

Introduction

A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character.

—WILLIAM JAMES

But even as we as a nation have embraced education as critical to economic growth and opportunity, we should remember that colleges and universities are about a great deal more than measurable utility. Unlike perhaps any other institutions in the world, they embrace the long view and nurture the kind of critical perspectives that look far beyond the present.

—DREW GILPIN FAUST, PRESIDENT OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY

THE WORD “UTILITARIAN” is not apt to strike the right chord in the world’s moral consciousness. Today, as in the nineteenth century, it can all too easily conjure up visions of soulless manager drones addicted to “efficient” administration in the least imaginative and most dehumanizing sense, or of those who would destroy a many-sided liberal education in the name of the immediately practical, useful, and vocational. The defenders of the humanities, including the presidents of Harvard and Columbia and their peers, have tended to define themselves by their opposition to instrumental or “utilitarian” approaches to education, which, it is implied, will prioritize “economic growth and opportunity” and miss the big issue: how over the long haul to cultivate individuals who can think critically, empathize with others, imagine better worlds, and actively engage in meaningful democratic citizenship. These, in their view, are the invaluable intangibles that cost-benefit-minded, bean-counting, Dickensian utilitarian functionaries cannot even conceptualize much less defend. The iron-cage of administrative rationality—perhaps with a panoptical observation tower or its security state equivalent—that is all that the utilitarians can offer. And they do not even see it as a problem.¹

Yet philosophical utilitarianism is and has always been something quite different. The great classical utilitarians, William Godwin, Jeremy Bentham,

John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick, were certainly not lacking in either imagination or liberal education, and their visions, when defended with some fidelity, are more likely to inspire such influential activists as the philosopher Peter Singer, a founding father of the animal liberation and effective altruism movements, than serve the purposes of managerial “leadership,” whether capitalist or state socialist. This book aims to show how and why this is so. It offers, to adapt some titular words from E. M. Forster, “two cheers for utilitarianism.”

It offers only two cheers because some of the criticisms of utilitarianism are very serious. But then, two cheers may be about the best that any developed ethical and political theory can hope for, and at any rate, my aim in this work is primarily to foster a better sense of what the great utilitarians were really like, of what they really stood for, when they are considered from all sides. The hope is to revisit and repurpose classical utilitarianism in ways that will bring out some important aspects of it that have tended to be neglected or underestimated by both the critics and the professed friends of utilitarianism, including many economists of the last century. Although certain forms of utilitarianism would appear to have been flourishing in recent decades, the great roots of these perspectives always seem capable of generating new growth.² Perhaps the history explored in this book, selective and strategic though it may be, can help facilitate further growth, but simply sparking some greater and more intelligent curiosity about this cast of characters, their lives and works, is hope enough.

Philosophical utilitarianism would seem to be an ism with a sharp point: that the supreme ethical and political principle, the normative bottom line so to speak, demands maximizing total happiness for all sentient creatures living and yet to be. Is this supreme principle true? Possibly—it could turn out that there are decisive objective reasons for it.³ But at the least, there are certainly lots of more or less powerful arguments in its defense, and it remains a live philosophical option, albeit one with much competition. Putting happiness first in this way is, philosophically and historically, a matter both of revealing how pervasive and inescapable the concern with happiness already is, demonstrating how it undergirds and defines such familiar moral duties as veracity and promise keeping, and of creatively experimenting with possibilities for understanding and advancing happiness in new and more effective ways. As John Stuart Mill recognized, in words adopted by some recent feminist philosophers, it calls for “experiments in living.” And with the classical utilitarians, the experiments were exceptionally creative and wide-ranging, imaginative in the extreme. The sharp point tore through the crust of convention and custom and opened up new worlds of possibility. Virginia Woolf, in her marvelous account of *Wollstonecraft and Godwin*, quoted Godwin’s observation, “Ours is not an idle happiness, a paradise of selfish and transitory pleasures,” and noted: “No, it too was an experiment, as Mary’s life had been an experiment from the start, an attempt to make human conventions conform more closely to human needs.”⁴

