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A Critique of Elie Halévy

Refutation of an important distortion of
British moral philosophy*

by
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A Critique of Elie Halévy

Refutation of an important distortion of British moral philosophy¹

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The prestigious French publisher Presses Universitaires de France has recently brought out (November 1995) a new French edition of Elie Halévy's well known book *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, first published in France in three volumes as *La formation du radicalisme philosophique* (1901-1904) and translated into English in 1926. The prevailing opinion on this book is that it gives an excellent account of English utilitarianism. Thus, in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Talcott Parsons speaks of it as the 'virtually definitive analysis of utilitarianism²'. More recently Donald Winch, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, describes Halévy's book as: 'Still the best study of the ideas and activities of the school taken as a whole³'.

In this short essay I express a very different opinion. I show that Halévy, who qualifies utilitarianism (with obvious disgust) as 'a plebeian or rather bourgeois morality⁴', as 'much too simple⁵', completely misunderstood the writings of the English and Scottish utilitarian philosophers.

Halévy's understanding of Utilitarianism and the Principle of Utility

There is no clear or precise definition of utilitarianism in Halévy's book, but he obviously understood it to be a *descriptive theory*, and

¹ I would like to very specially thank professors R. M Hare, D. D. Raphael, Fred Rosen and Ross Harrison for their advice, but my warmest gratitude goes to Bernard Guerrien (Paris I University) and Mrs Estiva Reus (Université de Bretagne occidentale).

² T. Parsons, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), vol. 16, 229.

³ J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Penguin Classics, 1985), 51.

⁴ E. Halévy, 477; Vol. III, 316. When quoting Halévy, the first reference will concern the 1965 English edition (Kelley reprints of economic classics); the second reference concerns the French 1901-1904 three volume version (Felix Alcan Editeurs, Paris). Unless otherwise indicated, the italics inside quotations are ours.

⁵ Op. cit., note 4, (491; Vol. III, 343).

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took the 'principle of utility' for a psychological law *explaining* human behaviour: 'The principle of utility [...] meant that *all men naturally incline towards pleasure* and flee from pain ⁶', 'the fundamental principle of the doctrine is that pleasure is *the natural end* of human actions'⁷,.

Now, no utilitarian philosopher has ever given the name *principle of utility* to this psychological law. This is the fundamental mistake on which the whole book is constructed.

As for the 'law' itself (as distinguished from the name we give to it), like most of Halévy's statements it can be interpreted in two different ways. It can mean simply that pleasure awakens desire; that people are attracted by it. But this is a commonplace observation that no one ever denied. On the other hand, the proposition can mean that man is moved to action *only* by expected pleasure and that between two actions he will *always* choose the one that promises him most pleasure. Halévy sometimes seems to use the expression in the first sense; but it is the second (the extreme egoism theory) that ends up being the basis of utilitarianism. Thus he tells us 'Were the utilitarian doctrine to accept family feelings, would it not destroy *the postulate* on which it rests?'⁸.

Halévy tells us that the great British utilitarian philosophers wanted to imitate Newton (which is true); but that they had a simplistic idea of what this great scientist had done in the natural sciences. They are supposed to have believed they could explain *all phenomena of social and mental life* by one single law or by one principle (the attraction of man towards pleasure) just as Newton had supposedly explained all natural phenomena by the universal attraction of gravity: 'the discovery of Newton's principle which made it possible *to found on a single law a complete science of nature* [...] [gave rise to] the hope of discovering an analogous principle capable of serving for the establishment of a synthetic science of the phenomena of moral and social life'⁹; 'The equivalent of the principle of universal gravity in the sphere of moral philosophy is the principle of utility'¹⁰.

According to Halévy then, utilitarianism is *a vast system*, composed of several social sciences (psychology, political economy, ethics, politics, etc.) unified by the single law of behaviour according to which man constantly seeks pleasure and chooses the greater pleasure. Thus, *in psychology*, all voluntary actions and all moral

⁶ Op. cit., note 4, (456; vol. III, 275).

⁷ Op. cit., note 4, (119; Vol. I, 218).

⁸ Op. cit., note 4, (504; Vol III, page 367).

98 ⁹ Op. cit., note 4, (3; vol. I, XIII).

¹⁰ Op. cit., note 4, (12; vol. I, 13).

