

Nature

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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'Nature', 'natural', and the group of words derived from them or derived *with* them from other words, have always loomed large in the thoughts of mankind and taken a strong hold on their feelings. This isn't surprising when we consider what the words originally and most obviously meant; but it is unfortunate that a set of terms that play such a great part in moral and metaphysical theorizing should have acquired many meanings that •differ from the main one yet •are linked to it enough to create confusion. In this way 'nature' and its kin have come to stir up many extraneous associations, mostly very powerful and tenacious ones; and because of these associations the words have come to be symbols of feelings that their original meaning doesn't at all justify—feelings that have turned these words into one of the richest sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law.

The most important work done by the Socratic form of argument, as exhibited and improved by Plato, consists in •taking large abstractions such as the word 'nature', •pinning down precisely the meaning that they only vaguely gesture towards in common thought and talk, and then •questioning and testing the common maxims and opinions in which they play a part. It's regrettable that among the instructive examples of this kind of inquiry which Plato has left us—and to which people in later centuries have been much indebted for whatever intellectual clearness they have attained—he hasn't enriched us with a dialogue about nature. If the idea which 'nature' stands for had been put through his searching analysis, and the common platitudes in which it is used had been subjected to the ordeal of his powerful analysis, his successors probably wouldn't have rushed, as in fact they speedily did, into ways of thinking and reasoning that were constructed on the basis of the fallacious use of that word—a kind of fallacy from which Plato himself was singularly free.

According to the Platonic method. . . the first thing to be done with such a vague term is to find out precisely what it means. Another rule of that method is that the meaning of an abstract word is best looked for in concrete particular cases—seeking the universal in the particular. If we follow that rule with the word 'nature', we'll start by asking such questions as: What is meant by the 'nature' of this flame? of that water? of these daffodils? of my cat? Evidently the thing's nature is the totality of its powers or properties: •the ways it acts on other things (including the senses of the observer), and •the ways other things act on it; and also (if the thing is sentient) •its own powers of feeling, or being conscious. The *nature* of the thing means all this—its entire ability to exhibit phenomena [= 'to present itself to our senses, to show up empirically']. And although the phenomena that a thing exhibits may vary in different circumstances, they are always the same in the same circumstances; so they can be described in general forms of words, which are called the *laws* of the thing's nature. For example: under average atmospheric pressure at sea level, water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit—that's a law of the nature of water.

As the nature of any particular thing is the totality of *its* powers and properties, so Nature in the abstract is the totality of the powers and properties of *all things*. 'Nature' means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes that produce them; including not only everything that happens but everything that could happen, because the •unused powers of causes are as much a part of the idea of *Nature* as are the powers that •come into play. All phenomena that have been examined thoroughly enough are found to take place in a regular way—invariably occurring when such-and-such positive and negative conditions are satisfied. That has enabled mankind to discover, either by direct observation or by reasoning based on observation, the

•conditions of the occurrence of many phenomena; and the progress of science mainly consists in discovering those conditions. When discovered they can be expressed in general propositions, which are called laws of the particular phenomenon—e.g. ‘laws of water’, ‘laws of memory’—and also, more generally, ‘laws of Nature’. For example, this truth:

•All material objects tend to move towards one another with a force directly proportional to their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them

is a law of Nature. And the proposition:

•Air and food are necessary to animal life

—if it is true without exception, as we have reason to believe it is —is also a law of Nature, though the phenomenon of which it is the law is special, and not universal as gravitation is.

In this simplest meaning of it, then, ‘Nature’ is a collective name for (1) all actual and possible facts. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that it is a name for (2) the way in which—i.e. the laws according to which—everything happens. . . . That is better, because the word ‘Nature’ suggests not so much (1) the multitudinous details of the phenomena as (2) the conception that might be formed of them, as a unified whole, by a mind that had a complete knowledge of them. It is *this* conception that science aims to achieve by raising itself, by successive steps of generalization, from experience ·on the ground-floor·.

[We are about to meet the first of Mill’s many uses in this Essay of the word ‘art’. In his use of it (common enough in his day), ‘art’ covers every activity involving human planning, forethought, or skill. In this sense, plumbing and carpentry and dress-making are ‘arts’.] Well, that definition of ‘nature’ is correct, but it captures only one of the senses of that ambiguous word. It clearly doesn’t

fit some of the ways in which the word is commonly used. For example, it flat-out *conflicts* with the common form of speech in which ‘nature’ is contrasted with ‘art’, and ‘natural’ with ‘artificial’. For in the sense of ‘nature’ that I have just defined, which is the true scientific sense, •art is as much •nature as anything else; and everything that is artificial is natural. Why? Because art has no independent powers of its own; it is merely the use of the powers of Nature for a particular purpose. Phenomena produced by human agency, just as much as ones that happen without any input from us, depend on the properties of •the elementary forces, or of •the elementary substances and their compounds. The united powers of the whole human race couldn’t create a new property of matter in general, or of any specific kind of matter. All we can do is to use for our own purposes the properties that we *find*. A •ship floats by the same laws of specific gravity and equilibrium as a •tree floats after being uprooted by the wind and blown into the water. The laws of vegetation by which men grow •corn for food are the very ones by which •the wild rose and •the mountain strawberry produce their flowers and fruit. A house stands and holds together by the *natural* properties—the weight and cohesion—of the materials that it is made of; a steam engine works by the *natural* expansion of steam, putting pressure on one part of a mechanism, which—by the mechanical properties of the lever—transfers the pressure to another part where it raises a weight or moves an obstacle. In these and all other artificial operations—i.e. things that happen partly because of how things were arranged by human skill—the role of man is a very limited one; all we do is to move things into certain places. By moving objects we bring separated things into contact, or pull adjacent things apart; such simple changes of place produce the desired effect by bringing into play natural forces that were previously dormant. We •decide to

make those movements to get the desired effect, we •think out the movements we'll make, and we •use our muscles to make them; and these three performances of ours are all exercises of powers of Nature.

So it seems that we have to recognize at least two principal meanings in 'nature'. In one sense, it means •all the powers existing in the outer and the inner world—all the powers of matter and of mind—and everything that happens by means of those powers. In another sense, it means (not everything that happens, but merely) •everything that happens without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man. This very ambiguous word has more senses than just •those two, but •they are the key to most of the others that matter.

Those being the two principal senses of 'nature', let us ask: when it is used to convey ideas of commendation, approval, and even moral obligation, is it being used in either of those senses? and if so, in which? It has conveyed such ideas all through the centuries. *Naturam sequi* [Latin for 'to follow nature'] was the basic principle of morals in many of the most admired philosophical systems. Among the ancients, especially during the period when ancient thought was past its best, it was the test to which all ethical doctrines were subjected. The Stoics and the Epicureans, though strongly disagreeing in most of their views, were alike in this: each group thought that it had to prove that its maxims of conduct were the dictates of Nature. Under their influence, the Roman theorists who were trying to systematize the law led off with a certain 'natural law'—a law that 'teaches all animals', as Justinian declares in the *Institutes*. And modern makers of systems not only of law but also of moral philosophy have generally taken the Roman legal writers as their models, with the result that there have been many treatises on the so-called 'law of Nature', and references

to this law as a supreme rule and ultimate standard have occurred all through the literature. The writers on 'international law' have done most to give currency to this style of ethical theorizing; not having any man-made law to write about, but wanting to bring the authority of 'law' to support the most approved opinions regarding international morality, they tried to find such an authority in Nature's imaginary legal code. Christian theology during the period of its greatest ascendancy only *partly* accepted the ways of thinking that erected •Nature into the criterion of morals; they couldn't *fully* do so because according to the creed of most Christian denominations (though certainly *not* according to Christ) man is by •nature wicked. But reactions against this doctrine have the deistic moralists almost unanimous in proclaiming that Nature is divine, and setting up its imagined dictates as an authoritative rule of action. [A deist—from the Latin *deus* = 'god'—is someone who believes that a single higher power made the universe but doesn't intervene in its workings; some deists deny that the higher power is in any way personal.] A reference to that supposed standard is the chief ingredient in the line of thought and feeling that was started by Rousseau and has infiltrated itself most widely into the modern mind—including the part that calls itself Christian. The doctrines of Christianity have always adapted themselves to the philosophy that happened to be prevalent at the time, and the Christianity of our day has borrowed much of its colour and flavour from deism. These days, the concept of *nature* isn't applied in the way it used to be, to deduce rules of action with lawyer-like precision, in an attempt to make all human activity coincide with what is 'natural'. Nor is any other standard invoked for such a purpose. People today don't commonly apply principles with any such careful exactness, or acknowledge such a binding allegiance to *any* standard. Rather, they live in a kind of confusion of many standards; which isn't

conducive to the formation of steady moral convictions, but is convenient enough for those whose moral opinions sit lightly on them, because it gives them a much wider range of arguments for defending the doctrine of the moment. But even though perhaps no-one could now be found who, like the ancient Roman legal theorists, adopts the so-called 'law of Nature' as the foundation of ethics and tries to reason from it consistently, 'nature' and its cognates must still be counted among the words that carry great weight in moral argumentation. The claim that a way of thinking, feeling, or acting is 'according to Nature' is usually accepted as a strong argument for its goodness. If it can be said with any plausibility that Nature tells us to do •something, most people think that this makes the case for •its being right for us to do it; conversely, the claim that •something is 'contrary to Nature' is thought to bar the door to any claim that •it should be tolerated or excused; and 'unnatural' is still one of the most fiercely critical adjectives in the language. Those who deal in these expressions may avoid committing themselves to any deep theorem about the standard of moral obligation, but they still *imply* such a theorem, and the theorem they imply must be essentially the one on which the more logical thinkers of a harder-working age based their systematic treatises on natural law.