Described in this way, utilitarianism has little in common with the prosaic, visionless notion of the “merely utilitarian,” in the sense of a narrowly or mundanely functional or efficient option. No such limited horizon confined the thought and character of the great English-language utilitarian philosophers, whose influence ran its course from the period just before the French Revolution through the Victorian era. Happiness, for them, was more of a cosmic calling, the path to world progress, and whatever was deemed “utilitarian” had to be useful for that larger and inspiring end, the global minimization of pointless suffering and the global maximization of positive well-being or happiness. It invokes, ultimately, the point of view of universal benevolence. And it is more accurately charged with being too demanding ethically than with being too accommodating of narrow practicality, material interests, self-interestedness, and the like.⁵

Apparently, the very word “utilitarian” came to Bentham in a dream. According to James Crimmins:

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) coined the term ‘utilitarian’ in the summer of 1781, when he recorded a dream in which he ‘was the founder of a sect; of course a personage of great sanctity and importance. It was called the sect of the *utilitarians*.’ The dream turns on Bentham’s hopes for *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* . . . printed the previous year (but not published until 1789), ‘my driest of all dry metaphysics,’ parts of which he had read to the company of guests at the country seat of his patron, the reformist Whig the Earl of Shelburne, who served as Prime Minister 1782–1783 and became Marquis of Lansdowne in 1784. In Bentham’s telling of the dream he writes, ‘there came to me a great man named L. [Shelburne] and he said unto me, what shall I do to . . . save the nation? I said unto him—take up my book, & follow me.’ With the noble lord in tow, he then encountered King George III and instructed his ‘apostle,’ Shelburne, to give the king ‘a page of my book that he may read mark learn and inwardly digest it.’⁶

As the years passed, Bentham would dream less of nobles and kings and more of democracy as the utilitarian vehicle for saving the nation and, in fact, the world. But the grandeur and ambition of his vision remained.

Such is the great irony of the legacy of utilitarianism: its name has long been an obstacle to its message. This irony has been compounded by the infatuation, in recent decades, with work in the area of “happiness studies,” an offshoot in many respects of the “positive psychology” movement that emphasizes the positive side of human nature, or what the well-being of fully functioning, self-actualizing, super-healthy psychological types seems to involve. Alas, the cascade of recent books on happiness has, with few exceptions (such as Richard Layard’s), not been matched by a serious interest in utilitarianism, one of the most historically significant philosophical frameworks

for thinking about happiness. Aristotle and ancient eudaimonism have received far more attention in this area than Godwin and Bentham and their successors.⁷ The growth industry of happiness studies has largely developed apart from the recent renaissance in utilitarian philosophizing and has owed surprisingly little to it, despite the transformation of utilitarianism into, potentially, one of the most relevant and radically progressive philosophies of our time, sparking vital new work in environmental philosophy, population ethics, global poverty reduction, and more.⁸ No such critical edge has marked the “Happiness Industry,” as work in happiness studies has been aptly labeled.

Thus, this book is about that other utilitarianism, which is in truth genuine utilitarianism, though it is scarcely recognizable in the pervasive caricatures floated by everyone from Dickens to Marx to Foucault. One thought behind this assemblage of biographical/philosophical sketches is that an introduction to the actual personalities behind utilitarianism might help challenge the dismissive caricatures of this tradition. The great classical utilitarians were fascinating people, brilliant and complex, and as intrinsically interesting as great artists. Inspired, weird, provocative and controversial, they were neither as complacent nor as naïve as their followers—or their critics.

What is more, the ancient concern with philosophy as the art of living or a way of life, and with philosophers as exemplars of philosophies in their actual lived lives, has much to recommend it. The lives of the individuals in question are profoundly interesting as exemplars of the varieties of philosophical experience, to tweak a title from William James. Whatever his factual failings, the tales that Diogenes Laertius tells in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and so many other philosophers do make them come alive as persons. Although far too many contemporary academic philosophers take an excessively narrow approach, focusing solely on writings rather than persons and dismissing as ad hominem argument a central element of much of the philosophical tradition, there are always powerful critics around ready to challenge that prejudice. As James Miller explains in his engaging work *Examined Lives: from Socrates to Nietzsche*:

Such a principled disregard of ad hominem evidence is a characteristically modern prejudice of professional philosophers. For most Greek and Roman thinkers from Plato to Augustine, theorizing was but one mode of living life philosophically. To Socrates and the countless classical philosophers who tried to follow in his footsteps, the primary point was not to ratify a certain set of propositions (even when the ability to define terms and analyze arguments was a constitutive component of a school’s teaching), but rather to explore ‘the kind of person, the sort of self’ that one could elaborate as a result of taking the quest for wisdom seriously.⁹

Or as Socrates put it, “If I don’t reveal my views in a formal account, I do so by my conduct. Don’t you think that actions are more reliable evidence than words?”

