

# Introduction

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1. Utilitarianism, at least in its modern form, evolved in the wake of empiricism. In his metaethics and philosophy of language, Jeremy Bentham was strongly influenced by John Locke's empiricist framework. In his works on logic and mind (but also in his ethical writings), John Stuart Mill displayed a blend of empiricism and common sense philosophy, which he inherited from his father James. In addition to this, both Bentham and Mill viewed ethics and politics as empirical disciplines, based on human experience, and modeled after empirical, inexact disciplines, such as medicine. Despite his intuitionist leanings, even Henry Sidgwick presented his moral epistemology as a correction of an originally empiricist framework. Moreover, in Sidgwick's argument for utilitarianism, a lot of room is left to the power that a utilitarian ethical theory has in accounting for our common moral experience, embodied in our common sense moral judgements. Even through the twentieth century, utilitarianism has kept its connection with human experience, if only because of its frequent and numerous incursions in detailed applicative problems. Possibly, utilitarian ethical thinkers were the first to realize a turn to applied ethical theory. Paradoxically, the often repeated and most well-known objection to utilitarianism, namely its alleged counter-intuitiveness, concerns the relationship between utilitarian ethics and experience.

This aspect of utilitarian moral theories was placed at the center of the three-day Conference "Utilitarianism: An Ethic of Experience?" (held at the University of Rome, June 12-14, 2007), where the papers published here were originally presented and discussed. From the many presentations, discussions, and informal talks that happened in those three days in Rome, it turned out that the question mark at the end of the conference title, originally indicating the ironic, yet provocative and wary spirit the organizers had toward the subject, could be removed safely. Experience is at the centre of utilitarianism, both in its historical and contemporary versions. Experience, however, is only a common point of departure, and it is not able to settle the various puzzles that scholars interested in utilitarianism must face. It is also for this reason that the title of the present collection was changed to a more neutral one, aiming to show the two directions assumed by the contemporary scholarship: an increasing penetration into the historical texts of eighteenth and nineteenth century utilitarians and a more detailed refinement of utilitarian ethical theories to respond classical and new objections and problems.

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2. The first path of inquiry is exemplified here in papers by Frederick Rosen, Peter Kail, Sergio Cremaschi and Annamaria Loche. Rosen devotes his exegetical energies to Mill's enterprise of building a science of character, called "ethology". Notwithstanding the enthusiasm Mill had for the prospects of such a new science, he never developed it. Rosen shows first the methodological assumptions Mill posited at the roots of his science of character (comparing also Mill's and Bentham's views on the distinction between art and science and the method to be used in politics). Then, he provides an insightful analysis of Mill's characterization of individual and national character, emphasizing how these notions work within the arguments for representative government contained in Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*.

Peter Kail goes back to the early modern beginning of utilitarianism, by focusing on Hume's theory of value, which he interprets as a strong form of axiological hedonism (in Kail's terms, Hume's hedonism concerns "natural goods and evils", and is called *metaphysical hedonism*; moreover, some form of this kind of hedonism is present in many authors of the early modern period, both in England and in France, from Malebranche to Locke). Kail's main contention is that this hedonism relies on a precise model of experience and value - a realist, cognitivist and internalist model - sketched in detail in his paper.

Sergio Cremaschi, too, takes his lead from the alleged forerunners of utilitarianism (but he is skeptical on this way of viewing them). From there, he surveys the many objections raised during nineteenth-century to utilitarians such as Bentham, Paley and Godwin by Christian thinkers of various strands (T. Belsham, S. Coleridge, A. Sedgwick, J. McIntosh, F.D. Maurice, H. Newman, W. Whewell, G. Grote). Cremaschi lists also some of the most famous utilitarian rejoinders, coming from James Mill (the inflamed *Fragment on McIntosh*, 1835) and John Stuart Mill (*Sedgwick's Discourse* and *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*). Cremaschi claims that this intense dialectic prompts a different way of viewing the evolution of utilitarianism, less neat, but with more insights into the real reasons why this doctrine changed so much from Bentham to Sidgwick.

Our historical path ends with a fascinating comparison between Bentham and Rousseau, which is the focus of Annamaria Loche's essay. First of all, Loche traces our contemporary conception of democracy back to Bentham and Rousseau, emphasizing how (despite many differences, both chronological and philosophical) these theorists put forward their claims in a context where the democratic ideal was deemed either unacceptable or outmoded, as compared to the liberal framework of the European nation-states. Then, Loche considers the structural differences in those two conceptions of democracy, especially those deriving from the divergent theoretical backgrounds that Bentham and Rousseau assumed, i.e. contractualism and utilitarianism. Loche's analysis focuses in particular on Bentham's and Rousseau's views concerning sovereignty and legislative power.

