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Edited by Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller

Excerpt

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BEN EGGLESTON AND DALE E. MILLER

Introduction

UTILITARIANISM'S PLACE IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

It is well known that utilitarianism – the moral theory based on the maximization of overall well-being – is one of the leading theories in recent and contemporary moral philosophy. The same can be said, of course, about several moral theories. Utilitarianism, however, arguably has the distinction of being the moral theory that, more than any other, shapes the discipline of moral philosophy and forms the background against which rival theories are imagined, refined, and articulated.

At times, utilitarianism's preeminence has been evinced in the remarks of those who would most fervently wish it gone. In the middle part of the twentieth century, for example, John Plamenatz wrote that "Utilitarianism is destroyed," with "no part of it left standing."¹ In 1973, Bernard Williams concluded his "A Critique of Utilitarianism" with the following assurance to his utilitarianism-weary readers: "The important issues that utilitarianism raises should be discussed in contexts more rewarding than that of utilitarianism itself. The day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of it."² Finally, in 2011, Ronald Dworkin claimed that although the rise of utilitarianism in the nineteenth century had given it ascendancy over the rights-based doctrines that defined the morality of the Enlightenment, "Now the wheel is turning again: utilitarianism is giving way once again to a recognition of individual rights."³

It will be interesting to see whether the passage of time is kinder to Dworkin's assessment than it has been to those of Plamenatz and Williams. Meanwhile, the remarks of other critics of utilitarianism attest to the supremacy it has enjoyed in the discipline of moral

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philosophy. John Rawls, for example, wrote in the preface to *A Theory of Justice* (1971) that “During much of modern moral philosophy the predominant systematic theory has been some form of utilitarianism.”⁴ He added that moral philosophers who did not subscribe to utilitarianism tended not to construct opposing theoretical frameworks, but to start with utilitarianism and then propose modifications of it to allay their particular concerns. What follows, Rawls concludes, is that “Most likely we finally settle upon a variant of the utility principle circumscribed and restricted in certain ad hoc ways by intuitionistic constraints.”⁵ In effect, the predominance of utilitarianism was so thorough as to result in a paucity of viable alternatives.

Of course, any mention of Rawls in this context must acknowledge that his treatise itself immediately reinvigorated and profoundly reshaped the discipline of moral philosophy, giving new energy, sophistication, and contemporary relevance to social-contract and Kantian ways of thinking. But utilitarianism was not dislodged from its place at the core of moral philosophy. In 1982, T. M. Scanlon, a fellow contractualist whose views were thus much closer to Rawls’s than to any form of utilitarianism, wrote the following:

Utilitarianism occupies a central place in the moral philosophy of our time. It is not the view which most people hold; certainly there are very few who would claim to be act utilitarians. But for a much wider range of people it is the view towards which they find themselves pressed when they try to give a theoretical account of their moral beliefs. Within moral philosophy it represents a position one must struggle against if one wishes to avoid it.⁶

Subsequently, in his *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Will Kymlicka wrote that “Rawls believes, rightly I think, that in our society utilitarianism operates as a kind of tacit background assumption against which other theories have to assert and defend themselves.”⁷ Like Rawls and Scanlon, Kymlicka was writing as a critic of utilitarianism rather than as its champion. Thus, even authors who doubted the adequacy of utilitarianism nonetheless affirmed its centrality. “[U]tilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it,” Philippa Foot pithily wrote.⁸

What accounts for utilitarianism’s persistent influence? Again, perhaps the most credible evidence comes from utilitarianism’s most prominent critics. Although Rawls denies that moral rightness

is based on the promotion of good consequences, he adds that he does not mean to suggest that a theory of moral rightness can ignore consequences: "All ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account when judging rightness. One which did not would be simply irrational, crazy."⁹ Utilitarianism's focus on consequences is also cited by Samuel Scheffler as a reason for the persistence of its influence:

I believe that utilitarianism refuses to fade from the scene in large part because, as the most familiar consequentialist theory, it is the major recognized normative theory incorporating the deeply plausible-sounding feature that one may always do what would lead to the best available outcome overall. Despite all of utilitarianism's faults (including, no doubt, its misidentification of the best outcomes), its incorporation of this one plausible feature is in my opinion responsible for its persistence.¹⁰

Finally, Scanlon credits utilitarianism with having a particularly simple and compelling account of why a person might feel motivated to attend to the ideals and requirements of morality:

In our own time, the leading substantive account of moral motivation has been that offered by utilitarianism. In fact it seems to me that a large part of the appeal of utilitarianism lies in the fact that it identifies, in the idea of "the greatest happiness," a substantive value which seems at the same time to be clearly connected to the content of morality and, when looked at from outside morality, to be something which is of obvious importance and value, capable of explaining the great importance that morality claims for itself.¹¹