That so many previous generations have studied philosophy through such works as those of Diogenes Laertius, Seneca, Plutarch, Montaigne, and Nietzsche, for example, whose accounts of philosophical lives are so often interwoven with ennobling myth, should be taken as an indication that current academic opinion on what is or is not “philosophy” might be more reflective of the institutional imperatives and limits of academe than of the larger historical practices of philosophy. This book reflects the belief that one needs the works *and* the lives, the words *and* the deeds, in order fully to harvest the contributions of the great philosophers, who can be so much more than their books. Nor, as we shall see, is such an approach unfitting for the great utilitarians, for they were deeply indebted to the ancients and offered up their own visions of utilitarianism as a way of life, a way of life often obsessed with the question of *parrhesia* (frank speaking). Mill, for example, was profoundly influenced by the ancient Greek view of philosophy, and was a forceful proponent of the method of interrogating both lives and works, reading a philosopher’s works not separately, but as a whole interwoven with the life.¹⁰

That is, this book is meant to do for the great utilitarians something of what Miller and so many others¹¹ have done for Socrates, Plato, et al., and it is in that way rather different from the various stock histories of utilitarianism.¹² Curiously, Miller avoids the utilitarians altogether, limiting his account of the moderns to Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Emerson, and Nietzsche. But as I hope to show, the utilitarians may furnish some of the very best material on the significance of philosophical lives. Just how their lives realized or failed to realize their visions—often quite different visions—of advancing happiness by utilitarian standards is a subject full of surprises, particularly for those wedded to the stock conceptions of utilitarianism. And surely we can learn a lot about the utilitarian legacy by carefully considering what the very philosophers who made utilitarianism famous took to be its practical implications for their most important and personal decisions. If we take their writings seriously, why not take their lives seriously as well, especially when it comes to problems about which their more theoretical works leave us wondering? That their lives were often their best work is particularly evident from the company they kept—as we may see through the examples of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, or Mill and Harriet Taylor. Indeed, the lives are but strands in larger webs of shared lived experience that call to us from the past, asking to be remembered. The friendships and the loves, the children and the young people, the comrades and the mentors, the vulnerabilities as well as the strengths make up much of the story of how these people became who they were. The relevant historical contexts are rich and various, and much is missed when they are condensed and constrained in the current academic fashion.

On this score, it is worth stressing that the great utilitarians represent a special chapter in gender and LGBTQ studies, in the history of constructions of gender and sexuality. Their writings and their lives were often astonishingly insightful, subversive, and transgressive, challenging in unprecedented ways the distortions caused by patriarchal power, homophobia, religious prejudice, etc. There really is nothing like Bentham on same sex relations in the entire history of philosophy, at least up until recent decades.¹³

Perhaps by viewing utilitarianism in this way, it will be possible to better appreciate its complexities and variations, and the ways in which more reductive treatments of this legacy, often as one or another form of ideology, fail to do it justice. This view animated my earlier work, *Henry Sidgwick, Eye of the Universe*, and it shapes the present book, though this is more of a sketchbook and less a detailed portrait. My purpose here is simply to review and pull together some recent, suggestive scholarly developments in dealing with the history of utilitarianism, developments that taken together display the utilitarian legacy in a different and often better light.¹⁴ Again, the point is not to pronounce, in any final, decisive way, on the truth or justifiability of utilitarianism, sympathetic though the portraits will often be. Utilitarianism must change its shape as the times change, and some of the challenges now confronting it (and every other plausible ethical approach) could scarcely have been envisioned during its classical era. But there are still many lessons to learn from that era, and it would be idle to deny that a rather Godwinian hope and method, for life writing as a consciousness raising agent of social change, pervades this work as a whole. Contra various radical critics, the utilitarian legacy harbors some powerful resources for penetrating the perverse psychological and ideological effects of severe inequality, and for envisioning a compelling ethic for dealing with the problems of future generations. The cruel effects of inequality and racial and gender injustice, the harsh failures of such social institutions as prisons and schools, the invisibility of so much suffering, and mistreatment of populations yet to be—utilitarianism may yet help to solve these problems.