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sentiments can be explained by 'self love'; in *ethics*, duty is strictly reduced to 'rational egoism'; as for *political economy*, it is based on the 'principle of utility' (that the individual is 'strictly egoistic') and consists in all the conclusions that we can draw from that postulate¹¹. Halévy and his disciples call this vast theoretical construction the 'moral newtonianism' of the utilitarians, the word 'moral' being used here in its widest sense, meaning mental, social and ethical life.

This wrong understanding of the principle of utility would at least have the advantage of being simple and clear; but Halévy can't stick to it since anyone who has read Hume, Bentham, Mill or Sidgwick would have seen his mistake. So he camouflages it; very quickly he tells us that the principle of utility meant *two things at once*; it was not only *a positive statement* (a proposition concerning 'what necessarily is') but also *a normative statement* (a moral precept expressing 'what we ought to do'). Thus Halévy writes 'Considered as a maxim of action, [the principle of utility] meant that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be aimed at; considered as the statement of a general fact, it meant that all men naturally incline towards pleasure and flee from pain¹², '[Bentham's] masterly idea is precisely to have *discovered* in the principle of utility a practical commandment as well as a scientific law, a proposition which teaches us *at one and the same time what is and what ought to be*¹³'.

However between these two interpretations of the principle- or this principle which means two things- one is more fundamental or basic: the positive (or descriptive) interpretation: 'The principle of utility is...not the expression of a subjective preference of the moralist, but of *an objective law of nature*¹⁴, 'a scientific law¹⁵'.

Utilitarianism according to British utilitarians

In Bentham's fundamental work, *An Introduction to the Principles of*

¹¹ 'political economy, the "dogmatics of egoism", is perhaps the most famous of the *applications of the principle of utility*'. Op. cit., note 4, (15; vol. I, xx).

¹² Op. cit., note 4, (456; vol. III, 275).

¹³ Op. cit., note 4, (12; vol. I, 14). Although Bentham is supposed to have 'discovered' this, a few pages later Halévy tells us that he did not 'see' it:

'Did he see that the principle of the association of ideas, and even the principle of utility, permit of diverse and perhaps contradictory interpretations? *He does not seem to have done so...*He liked to think that he had discovered in the principle of utility *a simple positive principle*' (34, vol. I, 53).

¹⁴ Op. cit., note 4, (27; vol. I, 41).

¹⁵ Op. cit., note 4, (12; vol. I, 14).

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Morals and Legislation, the first chapter “Of the Principle of Utility” is dedicated to the definition of his fundamental principle. After a short metaphor on pain and pleasure, to which we will return, he writes: ‘The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle *which approves or disapproves* of every action whatsoever...¹⁶’.

The essential point here is that for Bentham the principle is a criterion which ‘approves or disapproves’, a standard which says what is right and what is wrong, a principle that tells us *what ought to be*. It is certainly not a descriptive theory (a positive statement) about *what is*.

It remains to see what property of actions this principle singles out so as to approve or disapprove of them. Now British utilitarians have always clearly stated that their criterion of right and wrong is the happiness ‘of the community’ or the happiness ‘of humanity’ or ‘of *all* those who are concerned’. In the chapter we are quoting, Bentham exhausts all the alternatives: ‘6. *An action* then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility [...] when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it. 7. *A measure of government* [...] may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it [...] 9. *A man* may be said to be a partisan of the principle of utility, when the approbation or disapprobation he annexes to any action, or to any measure, is determined by, and proportioned to the tendency which he conceives it to have to augment or to diminish the happiness of the community¹⁷’.

This is not the way Halévy understood the principle of utility. Not only did he believe that it meant *two things at once*, he thought that the normative part of the principle proposes *two different ethical criteria*: one for the everyday actions of people in their quality as ‘private citizens’ (the criterion, in this case, should be *their selfish personal happiness*), and one for the measures taken in their quality of ‘public functionaries’ (the criterion here should be *the happiness of the community*). Thus, he gives us a third meaning for the principle of utility: ‘the principle of utility approves or disapproves of actions according as they tend to augment or diminish the happiness of the *individuals* under consideration¹⁸’.

We have here, once more, one of Halévy’s many ambiguous state-

¹⁶ J. Bentham, 1970, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (University of London: The Athlone Press), 11-12.

¹⁷ Op. cit. note 15, 12-13.

¹⁸ Op. cit., note 4, (28; vol. I, 41).

