

J.F. STEPHEN'S ON FRATERNITY AND MILL'S UNIVERSAL LOVE¹

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In chapter 3 of *Utilitarianism*, J.S. Mill forcefully presents and defends the idea of a universal love for humanity proclaimed to be the definitive and final sanction of morality; a love that constitutes (in Mill's words) "a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality". Once we know that general happiness constitutes the ethical standard, only that sentiment can afford us the strength to carry out this utilitarian morality and constitute the adequate sanction for this demanding standard. Again, in Mill's words, "this firm foundation is that of the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilization. The social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man, that... he never conceives himself otherwise than as a member of a body; and this association is riveted more and more as mankind are further removed from the state of savage independence" (p.284).

This progressive fortification of social ties does not only give everyone a practical interest in the well-being of everyone else, but "it also leads him to identify his feelings more and more with their good", and identification that will take on, in the extreme case, the character of a religion: "If we now suppose this feeling of unity to be taught as a religion, and the whole force of education, of institutions, and of opinion, as it was once in the case of religion, to make every person to grow up from infancy surrounded on all sides both by the profession and by

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the practice of it, I think that no one, who can realize this conception, will feel any misgivings about the sufficiency of the ultimate sanction for the Happiness morality” (p.286).

While this situation of universal fraternity remains unachieved, we must, without doubt, conform to a less complete sanction: not identification of everyone’s feelings with the good of all, but at least, the consciousness that no necessary conflict exists among individuals “for the means of happiness”: “The deeply-rooted conceptions which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and his aims and those of his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture makes it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings – perhaps make him denounce and defy those feelings – he still needs to be conscious that his real aim and theirs do not conflict: that he is not opposing himself to what they really wish for, namely, their own good, but on the contrary, promoting it... This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest-happiness morality” (p. 287).

There are then two phases in the theory of sanction (i.e. of rational motivation):

a) temporally, the first is the phase of cooperation, in which –in a more or less clear way– we realize that not only is there no conflict among the goals that individuals propose for themselves, but that there is also a certain promotion of others’ goals as a result of the search for our own good. (It would clearly correspond to a social situation of interested cooperation, as the economic situation governed by the hidden-hand).

b) the second phase would be one of fraternity (to use J.F. Stepehen’s terminology), that is, that in which “the good of others become to him [each individual] a thing naturally and necessarily to be attached to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence” (p. 285). (It would be, by conjecture, a state of socialism, in the sense that Mill uses this term).

It is obvious that in the first phase of morality, we cannot dispense with external sanctions, i.e. “the outward motives to care for others”; to put it another way, the law and the state that backs it. In the second phase, in contrast, the growing tendency toward equality (reflected in the ideas of democracy and

socialism) not only favors our practical interest in keeping in mind everyone else's well-being, but it also pushes us to identify our feelings with their good, or at least it drives us to an increasing degree of consideration of this good. "[the individual] comes, as though instinctively, to be conscious of himself as a being who *of course* pays a regard to others" (p.285)

It is this theory of moral motivation, with its social and political backdrop, that J.F. Stephen subjects to tough criticism in the chapter entitled "Fraternity" from his classic book *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. In this critique, Stephen draws attention to an issue that is essential for the interpretation of utilitarianism, and which, nevertheless, has been neglected by its critics. So, for example, Henry Sidgwick, in his review of Stephen's book, affirms not without sarcasm: "In discussing Fraternity Mr. Stephen seems to confound two very distinct issues, how far men actually do love each other, and how far it would be for their mutual benefit that they should. Sometimes, indeed, the discussion seems to be almost narrowed to the question whether Mr. Fitzjames Stephen loves his fellow-men: which he assures us, is only the case to a very limited extent" (p.1984). This *reductio ad personam*, however, is certainly unfair. The point that Stephen intends to make has much greater theoretical importance: it consists of opposing to the "transcendental" utilitarianism of Mill a "common" interpretation of utilitarianism which has its roots in Hobbes and in Hume, and its clearest expression – according to Stephen – in Bentham.

