

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF EVERYBODY ACTED LIKE ME?

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IN this paper I shall use terms such as "intrinsically good" which may be deemed old fashioned by many readers and which certainly to my own mind presuppose an objective non-naturalistic theory of ethics. I still hold such a theory and I have not mastered the new jargon by which a sort of higher synthesis between that and other theories is supposed to have been effected, but I do not think that such a view as mine of ethics in general is necessarily presupposed if one is to understand or even agree with the contentions of my article. These relate to a specific problem as to certain ethical actions, which will arise on any view that admits the possibility of giving any sort of legitimate reasons for ethical judgments, as we all do in practice. After all a naturalist can easily translate "intrinsically good" into his own terms, say, valued for its own sake by most people who experience it, and there will still be a question as to what is intrinsically and what is merely instrumentally good and other questions as to what is the logical nature of certain arguments in ethics.

Now what I wish to discuss is the use of an ethical argument of a peculiar and puzzling type, the argument that I ought to do or not do something, not because of the particular effects of what I myself do but, because if people in general did not or did do it, the results would be very evil. Few, if any, philosophers would to-day maintain that all our duties can be derived from Kant's principle that we ought not to act according to any law which could not be universalized (even if Kant did himself, which has been doubted); but it can hardly be denied that something like this principle does play a considerable part in our ordinary ethical thought. There is indeed an important difference between the way in which Kant uses it and the way in which it figures in the thought of most people. Kant thought that what made a principle wrong was that its universalization would involve some inconsistency, either a sheer logical contradiction, or an inconsistency with what we could not help willing, and tried by the use of this criterion of inconsistency to avoid a straightforward argument from consequences. But as generally used the argument is not that we could not conceive or at least consistently will the universalization of a principle, but simply that its universalization would lead to bad consequences. In this form the argument, though by no means a universal solvent of ethical problems, is certainly quite common, and as we shall see it is quite often

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accepted in preference to the straightforward utilitarian criterion where the two seem to conflict. What I want to ask here is whether this can ever be rationally justified, and, if so, under what circumstances.

Now *prima facie* the use of the principle seems very hard to defend. Why on earth should I be debarred from doing something, not because my doing it produces bad consequences, but because, if everybody did it, which I know will not be the case, the consequences *would* be bad? How can it be relevant to cite against an action not the results likely to accrue from it, but results which *would* accrue if something else happened that certainly will not happen? Why should I not tell a lie when there is something to be gained by it merely because it would have a bad effect if everybody under similar circumstances told lies? My lying certainly will not make everybody tell lies. And it is clear that in fact we more usually make ethical decisions either by arguing direct from the likely consequences of the particular act proposed or by referring to a principle taken as self-evident than by arguing from the consequences which would be likely to result if everybody were to act in the way in question. But it cannot be denied that we sometimes argue in the last-mentioned fashion.

To show this I shall take three instances. Suppose a man argued thus: I should not be asked to pay any income tax. For while the surrender of the money makes a substantial difference to me, if I kept it its loss would make no appreciable difference to social welfare. The small amount I can pay is only a drop in the bucket, and it can hardly be contended that if it were not paid any social services or the rearmament drive or anything else on which government expenditure is held to be desirable would in practice suffer at all. Therefore by utilitarian principles I ought not to have to pay it, since its payment by me produces an appreciable evil (for me) and no appreciable good, and the tax-collector or those above him act wrongly in demanding it from me. What is the objection to this attitude? I do not think it is an adequate reply to say that, if an exception were made in one case and not in others, it would have the effects of a bad example, because these could be avoided by secrecy. Yet I think we should all hold the plea to be unjustified, and the reason is surely not that the calculation as to the effect of the particular act of paying one's tax is wrong, but that, if the argument were admitted in one case, it would have to be admitted in all, and then no taxes would be paid by anybody, a situation which certainly would have disastrous results.