Even in contemporary debates, one of the main tasks for any supporter of utilitarianism is answering old and new objections to the theory. Several papers in

this collection pursue this task. Thus, John Skorupski tries to answer a criticism to the effect that utilitarian-driven transgressions of conventional morality, especially when esoteric and individually performed, are made wrong by the arrogance those deeds display. Skorupski's strategy goes through the following stages. First, he provides a scheme of what might be the theoretical assumptions concerning morality that underlie the arrogant attitude in morality - in particular, assumptions concerning the weight to be assigned to welfare in determining reasons for action and obligations to act. Second, Skorupski considers a list of possible conceptions of what it is to be *morally* arrogant, showing them to be inappropriate and vague. Finally, however, Skorupski puts forward a conception of moral knowledge that is able to make room for cases of moral arrogance. Genuine moral knowledge relies both on subjective and personal rational convictions and on a social context of discussion, the latter being necessary to give epistemic warrant to the former. Moral arrogance obtains when the social context of discussion is denied, as in any esoteric morality. Moral arrogance is an epistemological mistake. However, this is not enough to show that epistemically arrogant actions are wrong. Skorupski's conclusion is rather open: possibly, there are spaces for arrogance, along the lines traced by his account of genuine moral knowledge, and to rely on epistemically unsafe moral principles may possibly amount to committing wrong actions. However, these possibilities are not enough to prove the esoteric utilitarians wrong.

As a proposer of a new version of rule-consequentialism in his *Ideal Code, Real World* (2000), Brad Hooker has been one of the leading figures in the enterprise of defending utilitarianism from some of the most common objections. In the paper published here, he pursues this task one step further, by defending his rule-consequentialism from some recent objections raised by Robert Card against his reliance on reflective equilibrium. Hooker's answer is premised by a very helpful statement of the main differences between act- and rule-consequentialism.

Since the very beginning of its history, utilitarianism has been beset by simultaneously contradictory criticisms, such as the accusation of being an unattainable ideal and the charge of worldliness or quietism, or excessive reliance on empirical facts. To these critiques, the worry that at least simple consequentialism turns out to produce strongly counter-intuitive conclusions has been added. In his paper, Tim Mulgan very helpfully displays a middle road between the two extremes of an unattainable ideal and a strict adherence to common moral practices and actual human behaviour. The result is a two-tiered rule-consequentialist ethics, where actions are justified in terms of a code whose internalization by the overwhelming majority of each new generation will produce the best consequences. Mulgan defends this model against the objection that it relies too much on contingent claims about the costs of internalization of certain codes, by showing the appropriate role of facts and empirical claims in a human morality.

One of the fields where debate on utilitarianism is hottest is in applied ethics. At the end of his paper, Tim Mulgan shows how a rule-consequentialist framework might be nicely used to deal with the issue of climate change, and how it provides

plausible suggestions in this difficult area. The final papers of this collection, too, consider concrete topics in applied ethics, especially in areas where those topics allow one to deal with large theoretical puzzles concerning utilitarian ethics. Gianfranco Pellegrino dwells on the way in which Hooker's rule-consequentialism was employed by Tim Mulgan in order to make room for reproductive freedom in a theory of our intergenerational obligations. Pellegrino contends that Hooker's rule-consequentialism may provide a justification for reproductive freedoms only in very peculiar, and unlikely, situations. Moreover, he claims that the old "collapse objection" raised by David Lyons is not successfully dispelled by Hooker's adjustments to rule-consequentialism.

Nir Eyal considers the issue of coercion in the realm of medical treatment. He rejects the standard justifications of the common-sense intuitions against certain forms of coercion and concludes that those intuitions are probably wrong. In addition to this, he provides a new utilitarian argument in favour of maintaining and fostering those intuitions - an argument relying on the notion of "dignitary harms" issuing from coercive acts.

3. Utilitarians are usually unconcerned with institutions, in that they deem that individual action is the basic unit to be considered, even in assessing collective deeds and the behaviour of groups. However, institutions are crucially important to ensure the proper environment for academic discussion and exchange of ideas. The University "La Sapienza" at Rome, the Dipartimento di Studi Filosofici ed Epistemologici and the Facoltà di Filosofia in that University provided an ideal context for our discussions and all of the necessary facilities and means that allowed for the Conference, held in June 2007, to be a memorable experience. I am deeply grateful to these institutions and to all the various officials working in them. I wish to express particular gratitude to Professor Eugenio Lecaldano, who organized this Conference with inexhaustible energy and personal participation. Let me finish by expressing my thanks to Emilio D'Orazio and the Comitato direttivo of *Notizie di Politeia*, for hosting this collection of papers, thus allowing the memory of those days in Rome to be preserved.