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ments that can have *two different meanings*. On one hand the expression ‘*the individuals under consideration*’ has a resemblance with the precise formula ‘*all those who are concerned*’, so someone who has studied utilitarianism might pass over it without noticing. But on the other hand, it conveys the wrong idea that the principle of utility preaches *individual selfishness*. And further down we see that this is precisely the idea that Halévy was smuggling in: ‘Be benevolent and do good, on condition that your goodness *always serves your own interest* indirectly: this formula seems to sum up *the whole theory of virtues* in Bentham and in James Mill [...] when beneficence implies a sacrifice [...] it is absurd to give oneself up to it¹⁹’.

But Bentham and his disciples were perfectly clear that, even in the most personal and intimate decisions (marriage, divorce, suicide, etc.), the *ultimate criterion* for judging an action should be the happiness of *all who are concerned*. Thus, as a young man, Bentham writes that the happiness of the community is: ‘the standard of right and wrong in the field of *morality in general* and of Government in particular²⁰’. And fifty years later, in his *Article on Utilitarianism*, he hadn't changed an inch: “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” was stated in the character of a principle [...] of all enactments in legislation and *all rules and precepts destined for the direction of human conduct in private life*²¹’.

In none of these definitions does Bentham confuse the principle of utility with man's *natural tendency* to seek pleasure. So, if Halévy was successful in conveying such an impression to his disciples, he did so by *suppressing* parts of Bentham's words in the quotation in which Bentham defines his principle. Let us compare Halévy's version and Bentham's original text with – *in italics* – the most significant passages that Halévy omitted.²²

¹⁹ Op. cit., note 4, (474-477; Vol. III, page 309-314).

²⁰ J. Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 116.

²¹ J. Bentham, *Deontology* (Clarendon Press, 1992), 291.

This is of course how John Stuart Mill understood Bentham's principle ‘Nor did [Bentham] ever dream of defining morality to be the self-interest of the agent. His “greatest happiness principle” was the greatest happiness of mankind, and of all sensitive beings’ Mill's quotation marks, *Collected Works* (Toronto University Press), vol. X, p. 184.

²² Here we have to point out a significant difference between the original French text and the English translation. The English translator probably checked with Bentham's book and felt obliged to add four dots (....) in the places where Halévy had simply omitted several lines; there are no such suspension points in the original French version.

BENTHAM'S WORDS

‘1. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne [...] The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law [...] ***But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.***

2. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever...²³.

HALÉVY'S VERSION

‘Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne.... [no suspension points in the French version] The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law.... [no suspension points in the French version] By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever.’²⁴

The sentences Halévy omitted separate Bentham's statements into two parts: a first part which is, in his own words, ‘metaphor and declamation’ and a second part which is ‘explicit and determinate’ and contains *the definition* of the principle of utility. Should anyone doubt where the definition is, Bentham has added a ‘marginal’ which reads ‘Principle of utility, what’, just opposite his point 2. But even Halévy's abridged version, which is systematically quoted by his disciples as a definition of the principle of utility, does not at all say (if read carefully) that the principle had *two meanings*.

²³ Op. cit. note 15, 11-12.

²⁴ Op. cit., note 4, (26; vol. I, p. 38-39).

Bentham's sources of inspiration: Hume and Helvetius

Should there still be any doubt about what Bentham meant by the principle of utility, it vanishes when he tells us where he got it from. Bentham tells us that he found the principle in Hume's and Helvetius' writings. Both these authors systematically use the expression 'principle of *public utility*', thereby clearly indicating that their criterion is not individual pleasure but 'collective happiness'. Here is one of the passages where Bentham acknowledges, in 1822, his debt to Hume: 'Under the name of the principle of utility, for that was the name adopted from David Hume, the *Fragment* [he is referring to his book *A Fragment on Government*] set up, the greatest happiness principle in the character of *the standard of right and wrong* in the field of morality in general and of Government in particular²⁵,'.

And here are some extracts from Hume's text to which he is referring: '[we] must search for those rules which are, on the whole, most useful and beneficial [...] what stronger foundation can be desired or conceived for any duty, than to observe that human society [...] will still arrive at greater degrees of happiness and perfection, the more inviolable the regard is, which is paid to that duty? [...] *the ultimate reason* for every rule [...] is the interest and happiness of human society [...] even in common life we have every moment recourse to *the principle of public utility*²⁶,'.