Do these forms of speech involve a third distinct meaning of 'nature'? Or can they be intelligibly connected with either of the two meanings I have already described? At first it may seem that we have no option but to admit that we have here a third meaning. There are two realms of inquiry:

- what is the case (e.g. science and history),
- what ought to be the case (e.g. art, morals and politics).

But the two senses of 'nature' that I first pointed out refer only to what *is*. In the first meaning, 'Nature' is a collective

name for everything that exists or happens. In the second meaning 'Nature' is a name for everything that exists or happens without voluntary human intervention. But the use of 'nature' as a term in ethics seems to reveal a third meaning, in which 'Nature' stands not for what *is* but for what *ought to be*, or for the rule or standard of what ought to be. But if you think about it a little you'll see that this is not a case of ambiguity; we don't have a third sense of the word here. Those who set up Nature as a standard of action don't intend to say something purely about a *word*; they don't mean that the standard of action, whatever it may be, should be called 'Nature'; they think they are giving information about what the standard of action really *is*. Those who say that we ought to act according to Nature don't mean the mere identical proposition—the mere tautology—that we ought to do what we ought to do! They think that the word 'Nature' provides some external criterion ·or standard· of what we should do. If they lay down as a rule for what *ought to be* a word which in its proper meaning stands for *what is*, they do this because they have a notion that what *is* constitutes the rule and standard of what *ought to be*.

My purpose in this Essay is to examine this •notion. I shall inquire into the truth of the doctrines that •make Nature a test of right and wrong, good and evil, or that in any way and to any degree attach merit or approval to following, imitating or obeying Nature. What I have been saying about word-meanings was an indispensable introduction. Language is, as it were, the atmosphere of philosophical investigation, and we have to make it transparent before anything can be seen through it in its right shape and position. In the present case we have to guard against a further ambiguity which, though it is abundantly obvious, has sometimes misled people who should have known better; and it would be as well to pin-point it clearly before going on.

No word is more commonly associated with 'Nature', than 'law'; and the latter word has two quite distinct meanings.

(1) In one of them it denotes some definite portion of what *is*.

We speak of

- the law of gravitation,
- the three laws of motion,
- the law of definite proportions in chemical combination,
- the vital laws of organisms.

(2) In the other meaning it stands for a definite portion of what *ought to be*. We speak of

- the criminal law,
- the civil law,
- the law of honour,
- the law of truthfulness,
- the law of justice;

all of which are portions of what *ought to be*, or of somebody's suppositions, feelings, or commands regarding what ought to be. •The first kind of laws, such as the laws of motion and of gravitation, are simply the observed uniformities in the occurrence of phenomena: uniformities in what follows what and in what accompanies what. These are what scientists and even ordinary laymen mean by 'laws of Nature'. •Laws in the other sense are the laws of the land, the law of nations, or moral laws (and I have already noted that legal theorists and commentators drag something they call 'the law of Nature' into the ranks of the moral laws). A prime example of how liable these two meanings are to be confused with one another occurs in the first chapter of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, where he •remarks that the material world has its laws, the inferior animals have their laws, and man has his laws; and •calls attention to how much more strictly the first two sets of laws are observed than the third—as if it were an inconsistency and a paradox that

things always are what they are but men are not always what they ought to be! A similar confusion of ideas pervades the writings of George Combe [a well-known though not very competent 19th-century scientist], and from there it has overflowed into many non-technical books and articles written for the general reader, which continually tell us to obey the physical laws of the universe, as though they were obligatory in the same sense, and in the same way, as the moral laws. The idea of a close relation if not an absolute identity between what *is* and what *ought to be*—an idea implied by the ethical use of 'Nature'—certainly gets some of its hold on the mind from the custom of labelling what *is* by the expression 'laws of Nature', while the same word 'law' is also used, even more commonly and emphatically, to express what *ought to be*.

When it is said or implied that we should conform to Nature or to the laws of Nature, is this a statement about 'Nature' in the first sense of the word, meaning all that *is*, the powers and properties of all things? But in this sense of the word, there's no need to tell people to act according to Nature, because nobody can possibly help doing so, whether he acts well or badly. There isn't any way of acting that doesn't exactly conform to 'Nature' in this sense of the word. Every action is the exercise of some natural power, and all the effects of an action are just phenomena of Nature, produced by the powers and properties of some of the objects of Nature, in exact obedience to some law or laws of Nature. When I voluntarily use my organs to take in food, that act and its consequences happen according to laws of Nature; if instead of food I swallow poison, the case is exactly the same. It is absurd to urge people to conform to the laws of Nature when the only powers they have are ones that the laws of Nature give them, and it's a physical impossibility for them to do *anything* otherwise than through some law of Nature. What they do need to be told is *which* law of Nature they

should use in a particular case. For example, someone who is crossing a river by a narrow bridge with no parapet will do well to •regulate his conduct by the laws of equilibrium in moving bodies, instead of •conforming only to the law of gravitation—and falling into the river!

However, although it is idle to urge people to do what they can't avoid doing, and absurd to prescribe as a rule of *right* conduct something that fits *wrong* conduct just as well, we *can* construct a rational rule of conduct—one that is neither idle nor absurd—out of the relation that conduct should have to the laws of 'Nature' in this widest sense of the word. Man necessarily •obeys the laws of Nature—i.e. the properties of things—but he doesn't necessarily •guide himself by them. Though all conduct is •in conformity with laws of Nature, not all conduct is •based on knowledge of them and intelligently directed to getting things done by means of them. Though we can't free ourselves from the laws of Nature as a whole, we can escape from any particular law of Nature if we can keep out of any circumstances in which it comes into play. Though we can't do anything except *through* laws of Nature, we can use one law to counteract another. According to Bacon's maxim, we can •obey Nature in a way that lets us •command it. Every alteration in our circumstances makes some difference, big or small, to *which* laws of Nature we act under; and every choice we make either of ends or of means puts us to a greater or lesser extent under one set of laws of Nature instead of another. So if the useless injunction 'Follow Nature!' were replaced by this:

'Study Nature! Know and pay attention to the properties of the things you have to deal with, insofar as these properties can help or hinder you in achieving your purpose',

we would have arrived at the first principle of all intelligent

action, or rather at the definition of *intelligent action* itself. And I'm sure that a confused notion of this true principle is in the minds of many of those who set up the meaningless doctrine that superficially resembles it. They see that the essential difference between •wise and •foolish conduct consists in •attending or •not attending to the particular laws of Nature on which some important result depends. And they think that someone who *attends* to a law of Nature in order to shape his conduct by it may be said to *obey* it, while a person who disregards it and acts as if no such law existed may be said to *disobey* it—overlooking the fact that what they are calling 'disobedience' to a law of Nature is obedience to some other law or perhaps to the very same law they are said to 'disobey'. For example, someone who goes into an explosives depot either not knowing or carelessly forgetting the explosive force of gunpowder is likely to do something that will cause him to be blown to atoms in *obedience* to the very law that he has disregarded.

But however much of its authority •the 'Follow Nature!' doctrine may owe to its being confused with the reasonable command 'Study Nature!', those who favour and promote •the former certainly mean much more by it than merely 'Study Nature'. To learn about the properties of things, and make use of that knowledge for guidance, is a rule of •prudence—a guide to •adapting means to ends, •giving effect to our wishes and intentions whatever they may be. But the maxim of obedience to Nature or conformity to Nature is offered not as a simply *prudential* but as an *ethical* maxim; and those who offer it in this way are the ones who also talk of 'the law of Nature' as a law that is fit to be administered by law-courts and enforced by punishments. •Right action must be something more than—something other than—merely •intelligent action, yet the prudential injunction to study Nature is the only one that can be connected with 'nature'

in the wider and more philosophical of its meanings. So we must try it in the other sense of 'nature'—the sense in which 'Nature' is distinguished from 'art', and stands for (not the whole course of observable events, but only) the events that occur without humans' having any part in them.