Stephen expresses the divergence between both interpretations with clarity: "The point at which Mr. Mill and I should part company is his belief that his natural feeling for oneself and one's friends, gradually changing its character, is sublimated into a general love for the human race; and in that shape is capable of forming a new religion of which we need only fear that it may be too strong for human liberty and individuality" (p. 175). Stephen was profoundly attracted to the idea that makes up the undercurrent of *Leviathan*: the idea that moral and political philosophy has to rest on a realistic, not idealized, conception of human nature. In Hobbes's opinion, this conception involves two features: a) the fact that the interests of human beings can unavoidably enter into conflict, given that they can possess very distinct, and even opposite, conceptions

of good; b) the fact that social order seems to unavoidably depend on forceful imposition: morality and law, these indispensable restrictions of liberty, are not only effective because of their capacity to seduce our wills, but even more so because of the coerced backing that the community provides (as a last resort) through politics.

The proximity of Bentham to Hobbes in these characteristic features is well known. His vision of man was strictly deterministic: the source of human actions is always the search for pleasure and the escape from pain. The real reason for our observance of the moral and the legal rules is always the fear of sanction. Bentham does not abhor purely Hobbesian expressions. In *First Principles...*, e.g., he says that under whatever form of government, a man will always prefer his own happiness to the happiness of all men taken together. These are the innate tendencies of human nature, tendencies that are necessary for the species' survival, and that, in the absence of any social control, unfolds freely and exclusively (p. 212).

The influence of Hobbes and Bentham in Stephen is, therefore, undeniable. There is, perhaps, a softening of the harshness of Bentham expressions. As for all else, Bentham's influence on Stephen does not manifest itself in this generic ideological influence, and even less in the adoption of Bentham's specific theses (as those of homogeneity of pleasure or of felicific calculus), but in the mental disposition to treat observation of the facts, instead of abstract reason, as the essential method of utilitarian thought. In contrast to "transcendental" utilitarianism (that he attributes to Mill), "common" utilitarianism is characterized by the thesis that only comprehension of the advantages and disadvantages of one type of behavior over another (and not generic love for humanity) can in each case give to rise to a serene and intelligent moral judgement.

The authority of Hobbes and Bentham is nuanced by the mediation of Hume. Stephen has developed his notion of "common" utilitarianism in his writing "Note on utilitarianism" (included in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*). It is a notion impregnated with the empiricist spirit of Hume's philosophy. If we examine the terms *right* or *wrong* from a semantic point of view, it is clear that they cannot mean anything other than the tendency of actions, so qualified, to produce happiness or un-

happiness. Now, given that different people can form very different ideas about happiness, it very well can be that the question about *the* motivation (supposedly a single motivation) to act correctly lacks meaning; or, to put it another way, to say that the *true* moral motivation to act is search for *general* happiness is an empty assertion: “[The utilitarian answer] implies that the reason for doing right varies indefinitely according to the nature of the right act to be done, and the circumstances of the person by whom it is to be done. There is no one sanction which applies with precisely equal weight to every conceivable case of doing right.” (p. 220).

An important consequence of this consideration is that the principle of universal love cannot lead to definitive results and, therefore, cannot be the motive (at least not the immediate motive) of our moral behavior: “Again, as Bentham pointed out, ... the principle of sympathy or antipathy never can, from the nature of the case, be so applied as to lead to any definitive result. It proposes no external standard to which disputants can appeal...” (p. 224).

The transcendentalization of ethics, that Stephen believed to have detected in Mill’s thinking, can be resurrected in the idea that love for humanity (“fraternity”) should constitute (given a specific degree of social evolution) this fundamental moral motivation. This conception, in Stephen’s opinion, is not only psychologically unreal, but it is also vacuous from the methodological point of view: it cannot lead us to develop standards by which we have to morally govern ourselves. Its only utility is as a language for preaching, which tends to afford us, nevertheless, an excessively elevated vision of our capabilities.

The goal of Stephen’s criticism of the idea of “fraternity” is to point out that this idea is not, as Sidwick thought, a circumstantial element of Mill’s thinking, but that it leads to a systematization that (Stephen considers) moves away from the authentic roots of the utilitarian doctrine. This rests on the negation of any moral monism and on the affirmation that, while obviously “right” can only mean the tendency of an action to produce happiness, the question about the ultimate reason to behave correctly can very well end up being empty: the reasons why different people should act or not act are different, and,

nevertheless, many of them could be acceptable from a moral point of view.

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The quotes included in the text refer to, in a sufficiently clear way, the following texts:

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