Take another case which seems to me clearer still. Suppose during the war somebody of military age and in other respects liable to military service had argued as follows: "What will be the result of

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my enlistment? It certainly will not shorten the war or turn defeat into victory. It may result in the killing of more Germans, but that is not an end in itself but an evil and only, if at all, to be valued as a means to the end of bringing the war to a speedy and victorious conclusion, which end I have just pointed out is not furthered by my enlistment. Further, in considering my proposed enlistment we must set on the debit side the facts that I shall be less happy than in my civilian occupation, that I shall be exposed to grave danger of death and mutilation, that I am likely to be in situations in which I shall suffer greatly, that those who are fond of me will be anxious and worried. On the one side we have no appreciable good effects, on the other very appreciable evil ones. Therefore on utilitarian principles, it is clearly not right but wrong for me to enlist, since it will definitely do great harm and there is no evidence that it will do any appreciable good." What would be our reaction to this? It seems to me plain that hardly anybody would accept the argument, and that the natural reply would be that, if everybody behaved like this, the war would have been lost and that therefore the man in question ought not to behave like this. The situation is indeed complicated by the fact that there were conscientious objectors who thought in any case that the war was wrong, but I do not think this need obscure the issue. For it is quite clear that no appreciable number of them regarded enlisting as wrong for the reasons I have suggested, but for quite different ones. I think almost all opponents as well as supporters of the war would regard the argument I have given as a bad one and would do so because they considered as relevant not just the effects of one man refusing to enlist but the effects that would result if this attitude spread to most people, though in fact there was no reason whatever to anticipate that it would spread to most people. If it is objected that to refuse to enlist would be to break the law, or that it could not be carried out with impunity unless deceit were practised, and that these things are evil, let us take the case of a country where military service was voluntary as it was in England during the earlier part of the First World War. It is plain that the argument I have given would in that case still strike almost everybody as invalid.

A still simpler instance is provided by a parliamentary election. Except in the extraordinarily rare case where a seat is won by a single vote, which we can dismiss as too extremely unlikely to be worth considering, one man's vote will make no appreciable difference whatever, yet we should still hold it his duty to vote and vote as intelligently as he could on the ground not of the effects of his particular vote but of the effects which would accrue if it were a general practice not to vote or to vote without reflection. These three instances do show, I submit, that besides any utilitarian criterion based on the anticipated effect of the particular action in

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question we do also employ as criterion a consideration of the consequences which would result if everybody acted in the way proposed, and that in some cases this is regarded as over-ruling the direct utilitarian criterion altogether. Other examples of this second criterion are provided by the frequent cases in which the keeping of certain rules is impressed on an individual by asking him the question—What would happen if everybody broke the rule as you have done? Of course, it might be said, that though people did commonly argue like this, they were wrong in doing so, and it is part of the purpose of my paper to consider whether this is the case. The attitude certainly strikes me in my ordinary ethical thinking as reasonable, and so it would, I think, almost everybody, and though this is no proof, it certainly is a strong presumption in its favour.

Can any further argument be adduced to back up this presumption? It must again be emphasized that the use of the criterion in question is an odd one and one which needs more support if it is to be defended. That the badness of the effects of my doing something constitutes a good reason against doing it is obvious enough, but it is by no means obvious that the fact that the universal or general adoption of the course of action would have bad effects is a reason against my adopting it. The question presents itself why I should ever abstain from doing something otherwise desirable, not because my action would produce bad effects itself, but because the occurrence of something quite different, namely everybody doing it, *would* have these evil consequences. It seems plain, further, that there are both courses of action such that it would be bad if everybody pursued them and yet good that some people should pursue them, and almost as plain that there are courses of action such that it would be good if everybody pursued them and yet bad that some or most people should when others do not pursue them. The pursuit of any worth-while specialized career is an example of the former class of cases, complete non-violence of the latter. For, even if there is a case for pacifism in relation to international war, there is hardly one for not using violence, if necessary, to stop would-be murderers.