[We are about to encounter the first of Mill's many uses of 'spontaneous' in this Essay. To call events 'spontaneous' in his sense is just to say that they occur without any help from or intervention by humans.] Well, then, *can* we attach any meaning to the injunction 'Follow Nature!' in this second sense of the word, in which 'Nature' stands for whatever happens without human intervention? Is the spontaneous course of events when left to themselves the rule we should follow in trying to adapt things to our use? Clearly not! It is perfectly obvious that the maxim 'Follow Nature!', taken in this sense, isn't merely superfluous and unmeaning (like the other), but palpably absurd and self-contradictory. For while human action can't help •conforming to 'Nature' in one meaning of the word, what human action is *for* is to •alter and •improve 'Nature' in the other meaning. If the natural course of things were perfectly right and satisfactory, to act at all would be pointless meddling that couldn't make things better and would therefore be bound to make them worse. Perhaps that is too strong: perhaps action *could* be justified when it is in direct obedience to •instincts, since •these might perhaps be regarded as part of the spontaneous order of Nature, .i.e. the course of events in which humans don't *intervene*. But to do anything with forethought and purpose would be a violation of that perfect order. If the artificial is not better than the natural, what's the point of human skills? To dig, to plough, to build, to wear clothes, are direct infringements of the injunction to follow Nature.

Thus, everyone would say that to apply the 'Follow Nature' maxim in the ways I have just described would be to push

it too far. (*Everyone*—even those who are most under the influence of the feelings that prompt the injunction to follow Nature.) Everybody claims to approve and admire many great triumphs of art over Nature [see note on 'art' on page 2]:

building bridges to connect shores that •Nature had made separate,

draining •her marshes,

digging down to •her aquifers,

dragging into the light things that •she has buried deep in the earth,

diverting •her thunderbolts by lightning rods, •her floods by embankments, and •her ocean by breakwaters.

But to commend these and similar feats is to acknowledge that the ways of Nature are to be conquered, not obeyed; that her powers often relate to man as enemies, from whom he must by force and ingenuity get what •little he can for his own use, and deserves to be applauded when that •little is more than might be expected, given his physical weakness in comparison to the gigantic powers of Nature. All praise of civilization, or art, or invention, is so much *dispraise* of Nature—an admission of Nature's imperfection, which it is man's praiseworthy business to be always trying to correct.

People have been aware that whatever man does to improve his condition is a criticism of the spontaneous order of Nature, and a thwarting of it. Down through the centuries this awareness has brought new and unprecedented attempts at improvement under the shadow of religious suspicion, as being at least •uncomplimentary and very probably •offensive to the powerful Beings who were supposed to govern the various phenomena of the universe, and whose will was thought to be expressed in the course of Nature. (And when polytheism gave way to monotheism [i.e. when the number of gods that were believed in fell to *one*], the same religious shadow fell, but with 'Beings' replaced by 'Being'.)

Any attempt to shape natural phenomena to the convenience of mankind could easily seem to be an interference with the government of those superior Beings; and though life couldn't have been maintained, much less made pleasant, without perpetual 'interferences' of this kind, each new one was presumably made in fear and trembling, until experience had shown that it could be ventured on without attracting the vengeance of the gods. The priests cleverly worked out ways to •explain the success of particular infringements while •maintaining the general dread of encroaching on the divine administration. They did this by representing each of the principal human inventions as the gift and favour of some god. The old religions also provided many ways of *consulting* the gods and getting their explicit permission for what would otherwise have seemed a breach of their privileges. When •oracles had ceased, any religion that recognized a •revelation provided ways for doing the same thing. The •Roman• Catholic religion had the resource of an infallible Church, authorized to say which human interventions in the natural order were permitted or forbidden; and, failing this, there could always be appeals to the Bible to decide whether any particular practice had been allowed, explicitly or by implication. The notion remained that man was granted this liberty to control Nature only as a special favour, and only as far his real *needs* required it; and there was always a tendency, though it lessened through time, to think that anyone who tried to exert *much* power over Nature was going further than any man should go, and impiously trying to usurp divine power. The lines of •the Latin poet• Horace in which he scolds the familiar arts of shipbuilding and navigation as 'wicked crimes' indicate that even in that sceptical age the old sentiment was still alive. [In Mill's time, 'sentiment' could mean 'belief' and could mean 'feeling'. He may sometimes be using it to straddle those two, wanting to steer clear

of the argument about whether 'the old sentiment' (for example) was a feeling or a belief. So 'sentiment' will be left untouched throughout this version.] The intensity of the corresponding feeling in the middle ages was not quite the same thing, because it was mixed up with superstition about dealing with evil spirits; but the accusation of

•prying into the Almighty's secrets
long remained a powerful weapon of attack against unpopular inquirers into Nature; and the accusation of

•presumptuously trying to defeat Providence's designs still retains enough of its original force to be thrown in as a make-weight, along with other objections, when there is a desire to find fault with any new effort of human forethought and inventiveness. [Mill uses 'Providence' sometimes to mean 'God' and sometimes to mean something like 'God's protective care of us'.] No-one says that God doesn't want the spontaneous order of the created world to be altered, or even that he doesn't want it altered in any new way. But there still exists a vague notion that •though it is quite all right to control this or that natural phenomenon, the general system of Nature is a model for us to imitate; that •we should on the whole be guided by the spirit and general conception of Nature's own ways; that •those ways are God's work, and are therefore perfect; that •man can't rival their unapproachable excellence, and can best show his skill and piety by trying as best he can to reproduce their likeness; and that •some special parts (at least) of the spontaneous order of Nature are in a special sense expressions of God's will—pointers showing the direction that things in general, and therefore our voluntary actions, are intended to take. (The particular parts will always be selected according to the speaker's predilections!) •Feelings of this sort are suppressed on ordinary occasions by the current of life that runs against them; but •they are ready to break out whenever custom is silent, and the instinctive

promptings of the mind have nothing opposed to them but reason; and speech-makers continually appeal to them, perhaps not convincing opponents but at least strengthening the confidence of those who already hold the opinion that the speaker wants to recommend. It probably doesn't often happen these days that

someone is persuaded to approve a course of action because he sees it as analogous to God's government of the world;

but it does often happen that

that analogy exerts great force on someone who feels it to be a great support for anything that he is already inclined to approve.

If this notion of imitating the ways of Providence as manifested in Nature is seldom expressed plainly and down-rightly as a generally valid maxim, it also is seldom directly contradicted. Those who find it blocking their way prefer to steer around the obstacle rather than to attack it: often they themselves have something of this feeling, and in any case they are afraid to draw accusations of impiety down on themselves by saying anything that might be thought to disparage God's works. So they usually try to show that they have as much right to this religious argument as their opponents have, and that if the course they recommend seems to conflict with some part of the ways of Providence there is some other part that it agrees with *better* than does what the opponents are arguing for. When the great *a priori* fallacies are dealt with in this way, some progress is made by the clearing away of particular errors, but the causes of the errors are still left standing, and aren't much weakened by each conflict. Still, a long series of such partial victories creates precedents that can be appealed to in subsequent arguments; and this creates a growing hope that the misplaced feeling of the obligation to follow

Nature, after so many partial retreats, may some day be compelled to an unconditional surrender. It is an undeniable fact that

the order of Nature, when not modified by man, is something that no just and benevolent Being would have made with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as an example;

and however offensive many religious persons may find this proposition to be, it is undeniable and they *should* be willing to look it in the face. If the world were made *wholly* by a just and benevolent Being, and not partly by Beings with very different qualities, it could only be as a deliberately imperfect work which man, in his limited sphere, is to exercise justice and benevolence in amending. The best people have always held it to be the essence of religion that man's chief duty on earth is to improve himself; and nearly all of them (the exceptions being monkish quietists) have associated this deep down in their minds (though they aren't often willing to say it out loud, clearly) with the additional religious duty of improving the world—the human part of it and also the material part, the order of physical Nature.

