nature."⁶

The place of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) in the history

of ethics is not easy to determine. Some histories of the subject simply omit him. It could be argued that he has a philosophy of law, of history, of society, and so on, but no ethics as such. However, he has influenced, positively and negatively, so many later writers in ethics that it is necessary to pay some attention to his views. We cannot attempt a complete exposition but will try to single out some of the more important teachings.

A group of early writings by Hegel dates from the last decade of the eighteenth century and contrasts Christian morality with Kant's philosophical ethics. These are the works translated as the *Early Theological Writings*. One of these studies (*Life of Jesus*, 1795) treats Christ as a teacher of ethics. The *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) marks the beginning of Hegel's personal approach to philosophy. This work has a good deal to say about the relation of ethics to the rest of philosophy. In 1821 Hegel published his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*; it is a major source for the study of his ethics. Various other volumes have been edited from Hegel's courses of lectures. The *Philosophy of History* is of this type. The posthumously published *System of Ethics* was outlined in 1802 by Hegel but it is a very imperfect formulation of Hegelian ethics and is only mentioned here for the sake of completeness.⁷

In the early works Hegel seems to have thought of ethics in terms of Kant's system. *The Spirit of Christianity*, for instance, teaches that Jesus advanced from the legalism (a morality of externally imposed commands) of the Judaic tradition to a new morality concerned with the satisfaction of human needs. This new morality of Jesus is grounded in the autonomy of the human will. In spite of the Kantian cast of this interpretation, Hegel accuses Kant himself of mistakenly speaking of a "command requiring respect for a law which commands love." It is wrong, Hegel thinks, to base love on an imperative: "In love all thought of duties vanishes."⁸

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Hegel worked out his own general notion of what philosophy is and does. His views now represent a reaction to those of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling (who, though a contemporary, published several works that were read by Hegel). Hegel remained an idealist but pushed the theory beyond the original meaning of "idea" as a presentation of individual consciousness toward a doctrine in which all things and events occur in Mind objectified. Reality is completely rational: there is an intelligible explanation for everything and the method of philosophical explanation is dialectical. Hegel's dialectic is a three-step process moving from an original positive affirmation of some event or thing (thesis), through a second stage of negation or denial of the first (antithesis), to a final stage which cancels and transmutes the two preceding stages into a higher combination (synthesis). What is canceled but then rises to a higher meaning is said to be *aufgehoben*. The blooming of a rose is used as an example of the dialectic. First, there must be a rosebud (thesis); then the bud must stop being a bud (antithesis); and third, the canceled bud must give rise to a new item, the flower, which comes from the first two steps (this culmination is the synthesis). This is the patterned triadic process of all developments in mind and reality: all philosophical interpretation should make use of this new logic. The dialectical theory is described at great length in the *Phenomenology of Mind*.⁹ Nature, consciousness, history, culture, art, and religion develop dialectically. So also does ethics, for it is but a distinctive way of tracing the evolution of Mind.¹⁰

God is the Idea, the universe considered potentially; Mind or Spirit (*Geist*) is the realization of the Idea in concrete evolution. Mind expresses itself in many lines of development. The *Phenomenology of Mind* traces the dialectical process through methodology, various phases of consciousness and self-consciousness, reason in itself, in nature and in self-consciousness, through objectified spirit,

morality, religion, art, to the ultimate stage of general philosophical science. Considering the phenomena of morality, Hegel says this:

When we look at the moral view of the world . . . The first stage, which forms the starting-point, is the actual moral self-consciousness. . . . And, since what is moral only is at all so far as it is complete,—for duty is the pure unadulterated ultimate element (*Ansich*), and morality consists merely in conforming to this pure principle—the second proposition runs: "there is no actual existence which is moral." Since, however, in the third place, it is a self, it is inherently the unity of duty and actual reality. . . . In this final goal or aim of the synthetic unity of the two first propositions, the self-conscious actuality, as well as duty, is only affirmed as a transcended or superseded moment.¹¹

In other words, ethics advances from some low-grade common concept of morality, through a stage which recognizes that this sort of morality is unrealistic, to a synthesis in which a philosophy of morality is proposed.

Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts* offers such a higher ethics, expressed in terms of right and wrong. As objectified, Mind gives rise to "abstract right." The term *Recht* (like *ius* in Latin) has no precise English equivalent. In a broad way, it names the moral, the lawful, the approvable good. Concretely, for Hegel, the institution of property (one's actuated right to possess a thing) provides a thesis from which to begin the development of ethics.¹² A property right is one sort of objectification of the universal or rational will.¹³ Will is that aspect of consciousness in which freedom becomes actual: there is both individual and universal will. Voluntary actions running contrary to rational will are wrong and antithetic to the original rightness.¹⁴ For such wrongs there is a logical demand for punishment and retribution. Morality itself is the abstract harmony

between the individual volition and the rational will or notion of what ought to be.

At one point in the *Phenomenology of Mind*¹⁵ Hegel speaks of the ethical life as substantially realized in a set of customs (*Sittlichkeit*) as something lower than morality (*Moralität*). However, the *Philosophy of Right* (some fifteen years later) sees morality as an abstract concept that is concretely objectified in the substance of the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). The latter is social, objective, and more profound than morality.¹⁶ In the ethical dialectic a key series moves from (1) *purpose*, as the subjective inclination of the individual person, through (2) *intention* and *well-being*, as the essential character of the act that is proposed, to (3) the final synthesis of *goodness* or *wickedness*. Fundamental to this is the concept of the "ethical system." This is described as follows:

The ethical system is the idea of freedom. It is the living good, which has in self-consciousness its knowing and willing, and through the action of self-consciousness its actuality. Self-consciousness, on the other hand, finds in the ethical system its absolute basis and motive. The ethical system is thus the conception of freedom developed into a present world, and also into the nature of self-consciousness.¹⁷

Duty, for Hegel, is the moral law issuing from the rational nature of will; while moral conscience is simply duty made effective.¹⁸ The notion of "subjectivity" is important here to Hegel. Whether recent phenomenology is in lineal descent from the thought of Hegel is a matter of dispute today.¹⁹ However, the phenomenological term "subjectivity" is used in a distinctively ethical manner by Hegel. This is evident in lines such as these:

Substantive ethical reality attains its right, and this right receives its due, when the individual in his private will and conscience drops his self-assertion and

antagonism to the ethical. . . . Subjectivity is the absolute form and the existing actuality of the substance. The difference between the subject and substance, as the object, end, and power of the subject, forthwith vanishes, like the difference between form and matter.²⁰

Hegel goes on to say that subjectivity is the foundation for the real existence of the conception of freedom, and in ethics subjectivity is the existence of personal self-determination and moral freedom.

Another very important Hegelian approach to the notion of "ethical system" lies in the development of social life. This may be one of Hegel's greatest contributions to ethics; it implies a special theory of history and of politics. As morality concretizes and becomes "substantial" in the family, civil society, and eventually the state, there is an evolution of the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). The family is the union of at least two persons in love.²¹ Civil society is a condition in which there is a mutual dependence of all persons on all, yet as a collection of independent individuals. It is founded on a system of wants. The state is a concrete institution that unifies and gives a higher reality to the ethical lives of its individual members. At times, there is a sort of mystique about Hegel's state. In his *Philosophy of History* we are told that the state is "the embodiment of rational freedom," and that it is the "Idea of Spirit in the external manifestation of human Will and its Freedom."²² Since God is also the Idea of the Spirit (*Geist*), this amounts to a rather extravagant divinization of the national state. It is but one step away from totalitarianism or *étatisme*.²³

The later influence of Hegel's ethical writings has been extensive. At times (see the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*) Hegel presented himself as the philosopher of Protestantism and the successor to Luther in the reformation of the religious life of Europe. A group of German