Now it seems to me that there is a distinguishing feature present in the three cases I have mentioned, which enables us to see why the universalization criterion is applicable there and not in other cases where this feature is missing. In all three the argument from the consequences of the particular act in favour of not doing it is of such a nature that, if it were accepted, it could be used to excuse all or most people. I suppose nowadays every individual called on to pay his taxes will miss the money more than the State would if deprived of his share of taxation. Likewise the argument against enlistment would apply not indeed altogether to everybody (since there are some people who seem to like fighting in a war better than a more peaceful

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occupation, though even these run the risk of death, maiming or permanent injury to health, and usually have relatives who would be anxious), but at any rate to most people. And the argument to the effect that no appreciable good is done by voting would, if valid, show that it was no one's duty to vote. Now suppose the individual who was trying to excuse himself used arguments which, if valid, would not excuse all or most people but were peculiar to himself or would only excuse a limited number. Then our attitude would change. Of course, we might still think the argument very unjustified or trivial, but if he could show that the act in question would in his case lead to very serious consequences beyond any that it would involve in most cases, we should have to treat it with respect. And the law by allowing reductions in taxation and exemptions from military service for certain causes admits this in principle. If a man argued that he should be taxed less than most other people with his income or even not taxed at all because he had ten children to support, he might well be right, and there might be similar circumstances which justified a man otherwise eligible in not volunteering for military service in a major war, while we should all admit that a man was justified in not voting because his temperature was 104 or because he was 500 miles away.

Is this difference in attitude capable of being justified by a logical difference between the two kinds of case? I think it is. If the excuse given is one which, if valid at all, would be applicable to everybody or to most people, it would seem to follow clearly that it cannot be valid. If an argument consistently carried out leads to the conclusion that nobody or hardly anybody ought to pay taxes, it seems plain that there must be something wrong with the argument, since it is plainly not true that nobody or hardly anybody ought to pay taxes. To use general terms, if it is right for me to do or abstain from doing something because of a certain argument, it must be right for everybody to whom the argument applies; but it cannot be right for everybody to whom the argument applies because, if all such people acted accordingly, the results would be disastrous. It therefore cannot be right for me. This seems a perfectly valid type of argument, whatever one may think of its application in a particular case. If, on the other hand, an argument is based on circumstances not common to all or most people, but to a very limited number, there is no similar presumption against its validity. Few object to the proposition that some people should be excused income tax. This distinction may be applied to Kant's attitude to lying. Kant differs from the views I discuss primarily in this article because he does not profess to base his principle on the badness of the effects even of general lying but on an alleged inconsistency, but I do not think this makes my remark irrelevant. He pointed out what would happen if

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everybody lied whenever they thought it suited them and concluded that one ought never to lie even to save the victim of a would-be murderer. Now this might be justified if the argument were one which could equally be used to justify any lying, but it is clear that in the case of the attempted murder there is an argument available which could not be used in defence of most cases of lying, namely that the lie will probably save a life. We could, I think, only object to such a lie on the kind of ground I have been discussing if we thought that the universalization of the principle—lie to would-be murderers in so far as this is the most efficient way available of hindering them in the commission of the crime—would have bad effects, and not merely because we thought that the general adoption of lying in other cases also would. Now while it is plain that the general adoption of a policy of lying by people whenever they thought it expedient would have bad effects by destroying mutual trust, it is far from plain that the adoption of such a policy towards murderers would. It is not by any means clear that it would be better if murderers could rely on any information they were given about the whereabouts of their victim. Nor can one claim to find a contradiction in it, as Kant did with the more general principle—Lie where it is expedient to do so. It is a question which class we take as our basis—the larger class of all lies or the smaller class of lies to murderers to save somebody from being their victim, and using the criterion I have given it is plain to me that we should take the smaller. For it is plainly not true that it follows that, if I am justified in telling a lie to a murderer to save life, everybody is justified in lying whenever it suits his convenience, since there are highly relevant ethical circumstances present in the narrower class which are not present in all cases of lies. The universalization criterion cannot, I insist, be plausibly applied where there are ethically relevant differences between the act proposed and other acts of the same class which exclude the argument for the act from applying in most or all cases of the class. For we are then not compelled to choose between admitting its validity in no case at all and admitting its validity in most or all cases. We must then either judge the act purely on its merits or apply the universalization criterion within a smaller class, namely, that class which has in common with the particular case before us all or most of the points that in the latter are ethically relevant.