We all have certain preconceptions that might fairly be called *natural prejudices*, because they arise from feelings that are natural and inevitable. But they intrude into matters that are none of their business, and when we are thinking about our present subject we should clear our minds of them. One of these feelings is the astonishment, rising to awe, that is inspired (even independently of all religious sentiment) by any of the greater natural phenomena. •A hurricane; •a mountain precipice; •the desert; •the ocean, either agitated or at rest; •the solar system, and the great cosmic forces that hold it together; •the boundless firmament, and to an educated mind •any single star—all these arouse feelings

that make all human enterprises and powers appear so insignificant that while you are in this frame of mind it will seem to you intolerably cheeky for such a tiny creature as man to look *critically* at things so far above him, or dare to measure himself against the grandeur of the universe. But if you consult your own consciousness a little, you'll see that what makes these phenomena so impressive is simply their vastness. Their sublimeness consists in their enormous extent in space and time, or their enormous power; and a sense of this vastness always arouses a feeling that is more like terror than like any moral emotion. The enormous scale of these phenomena may well arouse wonder, and it squashes any idea of rivaling them, but the feeling it inspires is of a totally different character from *admiration of excellence*. People whose awe turns into admiration may be aesthetically developed, but they are morally *undeveloped*. Our imaginative make-up has this remarkable feature: conceptions of •greatness and •power, when we vividly make them real in our minds, produce a feeling which, though in its higher intensities it's close to pain, we prefer to most pleasures. But we are just as capable of having this feeling towards •power that could be harmful to us; indeed we have it most strongly towards •powers of the universe when we are most vividly aware of their capacity to harm us. It would be a great error to move from the fact that

•these natural powers overawe us by a •single attribute—namely enormous power—that we can't imitate

to the conclusion that

•we should try to imitate their •other attributes, modelling our use of our small powers on the example that Nature sets us with her vast forces.

Consider the facts! When you look squarely at these cosmic forces, what strikes you most forcibly is their

•greatness and—second only to that—their perfect and absolute •uncaringness. They go straight to their end without regard for what or whom they crush along the way. When optimists try to prove that *whatever is, is right*, they have to maintain not that •Nature ever turns one step from her path to avoid trampling us into destruction, but that •it would be very unreasonable to expect that she should. Pope's line 'Shall gravitation cease when you go by?' may be a just rebuke to anyone who is silly enough to expect common human morality from Nature. But if the context was a confrontation between two men, rather than between one man and a natural phenomenon, Pope's triumphant line would be regarded as an extraordinary bit of impudence. A man who persisted in hurling stones or firing cannon when another man 'goes by', and having killed him tried to excuse himself by a similar plea—namely, that his actions are natural events, and one can't expect Nature to change its ways in the interests of individuals—the plea wouldn't succeed and he would very deservedly be found guilty of murder.

In sober truth, nearly all the things that men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are Nature's everyday performances. *Killing*, the most criminal act recognized by human laws, is done once by Nature to every living being, and in most cases it kills after prolonged tortures such as only the greatest human monsters ever purposely inflicted on others. We might arbitrarily decide to count as *murder* only acts that end someone's life before he has had what is supposed to be his allotted term; but Nature does that too, to all but a small percentage of lives, and does it in all the violent or sneaky ways in which the worst human beings take the lives of others. Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, throws them to wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyr, starves

them to death, freezes them, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of her vapours, and has hundreds of other hideous deaths in reserve, such as the ingenious cruelty of the worst Roman emperor never surpassed. [The phrase 'the wheel' refers, like everything else in that catalogue, to a horribly painful method whereby humans executed other humans.] Nature does all this with the most lofty disregard both of mercy and of justice, firing her weapons indiscriminately at the best and noblest people along with the lowest and worst; at those who are engaged in the highest and worthiest enterprises, and often as the direct consequence of the noblest acts—as though Nature were *punishing* people for acting well! It can happen that

- the well-being of a whole people depends on one person's staying alive,
- the long-term prospects of the human race depend on a second person's staying alive,
- the death of a third person will bring him great relief,
- the death of a fourth person will be a blessing to the people he has been oppressing;

and Nature will mow down the first and second just as readily as the other two. Such are Nature's dealings with life. Even when she doesn't intend to kill, she inflicts those same tortures with what looks like reckless cruelty. Because Nature so briskly terminates the life of each individual animal, she has to make arrangements for the perpetual renewal of animal life; and her clumsy arrangements for *that* have the result that a human being can come into the world only through someone else's being literally stretched on the rack for hours or days, quite often leading to death. [This refers to normal human child-birth.] In the catalogue of human crimes, •taking the means of livelihood is second only to •taking life (and according to one high authority the two are first-equal). Nature does this too on the largest scale

and with the most callous indifference. A single hurricane destroys the hopes of a season; a flight of locusts or a flood desolates a district; a trifling chemical change in an edible root starves a million people [this refers to the 1845–9 potato blight in Ireland, which killed about a million people]. The waves of the sea, like bandit gangs, seize and confiscate the wealth of the rich, and the miserable possessions of the poor, with the same accompaniments of stripping, wounding, and killing as their human counterparts. In short, everything that the worst •men do against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by •natural agents. Nature has noyades more fatal than those of Carrier; her explosions of fire damp are as destructive as human artillery; her plague and cholera far surpass the poison cups of the Borgias. [A noyade is a mass execution by drowning, such as was ordered by Jean-Baptiste Carrier during the French revolutionary terror. Firedamp is an explosive mixture of gases that accumulates in coal mines. The Borgias were a powerful and sometimes murderous Spanish-Italian family, variously influential in Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries.] Even the love of 'order' that is thought to be a •following of the ways of Nature is in fact a •contradiction of them. Everything that people deplore as 'disorder' and its consequences is precisely a counterpart of Nature's ways. Anarchy and the reign of terror are overmatched in injustice, ruin, and death by a hurricane and an epidemic of plague.

'All these things are for wise and good ends' some people say. The first thing I have to say about this is that even if it is true it is altogether beside the point. Suppose it's true that contrary to appearances these horrors lead to good ends when *Nature* perpetrates them, no-one thinks they would do so if *we* performed them following Nature's example; so the course of Nature can't be a proper model for us to imitate. Either

- it is right that we should kill because Nature kills, torture because Nature tortures, ruin and devastate because Nature does so,

or

- we should pay no attention to what Nature does and attend only to what it is good to do.

If there is such a thing as a *reductio ad absurdum* [i.e. an argument showing that P is true because not-P has consequences that are absurd], this surely amounts to one. If it is a sufficient reason for doing *one* thing that Nature does it, why not *another* thing? If not all things, why anything? The workings of the non-human world are full of things that would be deemed the greatest crimes if men did them, so it can't be religious or moral in us to guide our actions by the analogy of how things work in Nature. This proposition remains true, whatever secret power of producing good may reside in the events of Nature that we see as most dreadful and that everyone thinks it would be a crime to produce artificially.

But really no-one consistently believes in any such secret power. The phrases ascribing perfection to the course of Nature have to be understood as exaggerations of poetic or devotional feeling, not intended to stand the test of being coolly thought about. No-one, either religious or irreligious, believes that Nature's hurtful agencies, considered as a whole, lead to good results in any way other than by inciting human rational creatures to rise up and struggle *against* them. If we really believed that those agencies were set to work by a benevolent Providence as ways of accomplishing wise purposes that couldn't be achieved otherwise, then everything we do that tends to hold down these natural agencies or to restrict the amount of harm they can do—everything from draining a disease-causing marsh right down to curing a toothache or opening an umbrella—ought to

be regarded as impious; and though we can occasionally see undercurrents of sentiment tending in that direction, nobody actually thinks that such actions are impious. On the contrary, the improvements that the civilized part of mankind take most pride in consist in more successfully *warding off the natural calamities* which, if we really believed what most people say they believe, we would *cherish as medicines* that God in his infinite wisdom had provided for our earthly state. [We are about to meet the phrase 'natural evil'. This doesn't use 'evil' as we do these days in application to people or actions, meaning 'worse than merely wicked'. Natural evils are just events or states of affairs that are harmful to us, bad for us, on the negative side of the value-ledger.] Also, each human generation averts much more natural evil than its predecessors did, so that if the theory that natural disasters are designed by God for our own good were true, we ought by now to have experienced some terrible and tremendous calamity—one that we had previously been protected by the supposed 'medicine' of the physical evils we have learnt to conquer. But anyone who acted as if that were what he thought would be more likely, I think, to be confined as a lunatic than revered as a saint!

No doubt it does often happen that good comes out of evil; and when that happens it is so agreeable that many people are eager to go on about it. I have two things to say about this. (1) It is true of human crimes as often as it is of natural calamities. The fire of London, which is believed to have had such a good effect on the health of the city, would have produced that effect just as much if it had been really the work of the *furor papisticus* [Latin, roughly = 'Roman Catholic terrorism'] so long commemorated on the Monument to the fire in London. The deaths of those whom tyrants or persecutors have made martyrs in a noble cause have done a service to mankind that wouldn't have been obtained if they had died by accident or disease. Yet whatever incidental and

unexpected benefits may result from crimes, they are still crimes. (2) If good frequently comes out of evil, it is equally common for evil to come out of good. For every case in which

- a public or private event was regretted at the time when it occurred, but was declared to be providential [roughly = 'sent by God'] at a later period because of some unforeseen good consequence,

there is one in which

- an event was thought to be satisfactory at the time when it occurred, but turned out later to be calamitous or fatal to those whom it had appeared to benefit.