The aspects of utilitarianism highlighted by these remarks are vital contributors to utilitarianism's persistent influence and its place in contemporary moral philosophy. A broader perspective is provided by a brief historical overview of the development and reception of the view.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of utilitarianism is surveyed by the first five chapters of this volume, so here a cursory summary will suffice. Fundamental elements of utilitarianism have been focal points of philosophical discourse since ancient times; the fourth- and third-century BCE philosopher Epicurus, for example, is best known for claiming that

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one's primary concerns should be the attainment of pleasure and, especially, the avoidance of pain. For nearly two millennia these and other foundational notions simmered as topics of philosophical discussion, but starting in the seventeenth century these ideas and related ones were embraced by a series of writers, mostly British, who assembled them with increasing sophistication into formidable philosophical systems. The most notable such writers, and their most notable works, are Jeremy Bentham (*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789), John Stuart Mill (*Utilitarianism*, 1861), and Henry Sidgwick (*The Methods of Ethics*, seven editions from 1874 to 1907).

As mentioned above, and as suggested by the dates just mentioned, utilitarianism surged to unprecedented prominence in the nineteenth century: sufficient time had passed for the teachings of Bentham to spread widely, and Mill was a public intellectual who enjoyed a wide readership for his prolific writings. This new prominence for the theory, however, was accompanied by a corresponding degree of opposition and criticism. In fact, several of the leading lights of the nineteenth century condemned utilitarianism publicly and vigorously.

The conservative historian and social critic Thomas Carlyle, despite his friendship with Mill, exemplified this trend. In one of a series of six lectures he gave in May 1840, Carlyle praised the prophet Muhammad's conscientious and absolutist sense of duty and said it "might put some of *us* to shame":¹²

Benthamee Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God's-world to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on: – If you ask me which gives, Mahomet or they, the beggarlier and falser view of Man and his Destinies in this Universe, I will answer, it is not Mahomet!¹³

Mill was outraged by this comparison. In a rare public display of anger, he rose from his seat and shouted "No!"¹⁴ Three lectures later, Carlyle mentioned his previous disparagement of Bentham's views and affirmed it as his "deliberate opinion."¹⁵

Also in the 1840s, utilitarianism was known and rejected in literary circles. The historian William O. Aydelotte writes that the authors he regards as "the four most important social novelists of the decade" – Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli,

and Elizabeth Gaskell – each “repudiated rationalistic utilitarianism, often through the mouth of a principal character speaking obviously for the author.”¹⁶ The case of Dickens is especially notable because of that author’s lasting popularity and the intensity of his reaction to utilitarianism; one Dickens scholar reports that “he was a life-long opponent of utilitarian ideas as he understood them” and that his “fury never abated.”¹⁷ Dickens’s 1854 novel *Hard Times*, with its cold-hearted, fact-obsessed Mr. Gradgrind, is often read as a denunciation of utilitarianism.¹⁸

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, utilitarianism was the object of severe and specific criticisms from two of the most celebrated philosophers of that era, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. In volume I of *Capital* (1867), Marx claimed that Bentham, in particular, was in the grip of a conception of human well-being that was tied to a specific cultural context and was therefore unsuitable for a moral theory that aspired to universal applicability:

he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naïveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man . . . This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future.¹⁹

Nor did Marx credit later utilitarians with salvaging their theory to any appreciable extent: according to Peter Singer, “Marx was as scornful of utilitarianism as of any other ethical theory.”²⁰

Nietzsche’s criticisms, though equally pointed, were “complex and varied,”²¹ ranging from personal digs at Bentham²² and Mill²³ to analytical insights about the intellectual milieu in which utilitarianism thrived. He observed, for example, that the universal benevolence elevated by utilitarianism into an ethical first principle did not seem to be manifest in the personal motives of many of the advocates of utilitarianism.²⁴ Perhaps Nietzsche’s most focused criticism of utilitarianism was his claim that well-being is not remotely well-suited to serve as a fundamental value.²⁵ In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he declared that “Well-being as you understand it – that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end*! – a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable – that makes their decline into something *desirable*!”²⁶ Nietzsche’s objection was that the state of

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well-being, as utilitarians understood it, was indifferent or inimical to the personal flourishing that he saw as the apotheosis of human development, since such personal flourishing often requires confronting and overcoming pain and other difficulties – or even essentially involves such states – rather than being best served by steering clear of them: “The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering – don’t you know that *this* discipline has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far?”²⁷ Nietzsche also argued that the development of flourishing individuals was likely to be further thwarted by another aspect of utilitarianism, specifically, the egalitarianism implicit in its concern with the *general* well-being:

“general welfare” is no ideal, no goal, not a concept that can somehow be grasped, but only an emetic . . . the requirement that there be a single morality for everyone is harmful precisely to the higher men; in short . . . there is an *order of rank* between people, and between moralities as well. They are a modest and thoroughly mediocre type of person, these utilitarian Englishmen.²⁸

Finally, Nietzsche’s best-known rejoinder to utilitarianism is his remark, contained in one of the “Arrows and Epigrams” at the beginning of his *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), that “People *don’t* strive for happiness; only the English do.”²⁹ In a study of Nietzsche’s moral views, Frank Cameron writes that “This emphasis on the ‘perfect man’ or higher type is, I believe, the central motivation underlying his critique of utilitarianism . . . Nietzsche often contrasts the ‘man of utility’ with the ‘exemplary individual’.”³⁰

The twentieth century began with the publication of another book that quickly earned a place on the top shelf of utilitarian studies – G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903). But since then, no single work has been published which appears, now, to merit a place alongside the landmark texts of Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick, and Moore. This is not to suggest that progress in the development of utilitarianism had ground to a halt, however. If the contributions of subsequent writers have been modest and incremental compared to those of earlier theorists, their accomplishments are still impressive in virtue of the many more hands that have taken up the work and their collective impact. Moral philosophers with an interest in the theory have explored the characteristics and merits of a variety of its forms, by pursuing conceptual possibilities lying along several distinct dimensions. Three of these lines of development warrant particular mention here.

Introduction

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First, there has been considerable evolution in utilitarianism's conception of the good to be promoted, i.e., well-being. One manifestation of this evolution has been a shift in the meaning of 'utility', which utilitarians today frequently use as a synonym for 'well-being'. This shift arguably began in the nineteenth century, but was certainly commonly seen by the middle of the twentieth.³¹ To some extent the roots of these efforts toward reconceiving well-being can be traced as far back as Mill; indeed the aspects of utilitarianism to which Dickens objected were, according to Richard Arneson, also aspects of Benthamite utilitarianism to which Mill objected.³² And perhaps Mill's most distinctive innovation, in his thinking about utilitarianism, was his more sophisticated account of kinds of pleasure, based on a more sophisticated conception of human nature. But even formulated in that way, utilitarianism was still concerned mainly with the promotion of pleasure, prompting objections of the kind lodged by Marx and Nietzsche. As late as 1936, R.F. Harrod wrote that "The Utilitarians attempted a great generalisation and affirmed that the sole ultimate end is pleasure. It is not clear that they were successful."³³ But, in 1959, Richard Brandt wrote that "Many 'refutations' of utilitarianisms are aimed at the hedonistic features, and do not touch the utilitarianism at all,"³⁴ reflecting the wider range of possible conceptions of well-being that utilitarian theorists were exploring. Some of these theorists, adhering to the traditional utilitarian idea that a person's well-being depends on what that person finds appealing (in some sense), suggest a relatively slight shift in focus, from pleasure to the subtly different good of having one's desires satisfied. But others, going farther afield, claim that some things are good for people regardless of whether they find them appealing or not – typical examples include achievement, knowledge, friendship, and freedom. This profusion of theories of well-being has made utilitarianism less vulnerable to objections of the kind lodged by Marx and Nietzsche, since these objections rely largely on certain assumptions about what specific sort of human existence is recommended by utilitarianism. To be sure, some contemporary critics of utilitarianism still censure it in such terms; the influential legal theorist Richard Posner, for example, writes that "utilitarianism is a hedonistic, unsocial ethic."³⁵ Nevertheless, well-being is a topic on which decades of gradual progress have resulted in a markedly greater general understanding of the possible forms of utilitarianism and their relative merits.

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A second important area of progress in utilitarian thought is the emergence of consequentialism as a distinct focal point of ethical theorizing. Consequentialism is the idea that morality should be based on the maximization of the good (possibly well-being, possibly something else). Thus, consequentialism is more general than utilitarianism, so utilitarianism is, in effect, a family of views within the larger consequentialist family of views. Since utilitarianism is distinguished from other forms of consequentialism by the claim that the good to be promoted is well-being, consequentialism can be understood as utilitarianism minus that claim. With consequentialism understood in this way, the emergence of it as a topic of inquiry distinct from utilitarianism can be seen as a logical extension of the thorough exploration of possible conceptions of well-being discussed in the previous paragraph: just as greater openness to different ideas about what constitutes well-being makes utilitarianism less vulnerable to objections concerned with the sort of human existence it recommends, the emergence of consequentialism as a distinct topic of discussion brackets such objections by removing the topic of well-being from the discussion altogether. In effect, it invites those who hold such objections to assert whatever conception of the good they find appealing (whether it involves well-being or not), and just plug it in to the consequentialist framework. Of course, this strategy comes at the potential cost, for utilitarianism, of opening the door to greater consideration of non-utilitarian forms of consequentialism. But this strategy has also arguably benefitted utilitarian thought because any element of a consequentialist theory that is independent of its conception of the good can, in principle, also be an element of a corresponding form of utilitarianism, and this means that proposals, analyses, and evaluations of various forms of consequentialism can, correspondingly, lead to progress in the development and assessment of various forms of utilitarianism.