Philosophically the issue I am discussing has a wide importance because it might be held to provide the utilitarian with a way of escape from many of the criticisms he has to meet. As such the universalization test was used by Hume and, I think, even Bentham. Can it be so used without abandoning utilitarianism? If he takes this course, the utilitarian will admit that a particular action will produce

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more harm than good and yet ought to be done by him, thus apparently contradicting his principles. But he may say that he is still appealing to utility, only it is the utility not of a single act but of a whole class of acts of which the former is a member. Of course, if the single act is a necessary condition of the whole class of acts being performed sufficiently to secure the good in view, the reply is valid from his point of view, but it was not so in the cases I have mentioned. My payment of income tax is not a necessary condition of the government being able to secure funds sufficient for its work, nor is my vote a necessary condition of the candidate I favour being returned (nor—alas!—a sufficient one). All that can be said is that, if a consistent thinker admits the argument against voting or paying taxes in my case, he will have to admit it in every or almost every other case, and that the effect would be very bad if it were so admitted in practice. So the question arises—is the utilitarian not then abandoning his utilitarianism and appealing to a different principle, the principle that he ought to be consistent even in cases where it is not for the greatest good that we should be consistent? If I omit to pay my taxes while expecting other people to pay theirs I am in a sense acting inconsistently,¹ but why should I not act inconsistently if it does more good than harm to do so? From the hedonistic utilitarian point of view must not the answer be that there is no reason at all? And even if the utilitarian is prepared to admit other values besides pleasure, it does seem very doubtful whether he can reasonably claim sufficient intrinsic value for consistency to be in accord with our ordinary ethical practice in the cases discussed. It would certainly seem very odd to say that the reason why a man ought to fight in a war was because it was intrinsically valuable that he should be logically consistent. Is logical consistency in a particular action so valuable as to outweigh the disadvantage of being maimed or blown to bits, incidentally depriving oneself of any future opportunities of being logically consistent (unless you postulate a future life which, whether justifiable or not on other grounds, cannot be postulated to get one out of this sort of dilemma)? There is a story of an Irishman who was called a coward because he ran away in a battle, and he replied that he would rather be a coward for five minutes than a corpse all the rest of his life. Would not the argument of the Irishman, though its statement does not show the analytic care and verbal exactitude which we expect of a philosopher, be on principle valid against a utilitarian who contended that it was wrong for one man to

¹ I should not, in doing this, be acting inconsistently, though I should be acting wrongly, if my set policy were to secure as much material advantage as I could for myself regardless of other considerations, but then I should not be acting *qua* universalistic utilitarian, and it is universalistic utilitarianism that I am discussing here, not egoism.

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avoid danger in battle on the ground that, if everybody acted like that, the result would be disastrous? Is it not better to be logically inconsistent in a single act than to die or incur great risk of death.

I think, however, that there is more in the universalization criterion than this. As I have suggested, the utilitarian may argue as follows: If it is right for me to do act A, it would be right also for everybody else under circumstances similar in all ethically relevant respects to do act A. But if everybody else did act A under the circumstances, the results would be disastrous. Therefore it would not be right for everybody else to do it. Therefore it cannot be right for me to do it. Here is a direct logical proof, which invokes no premisses that would not generally be accepted by utilitarians. The premisses are—(a) that, if it is right for me to do something, it would be right for everybody to do it under ethically similar circumstances, (b) that an act (or class of acts) is wrong if it does harm rather than good. These premisses are part of the ordinary stock-in-trade of utilitarianism. The second is just utilitarianism on its negative side, the first besides being necessary for *any* satisfactory system of ethics is a corollary of the principle that what makes an action right or wrong is just the good or evil it produces. Utilitarianism would be contradicted at once if two actions which produced the same amount of good relatively to evil were not either both right or both wrong. And from the two premisses the conclusion follows in strict logic. It is not that logical consistency is intrinsically valuable, but that the utilitarian cannot without logical self-contradiction deny the ethical conclusion in question. But the utilitarian is not out of the wood yet. For the conclusion remains inconsistent in the instances I have given with another proposition which he holds, namely, that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the consequences of the particular act. So the argument which started as an attempt to defend utilitarianism by enlarging its criterion seems to have now turned into an objection against utilitarianism in general. Utilitarianism cannot be true if it does really lead to two inconsistent conclusions, namely, that certain acts are both right and wrong.

