

"Two Centuries of Utilitarianism"

International Interdisciplinary Conference

June 4 - 5, 2009

University of Rennes II, France

The international conference on *Two Centuries of Utilitarianism* will be held by the research group *Axe Civilisation Britannique* (University of Rennes II) and the *Centre Bentham* (University of Paris Ouest – La Défense) on June 4 – 5 at the University of Rennes II.

Utilitarianism remains largely misunderstood in France where it has been reduced to a couple of caricatured positions which disparage its image. This attitude is at odds with a number of dominant theories taken mostly from the English speaking world which grant utilitarianism a privileged status: either as a source of inspiration or as a rival concept. From a theoretical point of view, it represents a major tradition and philosophical benchmark. From a practical point of view, it ranks among the most influential ethical and legal doctrines.

Thinkers developed utilitarian thought in the fields of ethics and ontology from Antiquity onwards. But utilitarianism, in its contemporary sense, emerges with Jeremy Bentham who expresses it in his principle of utility. It aims to "maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Bentham then systematizes its application, broadens its scope and establishes it as the primary principle of his philosophical system in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* first published in 1789.

For utilitarian thinkers, ethics is founded upon the idea that the moral value of an action is determined by its potential to increase or reduce general happiness. In addition to being a moral theory, utilitarianism also applies to several practical and theoretical fields including politics, law, the philosophy of action, economics, and sociology.

This conference aims to examine on the one hand the roots of utilitarianism and on the other its legacy, evolution and development. More than two hundred years after the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, what has become of utilitarianism? What has become of Bentham's emblematic concepts: "felicific calculus," happiness, pleasure, well-being, and the panopticon? Is it true that, in the words of Tim Mulgan, "perhaps the most important question dividing utilitarians is the definition of happiness or 'well-being' or 'utility' or 'whatever makes life worth living.'"? (*Understanding Utilitarianism*, Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007)

In the light of such questions, we would like to encourage the opposition of interdisciplinary viewpoints (English studies, philosophy, sociology, law, economics, history etc.) on key political and social issues (justice, democracy, international law, rights, political economy, ethics etc.). In addition, we advocate the comparison of classical utilitarians (Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick), and 20th-century utilitarian theories (Hare, Moore, Singer).

The following themes could also be addressed:

- Demandingness, paternalism, sacrifice: is utilitarianism an extreme moral theory?
- Utilitarianism and applied ethics: animal ethics, environmental ethics, medical ethics, bioethics etc.
- Consequentialism.
- The integration or exclusion of utilitarian and deontic calculus and teleological considerations in practical reasoning.
- Utilitarianism and the protection of the individual.

- Universalism and particularism.
- Act, rule, and preference utilitarianism.
- Utilitarianism and the concept of desert.
- The political influence of utilitarianism.
- Utilitarianism and state intervention / non-intervention.
- Utilitarianism and international law.
- Utilitarianism and distributive justice.

Presentations may be in French or English.

Please submit 250-word abstracts by September 29th, 2008 to Emilie Dardenne (emiliedardenne@yahoo.fr) with "Two Centuries of Utilitarianism 2009 Proposal Submission" noted in the subject line. Attachments should be in Rich Text or Word format only. Please include your name, professional affiliation, and contact information. Notification of acceptance will be made by December 2nd, 2008. The best papers will be subsequently selected for publication.

Keynote Speakers

Catherine Audard, London School of Economics
 Tim Mulgan, University of St Andrews (to be confirmed)
 Fred Rosen, University College London
 Philip Schofield, University College London

Conference Co-Chairs

Malik Bozzo-Rey, Université de Paris Ouest – La Défense
 Emilie Dardenne, Université de Rennes II

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