On other occasions Bentham has implied that it was Helvetius who inspired him with the idea: 'From him I learnt to look upon the tendency of any institution or pursuit to promote *the happiness of society as the sole test and measure of its merit*: and to [...] regard the principle of utility as an oracle which if properly consulted would afford the only true solution that could be given to every question of right and wrong²⁷,'.

Here are the passages from Helvetius which probably inspired him: 'one cannot constantly practice a strong and pure Virtue, without habitually having in mind *the principle of public utility* [...] truth itself is subordinate to *the principle of public utility* [...] a virtuous man always conducts himself by the indications of *public utility*. This utility is the principle of all human Virtues, and the foundation of all legislation²⁸,'.

²⁵ Op. cit. note 19, 116.

²⁶ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Enquiries...*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 195-203.

²⁷ J. Bentham, *The Correspondence...*, (The Athlone Press, 1968), Volume II, 99.

²⁸ C. A. Helvetius, *De l'esprit* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 82-84.

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So much for Bentham's predecessors. Let us now turn to his principal successors, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick who obviously did not consider the principle of utility as a scientific law *explaining* behaviour. Thus, the young John Stuart writes, in 1835: 'the principle of utility [...] is a theory of *right and wrong*²⁹'. And thirty years later, in the chapter headed "What Utilitarianism Is" in his book *Utilitarianism*, he writes: 'The [utilitarian] creed [...] holds that actions are *right* in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, *wrong* as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness [...] the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned³⁰'.

In, a chapter entitled "The Meaning of Utilitarianism", in his famous *Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick defines the doctrine in the same way: 'By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct³¹'.

Thus, if the British philosophers of whom we are speaking called their doctrine 'utilitarianism' this was not because it advances the quest for *individual utility* as the motive which explains human actions (as Elie Halévy and his disciples suggest), but because it proposes *public utility* – the happiness of the community – as the criterion by which to judge them. But, since Halévy has confused the principle of utility with the psychological theory according to which man is universally selfish, let us see what the British utilitarians actually thought about this theory, though it has nothing to do with utilitarianism.

The 'selfish system' of motives

In his book, *De l'esprit*, Helvetius, one of the most famous exponents of the universal selfishness theory in psychology, gave his opinion very clearly on this question: 'the desire for pleasure is the principle which explains *all* our thoughts and *all* our actions; if *all* men constantly seek their real or apparent happiness, *all* our voli-

²⁹ J. S. Mill, 'Sidgwick's Discourse', in *Collected Works* (Toronto University Press), vol. X, 71.

³⁰ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *On Liberty and Other Classics* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 137 and 148.

³¹ Sidgwick, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics*, (Macmillan and Hackett, 1907), 411.

tions are thus only the result of this tendency [...] we *necessarily* pursue happiness everywhere we see it [...] the desire for pleasure will *always* make man – will *always* force him – to chose the option which seems to him to correspond most to his interests³².

This is the 'principle' or 'postulate' that Halévy confuses with the principle of utility and attributes to British utilitarians. Accordingly, he writes: 'Bentham [...] now developed the theory of Helvetius without any restriction [...] James Mill [...] himself became an uncompromising supporter of the psychology of Helvetius³³, 'The Utilitarian philosopher [...] considered the individual as elementally egoistic, and all the disinterested inclinations as so many transformations of this primordial egoism³⁴'.

What did these authors really write? Let us begin first with David Hartley, the founder of the psychological theory adopted by most English utilitarians, an author frequently mentioned by Halévy³⁵: 'the desire of happiness, and the aversion to misery, are supposed to be inseparable from, and essential to, all intelligent natures. But this does not seem to be an exact or correct way of speaking [...] whoever will be sufficiently attentive to the workings of his own mind, and the actions resulting therefrom, or to the actions of others, and the affections which may be supposed to occasion them, will find such differences and singularities in different persons, and in the same person at different times, as in no way agree to the notion of an essential, original, perpetual desire of happiness, and endeavour to attain it³⁶'.

The same opinion is given by David Hume who, according to Halévy, is one of the 'first theorists of the Utilitarian morality' (201; Vol. II, p. 90). Thus Hume writes in his *Treatise of Human Nature*: 'Tis not contrary to reason [...] to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter. A trivial good may [...] produce a desire superior to what arises from the greatest and most valuable enjoyment [...] Men often act knowingly against their interest³⁷'.

³² Op. cit., note 27, 47. It should be noted that Helvetius never calls this psychological theory 'the principle of utility', as Halevy and his disciples seem to believe.