One conceivable way out which the utilitarian might adopt is to say that among the circumstances ethically relevant to my action should be included the fact that most people will, e.g., pay their taxes in any case, and consequently it might be right for me or any other particular person not to pay them (if he could get away with it), but wrong to do this if the number of evasions were ever so great as seriously to threaten the national revenue. But besides contradicting our moral convictions, this reply is open to the objection that, whether the number of evasions were in fact so great or not, it would still remain true that the amount *I* pay would not make any *appreciable* difference to the situation, and the same would apply to

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the other cases, military service and voting, so I should still be under an obligation to do something that did no appreciable good. (As a matter of fact I imagine the financial position of the country would be very appreciably improved to-day if everybody were perfectly fair about Income Tax and never evaded in any way any part of what was really due.)

The utilitarian cannot, I think, legitimately appeal to the bad effects of the example of not adhering to a general rule even when no specific good is done in a particular case by keeping to it. This for two reasons. (a) The bad effects are to a large extent due to the fact that the action is thought wrong, and therefore cannot be used as a ground for its wrongness without a vicious circle. (b) All or most of them could be avoided by secrecy.

Now, if asked for a justification of the type of argument in question, most people would have recourse to the concept of fairness. They would say that it was unfair that I should "get out of" making a contribution which other people in my position are rightly expected to make. This introduces a new conception, namely that it is not only the total good or evil which matters but also the way in which they are distributed, a view which utilitarianism is usually understood as denying, but which can be brought within the framework of "ideal"¹ as opposed to hedonistic utilitarianism by ascribing intrinsic value to fairness of distribution as such or at least intrinsic disvalue to acts which militate in favour of unfairness. Or utilitarianism could be abandoned here in favour of the conception that it was *prima facie* wrong to act unfairly. Neither course would indeed enable one to avoid the contradiction just mentioned unless it were held that in all such cases the intrinsic badness or *prima facie* wrongness of the unfairness outweighed the gain to the individual or his family. But I suppose this might be maintained, and then we have what is perhaps a valid argument in favour of either abandoning utilitarianism or modifying it by the admission that fairness is intrinsically good or unfairness intrinsically bad or both, for otherwise we have the contradiction I exposed: namely, unless there is an intrinsic evil unfairness, to set against the harm done to the individual and perhaps his family by doing something which produces no appreciable good, it follows from utilitarianism that it is both his duty and not his duty to do the same thing, his duty because if it is not his duty it would be no one's duty and it obviously is someone's duty on utilitarian grounds, and not his duty because if it were his duty it would be an exception to the principle that we ought always to aim at producing the greatest good.

¹ I.e. the view that the right action is the action most conducive to good, good being not limited to pleasure or happiness but supposed to include other values such as virtue and knowledge.

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Under what circumstances can we rightly use the criterion of universalization? Not, it seems, in all cases where the total omission of a class of acts would have disastrous effects. It would be a great disaster if nobody adopted farming as a career, but we certainly cannot conclude that everybody ought to become a farmer nor even that everybody who has no particular objection to farming should become a farmer. Even if it would be disastrous if everybody who was hesitating between farming and another occupation chose the latter in preference to farming, this would not, I think, be even a subsidiary reason for anybody in this position choosing farming, unless there was a real shortage of people willing to farm. Otherwise a real shortage of workers in the alternative occupation (provided it were at all a valuable one) would outweigh the bad effect of a merely hypothetical shortage of farmers. That it would be a disaster if nobody were to enter a particular occupation is quite compatible with there being far too many men at a particular time engaged in the occupation. Again it would, I think, be completely ruinous for some places if nobody bought herrings, but, at least while these places are reasonably prosperous, this does not put me under any obligation whatever to buy them. Again, suppose I thought that some very good object could be achieved if a great number of people including myself contributed but could not be achieved in any degree without their co-operation, I should be under no obligation to contribute if there were no prospect of the others also contributing.