This trend is reflected in the fact that for several of the chapters in this volume, the focus of discussion is some aspect of consequentialism rather than some aspect of utilitarianism. Conversely, several other chapters make claims about utilitarianism that could easily be applied to consequentialism. In fact, when this volume was being planned, serious thought was given to its ultimately being *The Cambridge Companion to Consequentialism*. It was decided, though, to keep the emphasis of the volume on the historically most significant strand of

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consequentialism insofar as was practicable, while acknowledging that consequentialism, rather than utilitarianism, is the primary context in which certain contemporary topics and issues are discussed.

A third area of progress in the development of utilitarian thought is the fruitful exploration of different answers to the question of exactly how, in principle, the rightness or wrongness of an act is related to the promotion of well-being. One obvious possibility is the view, associated with act utilitarianism, that the rightness (or wrongness) of an act depends simply on its effects on well-being. But alternative possibilities have been developed as well. For example, proponents of rule utilitarianism hold that the rightness of an act depends not on its particular consequences, but on its conformity to certain rules whose moral significance, in turn, depends on their promotion of well-being. The debate between act utilitarians and rule utilitarians has been a major topic in utilitarian thought for more than half a century, and since this debate is conceptually independent of utilitarianism's claim that the good to be promoted is well-being, the same issues are explored in the equally lively debate between act consequentialists and rule consequentialists. Like the topics of inquiry discussed in the previous two paragraphs, this topic has been an area of incremental progress to which many thinkers have made valuable contributions. But contemporary thinking about these issues is most indebted to the late-twentieth-century rule-utilitarian work of Richard Brandt and the subsequent rule-consequentialist work of Brad Hooker.

These reflections on the continued and multifaceted development of utilitarianism help to explain its contemporary standing as the moral theory against which other moral theories must, of necessity, be defined and contrasted. When utilitarianism is described in this way, it is easy to think of an unchanging monolith that has loomed so persistently mainly because of inertia. But inertia is not the whole story. For utilitarianism not only elaborates a basic insight about the moral importance of the consequences of the acts that people perform; it continues to evolve in response to new thinking about human nature and the nature of well-being, the role of rules in morality, and other ethical concerns. Clearly, it has not evolved to the point where moral philosophers are universally content to endorse it rather than pursue other possibilities. But it remains not only a venerable and preeminent, but also a vibrant and flexible, theoretical framework within moral philosophy.

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OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

While the chapters of this collection are not divided into sections, they are arranged in a logical order and by and large they fall naturally into several groups.

The first and most extensive of these groups comprises the first five chapters, which outline the history of utilitarianism from its pre-Benthamite roots into the twentieth century. Colin Heydt shows that although today we think of utilitarianism as a secular moral and political theory, much of its “pre-history” is to be found in a strand of Anglican natural law theory according to which our fundamental moral obligation is to obey God’s commands. We are obligated to promote happiness, according to the Anglican utilitarians, only because God wills it, which we know because we know that he loves us. Heydt also discusses the influence on utilitarianism of some thinkers who are not utilitarians themselves, such as John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, and David Hume. Utilitarianism came into its own in the nineteenth century, and it is convenient for our purposes to see this century as being divided into three distinct periods, with one particular figure occupying a position of preeminence among utilitarian thinkers during each. James E. Crimmins picks up the story at the beginning of the century, where Jeremy Bentham establishes himself as the father of modern utilitarianism. Crimmins traces the globe-spanning impact of Bentham’s work, which might almost be said to have been felt later in Britain than anywhere else. Henry R. West carries the discussion into the mid-nineteenth century, where John Stuart Mill comes to the fore. His father James – a contemporary, and for many years a close associate, of Bentham’s – intended Mill from birth to become a public champion of utilitarianism. And so he did, but West shows that Mill fashions a utilitarian account of morality and justice that is distinctively his own – one that says, for instance, that lesser quantities of certain superior pleasures can be more valuable and contribute more to well-being than greater quantities of inferior pleasures. Roger Crisp shifts the focus to the late nineteenth century, when Henry Sidgwick was the leading utilitarian theorist. Crisp demonstrates that with Sidgwick utilitarianism makes major advances in rigor and sophistication. Sidgwick confronts some of the main competitors to a utilitarian theory of morality, egoism and intuitionism in particular, more