³³ Op. cit., note 4, (377; Vol. III, p. 121).

³⁴ Op. cit., note 4, (502-503; Vol. III, p. 364-365).

³⁵ Halevy writes of him:

'[Hume and] Hartley had formulated the principles of this *positive science* of the mind' (487; vol. III, p. 333).

³⁶ D. Hartley, *Observations on Man* (Thomas Tegg and Son, 1834), 232-234.

³⁷ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Penguin Books, 1984), 463-465.

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And twenty two years later in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: ‘from the original frame of our temper, we may feel a *desire of another's happiness*³⁸’ (the italics are Hume's).

And James Mill writes: ‘an individual [...] may not only mistake [his] interest, but, perceiving it clearly, may prefer the gratification of a strong passion to it [...] a man's pursuing the interest of another, or indeed any other object in nature, is just as conceivable as that he should pursue his own interest [...] *is there a single proposition of [mine] which implies an ignorance of this fact?*³⁹’.

While his son John Stuart writes, in 1833 (his father was still alive): ‘that all our acts are determined by pains and pleasures in prospect, pains and pleasures to which we look forward as the consequences of our acts. This, as a universal truth, can in no way be maintained⁴⁰’.

And Sidgwick writes: ‘the doctrine that pleasure (or the absence of pain) is the end of all human action can neither be supported by the results of introspection, nor by the results of external observation and inference [...] our conscious active impulses are so far from being always directed towards the attainment of pleasure or avoidance of pain for ourselves, that we can find everywhere in consciousness extra-regarding impulses, directed towards something that is not pleasure, nor relief from pain⁴¹’.

Halévy's influence – direct or indirect – is probably, in great part, responsible if such a subtle thinker as Ronald Dworkin should attribute to his philosophical adversaries (the utilitarians) this simplistic doctrine they had so clearly rejected. Thus Dworkin writes: ‘Why should people care about anything except having as good a time as possible? Jeremy Bentham and other utilitarian philosophers denied that people ever do care about anything else⁴²’. John

³⁸ Op. cit., note 24, 300.

How far Halévy has misled his disciples is attested by an essay of Professor Philippe Mongin's that the new editors of *La formation du radicalisme philosophique* have considered instructive to append to volume III of the recent edition. In this essay M. Mongin explains to us that according to ‘*Hume's principle of utility* [...] every action aims at the pleasure of the person who acts... [Hume, says M. Mongin] was not familiar with the other side, the collective side, of the principle’ (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), Vol. III, page 376-379.

³⁹ J. Mill, *A Fragment on Mackintosh* (London: Longmans, Green Reader and Dyer, 1870), 276-278.

⁴⁰ J. S. Mill, “Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy”, *Collected Works...*, vol. X, 12.

⁴¹ Op. cit., note 30, 52-53.

⁴² R. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 204.

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Harsanyi, also a very fine scholar, makes the same regrettable mistake: '[classical utilitarianism] *presupposes* a now completely outdated hedonistic psychology. It is by no means obvious that all we do we do only in order to attain pleasure or to avoid pain'⁴³.

How about Bentham? Was he an exception among British utilitarians? As for almost all the questions he treats, Halévy often uses ambiguous formulas and even expresses different opinions in different parts of his book. Thus, he writes that: 'Bentham [...] *never* seems to have given up treating extra-personal motives as being as "simple" and fundamental as egoistic motives [...] he refuses to give the word interest the exclusive meaning of "personal interest"'⁴⁴, (Halévy's quotation marks).

Nevertheless the opinion that predominates in his book, the opinion his disciples have retained, consists in attributing to Bentham the theory of selfishness in an absolute form: "'love of self is universal". *All* individuals are, essentially and naturally, egoists. *All* professions of disinterestedness and of purity of intentions must be taken as so many lies'⁴⁵, (the quotation marks are Halévy's).

But, though Bentham is far from always having been perfectly clear on this question, he does not hold this theory in the chapter "Of Motives" in his *Introduction to the Principle of Morals and Legislation*. So, to make his opinion credible, when Halévy speaks of this chapter, he once again *suppresses* critical words in a Bentham quotation; and again *without warning the reader* (except in the English translation where, once more, suspension points have been added). Let us quote, side by side, the original (the words suppressed by Halévy in *italics*) and Halévy's rendering of it:

BENTHAM'S WORDS

'6. [...] Motive refers necessarily to action. It is a pleasure, a pain, **or other event**, that prompts to action. Motive then, in one sense of the word, must be previous to such event. But, for a man to be governed by any motive, he must in every case look beyond that event which is called his action; he must look to the consequences of it: and it is only in this way that the idea of pleasure, of pain, **or of any other event**, can give birth to it'⁴⁶.