Moreover, some of the big and more familiar philosophically charged themes of classical utilitarianism simply do need to be explicated more accurately and researched more thoroughly. The interplay of egoism and benevolence, self and other, often reflects a subtle strategy rather than a conceptual blunder, and a vision of the progress of happiness that has distributive elements built into it in ways that are both defensible and largely ignored by utilitarianism's many critics. Even such powerful recent works as de Lazari-Radek and Singer's *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* do not fully capture all the resources of the utilitarian legacy.¹⁵

Indeed, it is singularly curious that the great "secular" utilitarians had so much to say about the religious side of humanity, about which they could be deeply insightful as well as scathing. Their reformism in ethics and politics was typically bound up with reformism in religion, aimed at the powerful

established churches especially. But in the case of the individuals described in what follows, utilitarianism was not only radically reformist in conventional religious terms, but also mixed with a keen interest in the uncanny, the strange, and the occult, with magic, ghosts, necromancy, romanticism, and “intimations of immortality.” However dismal the normal business of political economy may be, the great utilitarians couched it in the larger business of getting a grip on life, on the cosmos and one’s place in it. It was a quest that carried them into far stranger places than one would ever guess from either their critics or their admirers. They had probing things to say about God and the afterlife, theism and pantheism, the longing for immortality, and the supernatural. If there was a “utilitarian character,” it was a character decidedly given not only to a sympathetic opposition to needless suffering, but also to opening up and critically examining religious experience, including some of its weirder dimensions. We would do well to remember that the great pragmatist William James dedicated his extraordinarily wide-ranging *Varieties of Religious Experience* to none other than John Stuart Mill.

Relatedly, it is also important to remember throughout what follows, that there are many possible metaphysical routes to a utilitarian moral theory. The springs feeding a utilitarian outlook have run from such diverse sources as immaterialism (William Godwin), Platonism (G. E. Moore), Absolute Idealism (T.L.S. Sprigge), and a Buddhist conception of the self (Derek Parfit). The naturalism of, say, Mill is but one option, however familiar; although utilitarianism is often thought of as part of a comprehensive philosophical and/or religious doctrine, it can, in some cases, yield something more like an overlapping consensus between different comprehensive doctrines.

There are a great many more issues, philosophical and methodological, that loom here. Some think that philosophical biography is flourishing; others worry that biography as a genre and in general is doomed. For my part, philosophical biography is still a work in progress, and biography as a genre is also changing and in need of change. Whether the present experiment will much advance these improvements remains to be seen. Whether it is even biography in any familiar sense is hard to say. As in *Henry Sidgwick, Eye of the Universe*, the works and lives herein considered are often cast in the light of Edward Said’s brilliant critique of Orientalism, or of theoretical frameworks derived from critical race theory, postcolonial studies, etc.¹⁶ To be sure, it is strange that so many academic philosophical works on, say, Mill, could bracket his extensive involvement with the East India Company or his writings on colonization in much the same way that conservative textualists have read, say, Jane Austin, without acknowledging the historical, political, and economic contexts that seep into her fiction. Although the great classical utilitarians were not of one mind about matters of race or imperialism, and in retrospect their views compare favorably with more orthodox ethical and political traditions,¹⁷ that is no reason to erase from history the parts that current philosophers find

embarrassing or offensive. Efforts to reconstruct for present purposes the classical utilitarian perspective—or efforts to reconstruct Kantianism, Thomism, Aristotelianism, etc.—must be alert to just what it is, historically, that is being reconstructed. If the critics of utilitarianism fail through ignorant and alarmist hyperbole, the “friends” of utilitarianism often fail as well, through ignorant “charity in interpretation,” when really, the truth will do. All too often, what passes for the history of philosophy is ennobling myth, disguised as a righteous fixation on the better arguments.

To call such narrowness a blind spot scarcely does justice to the problem, a problem that plagues much of academic philosophy, which in some parts of the world, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, is in a state of open crisis because of the sexism and racism of its academic practices.¹⁸ Efforts to reconstruct and reinvigorate utilitarianism need to take place on a wider front, and with an honest confrontation with both past and present problems of power and prejudice.¹⁹ The history of philosophy need not be an exercise in evasion and hypocrisy.

These larger debates provide the backdrop for what follows, and my hope is that these personal impressions offered from some historical distance will prove engaging and illuminating enough, perhaps even felicitous enough, to render them valuable both in themselves and as contributions to a wider and more diverse practice of philosophy. The future of happiness may depend on it.