These examples suggest that the universalization criterion can only rightly be applied if the following conditions are satisfied: (1) the act which it is proposed that the man in question should do must belong to a class of acts such that, if done by all or a large number of people, they produce a good result; (2) the value of the result must increase (not necessarily in the same proportion) as does the number of people who perform such acts. This would exclude the case of an occupation, which may always conceivably become overcrowded. But (3) the increment involved for each fresh individual must not be appreciable or at least not appreciable enough to outweigh the hardship to the individual. If it is, we need not apply the universalization criterion because the action is already justified by its own effects. (4) There must be some hardship in doing it. This again excludes the farming case because there is no hardship in choosing one occupation rather than another to which one is equally attracted. If there is no hardship in taking a course, we cannot say that, if a man did not take it, it would be unfair for him to expect others to do so. It is not *necessarily* unfair of me to leave responsibility to others in a party equally qualified, because they may like having the responsibility. (5) The purpose of the class of acts in question must not be capable of achievement unless the acts are done by people who are

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under no more obligation than the man in question and would suffer no less hardship through doing it than he would. This excludes those cases where there is a special reason why a particular individual should not be expected to do it.

Where there is a law capable of ethical approbation or an agreement that everybody in a certain class should perform the act, this greatly increases the unfairness of not performing it, but it is not a necessary condition of this being unfair. It is unfair not to share at all in common tasks in a party even if there is no prior agreement that I should. It is more difficult to find a case in which there is not at any rate a sort of vague general understanding involved, but it is clearly not the understanding which makes it unfair. It is rather that the understanding exists because the taking of no share by one member without a good reason is assumed to be unfair. Nor is a man necessarily released from an obligation to share in a common task because the other people concerned are good-natured enough to excuse him. It is unfair to accept all the sacrifices that other people are willing to make and not make any oneself.

Another difficulty about the universalization criterion is how to determine what class is to serve, so to speak, as our standard of measurement. The same act is usually included in a number of different classes, and according to which class we select the result will often be very different. There are, for instance, many further complications about the bearing of the principle on voting. As I have said, since the chance of my vote settling an election is negligible, there is no obligation to vote at all unless the universalization criterion is applied in some way, and no doubt it justifies the view that it is in general our duty to vote. But, suppose we take the case of a convinced Liberal. What is he to do? One would naturally expect him to take as his standard class, the class of all voters, and in that case one might expect him to hold that he ought to vote liberal because, if everybody voted liberal, the result would be good. But he might rationally hold—as most English people probably do hold—that it would be a very bad thing if there were no opposition through everybody voting alike. In that case it is difficult to see how we are to apply the concept of the standard class. However, the Liberal might say that the principle he is using is that everybody should vote for the party which he thinks best, and that therefore he votes Liberal. But in that case he may be confronted with the objection that the effects of everybody voting for the party he thinks best are not at all what the Liberal desires, as is shown by the election results for many years back. If he thinks it very desirable indeed that the Liberals should win the election, he will think that the results would be better if, the electors thinking as they do, everybody did not vote for the party he thought best. Perhaps the

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answer is that, though it might have good results in a particular election, in the long run it would be very bad if the people thus made a practice of insincerity in voting. I do not wish to deny this, but if he uses this argument the Liberal has extended his standard class to include not only the electors at this election but the electors for many years back or on, perhaps generations, and if he extends it so far why not extend it further and include the voters in all countries? Yet it would be perfectly consistent for a Liberal to hold that his party was the best for this country without holding that the party which comes nearest the outlook of British Liberals was the best for all countries on the face of the earth. And what reason is there for extending the class rather than narrowing it? If he narrows it, he may get different results. Suppose he includes in his standard class not all voters but all Liberal voters, and suppose he thinks that, though the Liberals are the best party, it is very much more important that the Conservative or the Labour Party should be kept out of power than that there should be a Liberal minority, and he also thinks that if all Liberals by conviction voted Liberal the party he dislikes most would have a majority. In that case he would not hold it a good thing for all Liberals to vote Liberal. But complications thicken, for he need not hold that it would be a good thing for them *all* to vote for another party. A stable majority might be secured for the party he thinks second best by *most* Liberals voting for it, and then he will think it better that the rest should vote Liberal. In that case how can he apply the *universalization* principle? Presumably his belief that most Liberals should vote, e.g. Conservative ought to carry some weight in favour of his voting Conservative, but not by itself a decisive weight, for he does not think that *all* Liberals should. But he may take as his standard a narrower class still, the class of Liberals in his own constituency. This might again lead to a different result. He might (though this has become unlikely) live in a constituency in which the Liberals were still one of the two strongest parties and to vote Liberal provided the best chance of keeping out the party he disliked most. He would then think that all Liberals by conviction in the constituency ought to vote Liberal and would accordingly vote Liberal himself. But suppose he lived in a constituency in which the chances of the Liberal candidate were practically zero, but in which if Liberals all voted for that candidate, it was very likely that a candidate of the party he liked least would be returned rather than one whom he liked not very much less than the Liberal. In that case he would seem on his principles justified in not voting Liberal. So the results may be very different according to which standard class we take into account, and the question arises how we are to decide which. The question is even more complicated than I have indicated because besides the possibilities I have men-