Such conflicts between the beginning and the end, or between the event and the outcome, are as frequent in the bad-out-of-seeming-good cases as in the good-out-of-seeming-bad ones; and the former are just as often noticed and attended to as the latter. But there isn't the same inclination to generalize about bad coming from seeming good; or at any rate such cases aren't regarded these days (though they were in ancient times) as indicating God's purposes in the way the good-out-of-seeming-bad cases are thought to do. When people think in a general way about bad out of seeming good, they settle for moralizing about the imperfect nature of our foresight, the uncertainty of events, and the futility of human expectations. The simple fact is this:

- Human interests are so complicated, and the effects of any event whatever are so many and various, that if the event affects mankind at all its influence on them is nearly always both good and bad.

If a majority of personal misfortunes have their good side, it hardly ever happens that one person receives some good fortune that doesn't also include something for him or someone else to regret. Also, many •misfortunes are so overwhelming that any favourable side they may have is entirely overshadowed and made insignificant; whereas the

corresponding statement can seldom be made concerning •blessings. The effects of every cause depend so much on the circumstances that accidentally accompany it that there are sure to be many cases where something initially good leads to consequences that are over-all bad, and where something initially bad leads to consequences that are over-all good; but neither of these is what generally happens. On the contrary, both good and evil naturally tend to bear fruit, each of its own kind, good producing good, and evil producing evil. It is one of Nature's general rules, and part of her habitual injustice, that 'to him that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath' [Matthew 25:29]. The ordinary and predominant tendency of good is towards more good. Health, strength, wealth, knowledge, virtue, are not only good in themselves but help one to acquire more good. It can be good of the same kind:

The person who can learn easily is the one who already knows a lot; it is the strong and not the sickly person who can do everything that most conduces to health; those who find it easy to make money are not the poor but the rich.

And of other kinds:

Health, strength, knowledge and talents are all means of acquiring riches; and riches are often an indispensable means of acquiring these.

And conversely, whatever may be said about evil turning into good, the general tendency of evil is towards further evil.

- Bodily illness makes the body more susceptible to disease; it produces physical weakness, sometimes feebleness of mind, and often the loss of ability to earn a living. All •severe pain, whether bodily or mental, tends to make the person more liable to pain for ever after.
- Poverty is the parent of a thousand mental and moral evils, What is still worse, when someone is habitually injured or oppressed, this lowers the

whole tone of his character. One bad action leads to others, in the agent himself, in the bystanders, and in the sufferers. All bad qualities are strengthened by habit, and all vices and follies tend to spread. Intellectual defects generate moral ones, and vice versa; and every intellectual or moral defect generates others of the same kind, and so on without end.

I think that that much applauded class of authors, the writers on natural theology, have entirely lost their way, missing the only line of argument that could have made their speculations acceptable to anyone who can tell when two propositions contradict one another. They have exhausted the resources of bad argument to make it appear that all the suffering in the world exists to prevent greater—that misery exists to ward off ·greater· misery. However skillfully argued for, this thesis could help to explain and justify the works only of *limited* beings who have to labour under conditions independent of their own will; but it can't apply to a Creator who is assumed to be omnipotent. If *he* bends to a supposed necessity, he himself makes the necessity which he bends to. [Mill means 'If he bends. . .' etc. sarcastically. His point is that because God makes the necessity, it is absurd to think of him as 'bending' to it—e.g. doing bad x because that's the only way to get good y. If x is the only way to y, that's because God has made it so, and so it is open to him to revoke this 'necessity'.] If the maker of the world can do anything he wants to, then he wants ·us to have· misery, and there's no escape from that conclusion. The more consistent of those who have thought themselves qualified to 'vindicate the ways of God to man'—quoting from Alexander Pope—have tried to avoid the alternative by hardening their hearts and denying that misery is an evil. [The 'alternative' here is presumably the view that God is not omnipotent.] The goodness of God, they say, consists in his willing not the •happiness of his creatures but their •virtue; and even if the universe isn't happy, it is just. There are objections to this scheme of

ethics, but I'll set them aside because this approach doesn't at all get rid of the difficulty we are now discussing. If the creator of mankind planned to make them all •virtuous, his designs are as completely thwarted as if he had planned to make them all •happy; the order of Nature is constructed with even less regard to the requirements of •justice than to those of •benevolence. If the law of all creation were *justice*, and the creator were omnipotent, then each person's share of suffering and happiness would be exactly proportioned to that person's good or evil deeds; no human being would have a worse lot than another unless he deserved worse; accident or favouritism would have no part in such a world, and every human life would be the playing out of a drama constructed like a perfect moral tale. No-one can blind himself to the fact that the world we live in is totally different from this! A sign of *how* different it is can be seen from the fact that *the need to redress the balance* has been regarded as one of the strongest arguments for another life after death—which amounts to an admission that the way things go in *this* life is unjust. You might want to object:

God doesn't rate pleasure or pain highly enough to make *them* the reward of the good or the punishment of the wicked. Really, virtue is itself the greatest good and vice the greatest evil.

In that case, however, virtue and vice ought to be distributed among people according to what they have done to deserve them; ·but that is not what we find·. On the contrary, every kind of moral depravity is laid upon many people by the facts about where and when and by whom they were born— through the fault of their parents, of society, or of uncontrollable circumstances, and certainly through no fault of their own. Not even on the most distorted and shrunken theory of good that ever was constructed by religious or philosophical fanaticism can the government of Nature be

made to resemble the work of a Being who is both good and omnipotent.

There is only one admissible moral theory of creation, namely this:

The force of good *cannot* subdue—completely and all at once—the powers of evil, either physical or moral. It couldn't •place mankind in a world free from the need for an incessant struggle with the powers of evil, or •make men always victorious in that struggle; but it could and did •make them capable of carrying on the fight with vigour and with progressively increasing success.

Of all the religious explanations of the order of Nature, this is the only one that doesn't contradict either •itself or •the facts that it is trying to explain. According to it, man's duty is not simply

•to take care of his own interests by obeying irresistible power,

but rather

•to play his part as a somewhat useful *helper* for a perfectly well-intentioned God.

[That clause replaces Mill's 'standing forward a not ineffectual auxiliary to a Being of perfect beneficence'.] If we are looking for a faith that will stimulate a man to exert himself, *this* one will do it better than a vague and inconsistent reliance on an author of good who is supposed to be also the author of evil. And I venture to assert that this •two-conflicting-powers doctrine• has really been the faith—sometimes unconsciously, perhaps—of all

who have drawn strength and support of any worthy kind from trust in a superintending Providence. In the context of religion, the words men use to express their beliefs are far from indicating what they really believe. Many have imagined themselves to be favourites of an omnipotent but capricious and despotic god, and have derived an *unadmirable* confidence from that. But those who have been strengthened in goodness by relying on the sympathizing support of a powerful and good Governor of the world have, I am sure, never really believed this Governor to be strictly speaking *omnipotent*. They have always saved his goodness at the expense of his power. Perhaps they have believed that he *could* remove all the thorns from their individual path, but only by causing greater harm to someone else or frustrating some purpose of greater importance to the general well-being. They have believed that he could do •any one thing, but not •any combination of things; that his government, like human government, is a system of adjustments and compromises; that the world is *inevitably* imperfect, contrary to his intention.¹ And since the exertion of all his power to make the world as little imperfect as possible leaves it no better than *this*, they have to regard his power as not merely finite but extremely limited (though of course far greater than we can gauge). They have to suppose, for example, that the best he could do for his human creatures was to make an immense majority of all who have yet existed be born (without any fault of their own) as South American Indians or Eskimos or something nearly as brutal and degraded, but to give

¹ This irresistible conviction comes out in the writings of religious philosophers, in exact proportion to the general clearness of their thinking. It nowhere shines forth so distinctly as in Leibniz's famous *Théodicée*, so strangely mistaken for a system of optimism, and, as such, satirized by Voltaire •in his novel *Candide*• on grounds that don't even touch the author's argument. Leibniz maintains that this world is the best (not of all •imaginable worlds, but) of all •possible worlds; he argues that it must be that, because this is the world that God, who is absolute goodness, has chosen. On every page of the work he tacitly assumes an abstract possibility and impossibility, independent of the divine power; and although his pious feelings make him continue to label God's power as 'omnipotence', his explanation makes it clear that he takes that term to mean 'power extending to all that is within the limits of that abstract possibility'.

mankind capacities which—by being developed for very many centuries in toil and suffering, and after many of the best humans have sacrificed their lives for the purpose—have eventually enabled some chosen portions of the species to grow into something better, capable of being developed in further centuries into something really good, of which so far there have only been individual instances. It may be possible to believe, as Plato did, that perfect goodness, limited and thwarted in every direction by the stiff unworkableness of the material, has done this because it couldn't do any better. But as for the thesis that the same perfectly wise and good Being had absolute power over the material, and freely *chose* to make it what it is—one might have thought that this couldn't be accepted by anyone who had the simplest notions of moral good and evil! [Mill means 'anyone who had *even* the simplest notions' etc.—i.e. anyone who wasn't a moral idiot.] And any such person, whatever kind of religious language he may use, must believe that if •Nature and •man are both the works of a perfectly good Being, that Being intended Nature as a scheme to be amended, not imitated, by man.