⁴³ In *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Sen and Williams (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54.

⁴⁴ Op. cit., note 4, (465; vol. III, 291).

⁴⁵ Op. cit., note 4, (405; vol. III, 176).

⁴⁶ Op. cit., note 15, 98.

HALÉVY'S RENDERING

'The internal motive being by definition "a pleasure or pain ... calculated to determine you to act" must be, in a sense, anterior to the action: it is what Bentham calls the motive "*in esse*". But because the individuals, in order to act, must foresee the appearance of a pleasure or the suppression of a pain as a future event, consequent upon an act yet to come, this pleasure, which is posterior to the action, constitutes what Bentham calls the motive "*in prospect*"⁴⁷ (inverted quotation marks are Halévy's).

The words *or of any other event* have disappeared⁴⁸. Halévy's *abridged* rendering of Bentham's theory of motives has become the standard version for many writers on the subject. On the other hand, other commentators – among the most competent – have found that Bentham did not adhere to the selfishness theory. Thus, according to John Stuart Mill, who was intimately acquainted with both the man and his work: 'He by no means intended [...] to impute universal selfishness to mankind'⁴⁹. Leslie Stephen says: '[he] does not lay down the doctrine [of selfishness] absolutely'⁵⁰. More recently prominent academics as Jacob Viner⁵¹, D. D. Raphael⁵² and Ross Harrison⁵³ have come to the same conclusion.

The formation of the moral sentiments

Halévy seems to have confused two different psychological theories that were attempting, in the eighteenth century, to explain the so called 'disinterested actions'. The first, known as 'the selfishness theory' (often associated with the names of Mandeville and Helvetius), holds that all these actions result from a more or less conscious *calculation* of the personal pleasure, utility or advantage to be drawn from them. The second is the 'theory of sympathy'

⁴⁷ Op. cit., note 4, (459; Vol. III, p. 280).

⁴⁸ The recent 1995 edition of Halévy's book makes no comment about these misquotes, though the publishers of the new edition insist, on the first page of each of the three volumes, that references to Bentham's works have been 'rechecked' (*révisés*).

⁴⁹ Op. cit., note 39, 14.

⁵⁰ L. Stephen, *The English Utilitarians* (Duckworth, 1900), volume I, 311.

⁵¹ J. Viner, 'Bentham and Mill: the Utilitarian Background', *American Economic Review*, March 1949, 363-364.

⁵² D. D. Raphael, *Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 38.

⁵³ R. Harrison, *Bentham* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 143-145.

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(associated with the names of Hume and Adam Smith) which, without in the least denying how strong self love is, maintains that in the human mental constitution (in human nature) there are, besides selfish impulses, non-selfish elementary impulses directed towards something else than the pleasure of the person who acts.

But the theory according to which man calculates, before each voluntary action, how much pleasure it will bring him, is very difficult to defend since it is so evident that men often act without enough time for reflecting, or in contradiction to their clearly understood interests, prompted by strong emotions such as pity, jealousy, sense of honour, etc. When confronted with these difficulties the 'selfish authors' often veer to another theory, which is in fact altogether different. They acknowledge the 'motive power' of such emotions (they admit that these are not just hypocrisy hiding some calculation) but maintain that they are *derived feelings* constructed unconsciously by association out of the elementary selfish impulses (the desire to eat, drink, etc.).

This second selfishness theory and the theory of sympathy both consider that the 'disinterested' feelings which prompt us to action are complex emotions constructed out of more simple and elementary mental reactions. But they diverge inasmuch as the former maintains that the only original principle of action is the desire for personal pleasure, whereas the second theory recognizes several other elementary reactions (such as fear, anger, sympathy, etc.) which do not necessarily aim at the pleasure of the person who acts.

To which of these two schools of thought did the most eminent figures of English utilitarianism adhere? Here again, there is no doubt that Halévy is completely mistaken. Thus he writes: 'The Utilitarian philosopher [...] considered the individual as elementally egoistic, and *all the disinterested inclinations* as so many transformations of this primordial egoism⁵⁴', 'The whole effort of the association psychology was to prove that egoism is the primitive motive of which *all the affections* of the soul are the successive complications⁵⁵'. Sympathy itself, if one is to believe Halévy, was, for the utilitarians, but one of the disguises of selfishness. Thus, he writes: '[for utilitarians] sympathetic feelings are *only transformations of egoism*⁵⁶', 'analysis must absolutely reduce *all the feelings* to simple elements, which are as homogenous as possible, and regulated by a *single law*⁵⁷'.