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tioned there are a great number of intermediate possibilities, e.g. where it is reasonably *possible* but not at all likely that the Liberal will get in and *more likely* that the result of people voting Liberal will be that it puts in the candidate whom the voter in question likes least. Again, if all the Liberals who thought their candidate would not be elected in all contested constituencies voted for another candidate the Liberal would in most cases have no votes at all and the moral effect of this might lead to the party losing at the next election what few seats it still holds.

I have taken this case not in the hope of deciding a political question by an abstract philosophical principle, but as an illustration of the difficulty of selecting one's standard class. As I have already indicated, it seems to me that the class which has the best claim for choice as standard class is the largest class, including the particular case, whose members have in common with it all features that are seriously relevant ethically, and that the nearer we approach to this class the more likely we are to be right. In deciding whether a man ought to be asked to pay taxes it is better to consider the class—all taxpayers of approximately his financial status rather than the larger class, all taxpayers; in deciding whether he ought to fight in a war, the class all men of approximately his age and responsibilities rather than all citizens; in deciding whether he ought to vote Liberal in a particular election the class all Liberals in his constituency and all constituencies where the situation is similar, rather than all voters in every constituency. The reason for this is that we can only argue that we ought not to act in a certain way because of what would happen if everybody acted in that way on the ground that, if it were right for us to act like that, it would be right for everybody to do so and it is not right for everybody to do so. Now if there are circumstances ethically relevant to our decision which are not present in all cases in our standard class, we cannot argue that if I ought to act like this everybody in the class ought to, and the only argument I can see for the application of the universalization criterion disappears. Should we therefore, in so far as we use the universalization criterion at all, take into account *only* this class as standard? That is where the argument points. Certainly a Liberal ought to consider besides the effects in his own constituency the effects on the whole country of Liberals voting in a certain way, but perhaps he need not ask—What would happen if all voters or all Liberal voters in the country as a whole did so and so? but only—What would happen to the country as a whole if all members of the narrower class of voters in my constituency or in constituencies where the situation is similar did so and so? We must remember that, while it can be argued that a single vote by an ordinary voter has no appreciable effect, we cannot say this about the return of a single

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member of Parliament, and therefore once we have decided what member of Parliament is most likely to be returned under certain circumstances, we can consider the actual effects of his return without bothering about the universalization criterion further. But I am far from feeling dogmatic about the matter, and a further difficulty remains. Suppose the class I have defined is that consisting of members which have in common with my proposed action characteristics *a*, *b*, *c*, and suppose *c* is only very slightly relevant to the ethics of the action, so slight that its introduction is almost trivial, while *a* and *b* are ethically very relevant. Ought we not to take as a standard rather the larger class whose members have characteristics *a* and *b* in common? Or ought we not at least to consider both classes? However there is one comfort here: since *c* is *ex hypothesi* very unimportant the results are likely to be almost always the same whichever of these alternatives we adopt. But the question of the application of the universalization criterion is one which has not been discussed nearly enough by philosophers, and this paper is of the nature of pioneer work on the subject, though I can refer to an article by Professor Broad.¹ The question clearly has important practical bearings both on politics and on private ethics.

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¹ *International Journal of Ethics*, 1915-16.