But even though they can't believe that Nature as a whole manifests the designs of perfect wisdom and benevolence, men aren't willing to give up the idea that •at least *some part* of Nature must be intended as an example or model; that •the moral qualities they are accustomed to ascribe to God must be exhibited in some portion or other of his works; that •if not *everything that exists* then at least *something that exists* must not only be a faultless model of what ought to be, but must be intended to be our guide and standard in correcting the rest of what exists. They won't settle for believing that what tends to good is to be imitated and perfected, and what tends to evil is to be corrected; they are anxious for •some more definite indication of God's designs; and being persuaded that this must be met with somewhere in his

works, they take upon themselves the dangerous work of picking and choosing among his works in quest of •it. Any selection they make must be perfectly arbitrary unless it is guided by the general maxim that God intends all the good and none of the evil; and if their selection yields results that differ from what could be deduced from that maxim, it must be to exactly that extent pernicious.

No accredited doctrine has ever said *what* particular parts of the order of Nature are to be thought of as designed for our moral instruction and guidance; and accordingly each person's individual preferences, or momentary convenience, have decided what parts of the divine government *he* will recommend us to take as models for our own behaviour. No such recommendation can be more valid than any other, because there's no way of deciding that certain of God's works are more truly expressions of his character than the rest; and the only selection that doesn't lead to immoral results is the selection of the parts and aspects of Nature that are most conducive to the general good—i.e. ones that point to an end which, if the entire scheme expresses a single omnipotent and consistent will, is evidently *not* the end intended by it!

However, people on the look-out for special •indications of God's will have thought—not without plausibility—that one particular element in the construction of the world is specially fitted to offer •them, namely *the active impulses of human and other animate beings*. One can imagine such people arguing that •when the Author of Nature was creating circumstances, he may not have meant to indicate how his rational creatures should cope with those circumstances; but that •when he implanted positive stimuli in the creatures themselves, stirring them up to a particular kind of action, we can't doubt that he intended them to perform that sort of action. This reasoning, if followed out consistently,

leads to the conclusion that God intended and approves everything that human beings do: everything they do is a consequence of some of the impulses with which God must have endowed them, so all must equally be considered as done in obedience to his will. As the people in question shrank from this practical conclusion, they had to pull back a little and say that some but not all of the active Nature of mankind points to a special intention of God's regarding how men should behave. It seemed natural to suppose that these parts must be the ones in which God's hand—rather than the man's own—can be seen (that is why people often contrast 'man as God made him' with 'man as he has made himself'). What is done with deliberation seems more the man's own act than what he does from sudden impulse, and he is held more completely responsible for the former; and so the *considered* part of human conduct is apt to be set down as man's share in the business, and the *unconsidered* as God's. This leads to the strand of sentiment that is so common in the modern world (though unknown to the ancient philosophers) which exalts instinct at the expense of reason—an aberration that is made even worse by an opinion that is commonly combined with it, namely that almost every feeling or impulse that acts promptly without waiting to ask questions is an instinct. Thus almost every kind of unreflecting and uncalculating impulse receives a kind of consecration, except for impulses which, though unreflecting at the moment, arise from previous habits of reflection. These are obviously not instinctive, so they don't meet with the favour accorded to the rest. The result is that authority over reason is granted to all unreflecting impulses except the ones that have the best chance of being right! I don't mean that anyone even *claims* to carry out this system of judgment consistently; life couldn't go on if it weren't admitted that impulses must be controlled, and that reason

ought to govern our actions. What I am discussing is the proposal not to drive reason from the helm—i.e. deprive it of its role as steersman of the human ship—but rather to require it to steer only in a particular way. Instinct is not to govern, but reason is to practise some vague and unquantifiable amount of deference to instinct. Although the impression in favour of instinct as being a special exhibition of God's purposes has not been shaped up into a consistent general theory, it remains a standing prejudice that can be roused into hostility to reason in any case where the dictate of the rational faculty hasn't acquired the authority of prescription.

I shan't here tackle the difficult psychological question about which impulses are instincts and which are not; that would require a book to itself. We don't have to touch on any disputed theoretical points to be able to judge that the instinctive part of human nature is *very* unworthy to be held up as our chief excellence—as the part of creation in which the hand of infinite goodness and wisdom is especially visible. To avoid disputes over where the line around instincts should be drawn, let us allow that everything that anyone has ever claimed to be an instinct is an instinct; it is still true that nearly every respect-worthy attribute of humanity is the result not of instinct but of a victory over instinct; and that nearly all of what is valuable in the natural man consists of his *capacities*—a whole world of *possibilities*, none of which can generate *realities* except through discipline that is utterly artificial.

The idea that *goodness is natural* grew up in a highly artificialized condition of human nature. I don't think it *could* have grown up otherwise, because no-one would have believed it if it hadn't been the case that good sentiments arose unprompted when there was occasion for them; that required that the good sentiments had come to predominate

over bad ones, which happened because they were *habitual*, which came about through a long course of *artificial* education. Back when mankind were nearer to their natural state, cultivated observers regarded the natural man as a sort of wild animal, distinguished chiefly by being craftier than the other beasts of the field; and all the worth of anyone's character was thought to result from a sort of *taming*—a term often applied by the ancient philosophers to the appropriate discipline of human beings. The truth is that almost every point of excellence belonging to human character is decidedly in conflict with the untutored feelings of human nature.

The virtue that we most expect to find and really do find in uncivilized men is *courage*. Yet courage is absolutely and totally a victory over one of the most powerful emotions of human nature. If there is any one feeling or attribute more natural than all others to human beings, it is *fear*; and no greater proof can be given of the power of artificial discipline than its conquest, at all times and places, of that mighty and universal sentiment. No doubt individual human beings differ enormously in how easy or hard it is for them to acquire this virtue of courage. Difference of original temperament makes an enormous difference here—more than in almost any other department of human excellence. But it is reasonable to question whether any human being is *naturally courageous*. Many are naturally quarrelsome or irritable or excitable, and these passions when strongly aroused may make them unaware of fear. But take away the conflicting emotion in these cases and fear comes back into command: consistent courage is always the effect of cultivation [= 'development, training, upbringing, education']. The courage that is occasionally—*not* generally—found among tribes of savages is as much the result of education as the courage of the Spartans or Romans. In all such tribes there is a most emphatic direction of the public sentiment into

every channel of expression through which honour can be paid to courage and cowardice can be held up to contempt and derision. You may want to say:

Just as the expression of a sentiment implies the sentiment itself, so also the training of the young to be courageous presupposes a naturally courageous people.

No, it doesn't. It presupposes only what all good customs presuppose—that there must have been individuals better than the rest, who set the customs going. Some individuals, who like other people had fears to conquer, must have had strength of mind and will to conquer them for themselves. They would obtain the influence belonging to heroes, for anything that is both astonishing and obviously useful is always admired; and partly through this admiration, partly through the fear they themselves arouse, these heroes would obtain the power of legislators, and could establish whatever customs they pleased.

Let's think about *cleanliness*. It marks the most visible, and one of the most radical, of the moral differences between human beings and most of the lower animals; the lack of it does more than anything else to make men bestial. Can anything be more entirely artificial? Children and the lower classes of most countries seem to be actually fond of dirt; the vast majority of the human race don't care about it, whole nations of otherwise civilized and cultivated human beings tolerate it in some of its worst forms, and only a very small minority are consistently offended by it. Indeed the universal law of dirt seems to be that *uncleanliness offends only those who aren't familiar with it*, so that the only people who are disgusted by every sort of uncleanliness are the ones who have lived in such an artificial state that they are unused to it in any form. Of all virtues this is the most obviously not instinctive but a triumph over instinct. Assuredly neither

cleanliness nor the love of it is natural to man; all that is natural in this area is the capacity to acquire a love of cleanliness.