Here we have again what Halévy and his disciples call the 'mo-

⁵⁴ Op. cit., note 4, (502-503; vol. III, 364-365).

⁵⁵ Op. cit., note 4, (477; vol. III, 314).

⁵⁶ Op. cit., note 4, (473; vol. III, 308).

⁵⁷ Op. cit., note 4, (464-465; vol. III, 291).

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ral Newtonianism' of the utilitarians who are accused of having believed that they could explain *all* manifestations of mental and social life by *one single law, one single principles*. Halévy apparently confuses two very different endeavours: the attempt to explain complex feelings by their more elementary components, and the very different quest, to *explain everything by one single law or principle*.

Sympathy: 'a simple and original instinct'

For the psychologists of the association school the word 'sympathy' meant the faculty everyone has of *feeling what someone else is experiencing*. When we see someone yawn, we feel 'the desire to yawn'; when someone tells us of his son who died, we feel sad *along with him*.

On the other hand, when we hear of children who are 'hungry', *we do not grow hungry* as we read. Some feelings then are susceptible of sympathy, others are much less so. And though our capacity to feel this or that emotion that other people are experiencing is greatly increased or diminished by education, and other circumstances, there seems to be, at the root of this difference (between feelings that can be "shared" and those that cannot), something peculiar to the constitution of the human mind or the nervous system (an 'original principle of human nature' as Hume and Smith would put it). The instinctive (reflex) reaction that makes this secondary or derived feeling spring up in our mind is what association psychologists call the 'principle of sympathy'.

The 'theory of sympathy' holds that this practically instantaneous reaction, totally independent of our will, is (just as much as the elementary selfish impulses) a basis on which more complex feelings are constructed, in particular the feelings of approval and disapproval that Hume and Smith call 'the moral sentiments' (such as the sentiment of justice). There is nothing selfish in this reaction, it is totally spontaneous. As Adam Smith puts it: 'That whole account of human nature, however, which deduces all sentiments and affections from self-love [...] seems to me to have arisen from some confused misapprehension of the system of sympathy [...] Sympathy [...] cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle'⁵⁸.

Hume is also very clear on the subject: 'we must renounce the

⁵⁸ A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Glasgow Edition, 1976), 317.

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theory, which accounts for every moral sentiment by the principle of self-love [...] No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has *a natural tendency* to give pleasure; the second pain [...] Here is *a principle*, which accounts, in great part, for the origin of morality⁵⁹.

James Mill says much the same thing and when he examines Mandeville's theory, which reduces all moral sentiments to a kind of self-love, he writes: 'If I am to speak what I think of his picture of human nature, I say, *it is not true*'⁶⁰.

And John Stuart Mill writes: 'The idea of the pain of another is *naturally painful*; the idea of the pleasure of another is *naturally pleasurable*. From this *fact in our natural constitution*, all our affections both of love and aversion towards human beings...are held by the best teachers of the theory of utility, to originate. In this, the unselfish part of our nature, lies a foundation...for the generation of moral feelings'⁶¹.

And, concerning utilitarians in general, Henry Sidgwick writes: 'The theories of Hume and Adam Smith taken together anticipate, to an important extent, the explanation of the origin of moral sentiments which have been more recently current in the utilitarian school'⁶².

Conclusion

In this essay I have criticized Elie Halévy, whose famous book has probably done more to distort the western world's understanding of utilitarianism than any other similar work. Halévy has nevertheless invented nothing; he has simply embroidered all the popular gossip and hearsay on utilitarianism and economics into a neat and easy system that has captivated many scholars.

Since the new French edition of Halévy's work will certainly encourage this 'popular' interpretation of utilitarianism, I have thought it a duty to recall that the tradition of English and Scottish thought which goes from Hume to Sidgwick deserves to be treated with more respect.

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⁵⁹ Op. cit. note 25, 219-220.

⁶⁰ Op. cit. note 38, 62.

⁶¹ Op. cit. note 28, 60.

⁶² H. Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (Macmillan and Hackett, 1902), 218.