So far I have given examples only of •personal virtues (Bentham called them ‘the self-regarding virtues’), because these might seem to be congenial even to the uncultivated mind ·and therefore to be natural rather than artificial·. I hardly need to say anything about the •social virtues, because our experience so firmly declares that selfishness is natural. I am not at all denying that sympathy is natural also. On the contrary, I believe that the possibility of developing goodness and nobleness, and the hope of their eventually coming to be uppermost ·in our natures·, rests entirely on the important fact that sympathy *is* natural. But ·for sympathy to have the role that we want it to have, artificial aid is needed·. If someone is left with his natural sympathy, and not helped to develop it in any way, he will in fact be as selfish as anyone else, differing from others only in the *kind* of selfishness that he has. What he will have is not •solitary selfishness but •sympathetic selfishness—two-person egoism, or three-person or four-person; he may be very amiable and delightful to those for whom he has sympathy, yet grossly unjust and unfeeling to the rest of the world. . . . Has there ever been *anyone* whose *natural* benevolence—without teaching by instructors, friends or books, and without intentional self-modelling according to an ideal—was a more powerful attribute than selfishness in any of its forms? We don’t need to answer that. Everyone must admit, at least, that such cases are extremely rare, and that’s all I need for my argument.

Let us now set aside the issue of self-control for the benefit of •others, and consider the commonest self-control for •one’s own benefit—the ability to sacrifice a present desire to a distant objective or a general purpose. A person must

have this ability if he is to bring his actions into line with his individual good as he conceives it; but even this is most unnatural to the undisciplined human being, as can be seen in

- the long apprenticeship that children serve to it,
- the very imperfect manner in which it is acquired by people born to power, whose will is seldom resisted, and by all who have been early and much indulged, and
- the notable absence of it in savages, in soldiers and sailors, and in a somewhat less degree in nearly the whole of the poorer classes in this and many other countries.

The principal difference between this virtue and others (so far as the present discussion is concerned) is that although it requires a course of •teaching just as the others do, it is more capable than they are of being •self-taught. It is a cliché that *self-control is only learnt by experience*; so that this endowment is much *nearer to* being natural than the others I have discussed, in that it tends to be developed by personal experience, without external teaching. Nature doesn’t of herself give us •this virtue any more than she gives us •others; but she often administers the rewards and punishments that help prudence to grow—whereas for other virtues the appropriate rewards and punishments have to be created artificially for the specific purpose of developing virtues.

Truthfulness might seem to have a more plausible claim to being natural than any other virtue, because speech usually conforms to fact—or at least doesn’t intentionally deviate from it—unless the speaker has a motive for lying or misleading. And so we find writers like Rousseau happily decorating •savage life with the virtue of truthfulness, and contrasting this with the treachery and trickery of

•civilization. Unfortunately, this is a mere fancy picture, contradicted by all the realities of savage life. Savages are always liars. They haven't the faintest notion of truth as a virtue. They have a notion of not harming—and that includes not harming through lies—individuals to whom have some special tie of obligation: their chief, perhaps their guest, or their friend. These feelings of obligation are the taught morality of the savage state, and grow out of its circumstances. But savages haven't the remotest idea of its being •honourable to respect truth for truth's sale; and this holds •not only for outright savages but also• for all the countries of the East, and the greater part of Europe: and in the few countries that *are* developed enough to have such a point of •honour, the only people to whom it makes a difference—i.e. the only ones who are truthful when seriously tempted to lie or deceive—are a small minority.

The expression 'natural justice' is commonly used; so I suppose that justice is a virtue that is generally thought to be directly implanted by Nature. I believe, though, that the sentiment of justice is entirely an artifact: the idea of natural justice doesn't •precede that of conventional justice—it comes •after it. [see note on 'sentiment' on page 8.] The further we look back into the human race's early ways of thinking, whether we consider ancient times (including those of the Old Testament) or the parts of mankind who haven't made any advance over ancient times, the more completely we find men's notions of justice being defined and limited by the explicit provisions of •human• law. A man's 'just rights' have meant the rights that the law gave him; a 'just man' was someone who never infringed or tried to infringe the legal property or other legal rights of others. The notion of

a higher justice that has authority over all •human• laws, and is binding on the •human• conscience even on matters on which human laws say nothing,

is a later extension of the idea •of law•, suggested by legal justice and constructed on an analogy with it. 'Natural law' tracks along with human law, running parallel to the latter through all the shades and varieties of the sentiment •of law•, and borrowing nearly all its terminology from that source. The very words *justus* and *justitia* [Latin, = 'just' and 'justice'] are derived from •the Latin• *jus* = 'law'. 'Courts of justice' and 'administration of justice' always refer to the •human• law-courts.

You may want to say that there must be the *seeds* of all these virtues in human nature, otherwise mankind wouldn't be able to acquire them. I agree about that, but there's more to be said. The weeds that dispute the ground with these beneficent seeds are not themselves •seeds but •chokingly luxuriant growths. In all but about one case in a thousand they would entirely stifle and destroy the seeds of the virtues, if it weren't so strongly the interest of mankind to •cherish the good seeds in one another that they always •do so as far as their imperfect degree of intelligence allows. Some fortunately placed specimens of the human race receive that kind of fostering from their childhood, and don't have it counteracted by unfavourable influences; for *them* the most elevated sentiments of which humanity is capable become a second nature, stronger than the first, not so much subduing the original nature as merging it into itself. . . . This artificially created or at least artificially perfected •second• nature of the best and noblest human beings is the only *nature* that it is ever commendable to follow. I need hardly say that even this can't be set up as a •basic• standard of conduct, because it is itself the result of training and development which (if rational and not accidental) must have been determined by a standard already chosen.

This brief survey is quite enough to show that the duty of man is the same with regard to •his own nature as it is

with regard to •the nature of everything else—namely not to •follow but to •amend it. But some people who don't deny that instinct ought to be subordinate to reason still defer to Nature in a certain way, by maintaining that every natural inclination must have some sphere of action granted to it, some opening left for its to be satisfied. 'All natural wishes', they say, 'must have been implanted in us for a purpose'; and they push this argument so far that we often hear it maintained that for every wish that it is natural to have there must be a corresponding provision in the order of the universe for its gratification. Thus, many people believe that the •desire for an indefinite prolongation of existence is in itself a sufficient proof of the •reality of a future life!

What I have been discussing are attempts to discover in detail what the designs of Providence are so that we can help Providence to bring them about. I think there is a radical absurdity in all this. Those who argue from particular bits of evidence that Providence intends something-or-other either •believe that God can do anything that he wants to do or •believe that he can't. If the first supposition is adopted—if Providence is omnipotent—then whatever happens is something Providence intended to happen; the fact of its happening proves that Providence intended it. In that case, everything that a human being can do is predestined by Providence and is a fulfillment of its designs. But if... Providence doesn't intend everything that happens, but only what is good, then indeed man has it in his power, by his voluntary actions, to aid the intentions of Providence; but he can learn what those intentions *are* only by considering

- what tends to promote the general good,
- and not
- what man has a natural inclination to.

Why? Because on this view God's power is limited by inscrutable but insurmountable obstacles; so for all we

know man may have been created with desires that will never—perhaps that *ought* never to—be fulfilled. Man's natural inclinations, like any of the other contrivances that we observe in Nature, may be the expression not of •God's will but of •the chains that impede its free action; in which case, if we take hints from these for the guidance of our own conduct we may be falling into a trap laid by the enemy. The assumption that everything that infinite goodness can desire actually happens in this universe, or at least that we must never say or suppose that it doesn't, is worthy only of those whose slavish fears make them offer the homage of lies to a Being who, they claim to think, can't be deceived and loathes all falsehood!

With regard to this particular hypothesis, that

- all •natural impulses, and all •propensities that are universal enough and spontaneous enough to be capable of being thought to be instincts, must exist for good purposes, and ought to be only regulated, not repressed

—this is of course true of the majority of •them, because the species couldn't have survived unless most of its inclinations had been directed to things that are needed or useful for its preservation. But unless we define 'instinct' in such a way that there are *very* few instincts, it must be granted that we also have bad instincts, which education should aim not merely to regulate but to wipe out, or rather to starve by disuse. Those who understand 'instinct' broadly enough to allow that there are many of them usually include among the instincts one that they call 'destructiveness'—an instinct to destroy for destruction's sake. I can't think of any good reason for preserving this, or for preserving another propensity that is at least very like an instinct—namely the so-called 'instinct of domination'. This involves taking delight in exercising despotism, in holding other beings in

subjection to one's own will. A man who takes pleasure in the mere exercise of authority, apart from the purpose for which it is to be employed, is the last person one would willingly trust with authority. A third example: some people are cruel by character, or (as we sometimes say) 'naturally cruel'; they have a real pleasure in seeing the infliction of pain or in inflicting it themselves. This kind of cruelty is not mere hardheartedness, absence of pity or remorse; it is a positive thing, a particular kind of voluptuous excitement. The East, and southern Europe, have provided plenty of examples of this hateful propensity, and they probably still do. I think it will be agreed that this is not one of the natural inclinations that it would be wrong to suppress. The only *question* relating to it would be: Ought we to suppress the man along with the inclination?

But even if it were true that every one of the elementary impulses of human nature has its good side, and can with enough •artificial training be made more useful than hurtful, this wouldn't be much of a concession to the moral significance of Nature, because it must be admitted that without •such training they would fill the world with misery—and I say this of *all* of them, even the ones that are necessary for our preservation. They would turn human life into a caricature of the odious scene of violence and tyranny that is exhibited by the rest of the animal kingdom, except where it is tamed and disciplined by man. People who pride themselves on being able to read the Creator's purposes in his works ought to have seen in the animal kingdom grounds for inferences to conclusions that they hate. If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most obviously designed is that a large proportion of all animals should spend their lives tormenting and devouring other animals. They have been well equipped with the instruments needed for that purpose; their strongest

instincts push them towards it; and many of them seem to have been so constructed as to be incapable of supporting themselves by any other food. Think about all the trouble that has been taken to find benevolent adaptations in Nature; if *a tenth* as much trouble were taken to collect evidence that would blacken the character of the Creator, what a lot of material would be found in the way the lower animals have to live! They are divided with almost no exceptions into •devourers and •devoured, and are subject to a thousand ills from which they can't protect themselves, not having been given the faculties necessary for that. All that saves us from having to believe the animal creation to be the work of a demon is the fact that we don't have to suppose it to have been made by an infinitely powerful Being. If we accepted as a rule of action that we should imitate the Creator's will as revealed in Nature, including the animal kingdom, the most atrocious crimes of the worst men would be more than justified by Providence's apparent intention that all through animated Nature the strong should prey on the weak.

My discussion up to here is far from having exhausted the almost infinite variety of ways in which the idea of *conformity to Nature* is introduced as an element in the ethical evaluation of actions and dispositions. The same favourable prejudgment follows the word 'nature' through the numerous meanings in which it is used as a distinctive term for certain parts of the constitution of humanity as contrasted with other parts. I have so far confined myself to one of these meanings, in which 'nature' stands as a general label for those parts of our mental and moral constitution that are supposed to be •innate, as distinct from those that are •acquired, as when

•nature is contrasted with education, or when •a savage state, without laws, arts, or knowledge, is called a state of Nature, or when •we ask 'Is benevolence,

or the moral sentiment, natural or acquired?', or ask
 •'Is it true that some persons are poets or orators by nature and others are not?'

But •actions and states of human beings are often called 'natural' in another and weaker sense, meaning merely that •they are not taken on deliberately or purposely in the particular case; as when someone is said to move or speak 'with natural grace'; or when someone's 'natural manner' or 'natural character' is thus and so, meaning that that's how it is when he isn't trying to control or disguise it. In a still looser meaning, a person is said to be 'naturally' F (whatever F may be) if •he was F before some special cause had acted on him, or •it is thought that he would be F if such a special cause stopped operating. Thus it may be said that someone is 'naturally dull' but has made himself intelligent by study and perseverance, 'naturally cheerful' but soured by misfortune, 'naturally ambitious' but kept down by lack of opportunity. Finally, the word 'natural', when applied to feelings or conduct, often seems to mean no more than that they are of a kind ordinarily found in human beings; as when we say that on some particular occasion a person acted as it was 'natural' to do, or that a particular response to some sight, or sound, or thought, or incident in life, is 'perfectly natural'.

In each of these senses of the term, the quality called 'natural' is very often known to be worse than the quality contrasted with it; but whenever it isn't too obviously worse for this to be called into question, there seems to be a thought that by describing it as 'natural' we are saying something that counts considerably in its favour. Speaking for myself, I know of only one sense in which 'nature' and 'natural' as applied to human beings are really terms of praise, and then the praise is only negative. I'm talking about the use of 'natural' to stand for the absence of *affectation*. We use

'affectation' to refer to *the effort to appear to be other than one really is*, in cases where the motive or the situation doesn't (on one hand) •excuse the attempt or (on the other) •fit it to bear the more odious label 'hypocrisy'. I should add that in affectation the person is trying to deceive himself as well as others; he imitates the external signs of qualities that he would *like* to have, hoping to convince himself that he has them! Whether in the form of deception or of self-deception, or of something hovering between the two, 'affectation' is rightly regarded as a term of reproach, and 'naturalness', understood as the opposite of affectation, is rightly regarded as naming a merit. But a more accurate term by which to label this estimable quality is 'sincerity'—a term that has fallen from its original elevated meaning, and now commonly refers only to a subordinate branch of the cardinal virtue that it used to designate as a whole. 'There was a time when we could speak of the •sincerity of a person's *conduct*, but these days we can speak only of a person's sincerity in what he *says*.' [In lists of the 'cardinal virtues'—sometimes said to be seven in number, and to be the opposites of the 'seven deadly sins'—'sincerity' is not usually included. But it is sometimes presented as one important part of a cardinal virtue, and when it does, it is 'sincerity' in the broad sense to which Mill refers here.]

...Conformity to Nature has no connection whatever with right and wrong. It is never appropriate to bring the idea of *nature* into an ethical discussion except—in a minor role on a few occasions—when the discussion concerns degrees of guilt. To illustrate this point, let us consider uses of the word 'unnatural', which can be used to express a more intense condemnation than any other member of the 'nature' cluster. Something's being 'unnatural', in any precise meaning that the word can be given, is not a reason for blaming it, because the most criminal actions are no more unnatural to a being like man than are most of the virtues.

It has always been thought that the acquisition of virtue is laborious and difficult work, whereas it's a common saying—quoted from the Latin poet Virgil—that 'The descent into Hell is easy'. In most people, certainly, becoming notably virtuous requires a greater conquest of a greater number of natural inclinations that is needed to become utterly vicious. But if we have already decided on some other grounds that an action or inclination is blamable, the case against it may be strengthened by its being *unnatural*, i.e. in conflict with some strong feeling usually found in human beings. Why? Well, we have evidence that the bad inclination that we are blaming is both strong and deeply rooted in the malefactor, because it has won out in the conflict with a strong natural feeling. This line of thought fails, of course, if the person in question never had the conflict because he didn't have the conflicting feeling; and in that case the argument from 'What he did was unnatural' to 'What he did was especially heinous' is not appropriate unless the feeling that is violated by this kind of act when most people perform it is not only justifiable and reasonable but is a feeling that it is *wrong* not to have.

I don't think we should ever regard a wrong act as somewhat excused by the plea that it was natural, or was prompted by a natural feeling. Almost every bad act ever performed has been perfectly natural, motivated by perfectly natural feelings; so 'It was natural' is no excuse, but people in general often regard it as one—and it's *natural* that they should do so because what they mean when they say 'What he did was natural' is that they have a fellow feeling with the offender. When the average person says of some admittedly blamable act that it was nevertheless *natural*, he means that he can imagine the possibility of being himself tempted to commit it. Most people are fairly forgiving of acts of which they feel a possible source within themselves, and are strictly

judgmental only about acts—perhaps less bad ones—that they find unintelligible, i.e.) acts of which their view is 'I can't understand how anyone *could* do such a thing'. If an action convinces them (which it often does on very inadequate grounds) that the person who performs it must be totally unlike themselves, they aren't fussy about the precise degree of blame it should receive, or even about whether it should be blamed at all. They measure the degree of guilt by the strength of their antipathy, which is why differences of opinion, and even differences of taste, have been objects of as intense moral abhorrence as the most atrocious crimes. And it is why they *don't* make fiercely negative moral judgments on actions by people they think of as utterly unlike themselves; possible feelings of antipathy or hostility towards those actions (and their agents) are drowned by the sense of strangeness, otherness, inexplicability.

It will be useful to sum up in a few words the main conclusions of this Essay.

The word 'nature' has two principal meanings: in one it refers to the entire system of things, with the aggregate of all their properties; in the other it refers to things as they would be if it weren't for human intervention.

In the first of these senses, the doctrine that *man ought to follow Nature* is meaningless, because man has no power to do anything *but* follow Nature; all his actions are done through, and in obedience to, one or more of Nature's physical or mental laws.

In the second sense of the term, the doctrine that *man ought to follow Nature*—i.e. ought to make the spontaneous course of things the model of his voluntary actions—is equally irrational and immoral. [See note on 'spontaneous' high on page 7.]

Irrational, because all human action whatever consists in altering the spontaneous course of Nature, and all *useful*

action consists in *improving* it.

Immoral, because the spontaneous course of Nature is full of events that would be utterly vile if human beings brought them about, so that anyone who tried in his actions to imitate the natural course of things would be seen and described by everyone as the wickedest of men.

The system of Nature, taken as a whole, can't have had for its principal object—let alone its only object—the good of human or other sentient beings. What good it brings to

them, is mostly the result of their own efforts. Anything in Nature that points to beneficent design proves that this beneficence is accompanied only by *limited* power; and the duty of man is to co-operate with the beneficent powers, not by imitating the course of Nature but by perpetually striving to amend it—and bringing the part of it that we can affect more nearly into conformity with a high standard of justice and goodness.