HUME AND MILL ON "UTILITY OF RELIGION":
A BORGEAN GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS?¹

JOSE L. TASSET²
University of A Coruña

ABSTRACT

This work is not a specific assessment of Utility of Religion by John Stuart Mill, but a defence of what I think is a utilitarian, but not millian, view on the problem that work states, the question of the utility of religion in contemporary societies. I construct that view from neo-humeanism more than from millian positions, notwithstanding, I postulate that view as a genuine utilitarian one.

Every cultural tradition makes a different approach to ethical and political theories. Spanish and Ibero-American utilitarians make precisely it with Classical Utilitarianism.

From that point of view, Ibero-American people identifies utilitarianism with radical and enlightened tradition linked with the reform that through XVIIIth and XIXth centuries tried to undermine the foundations of conservative society in our nations. This aim was not achieved, at least not completely; because of that, the pursuit of Utilitarianism remains opened between us.

In the end, I will argue that Spanish and Ibero-American utilitarians connect utilitarianism with philosophical and political radicalism, and inside that Hispanic utilitarianism, plays an important role the criticism of social and political functions of Religion.

Maybe, part of the future of Utilitarianism in our cultural context depends on a return of the Theory to its radical roots, also in religious subjects.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill, David Hume, Jorge Luis Borges, religion, deism, theism, functionalism, truth.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo no pretende ser una evaluación específica de la Utilidad de la Religión de John Stuart Mill, sino una defensa de lo que creo es una posición

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utilitarista, mas no milliana, sobre el problema que esa obra afronta, la cuestión de la utilidad de la religión en las sociedades contemporáneas. Aunque construyó esa posición desde el neohumeanismo más que desde posiciones millianas, definiendo que se trata de una visión auténticamente utilitarista.

Cada tradición cultural lleva a cabo un acercamiento diferente a las teorías éticas y políticas. Los utilitaristas españoles e iberoamericanos hacen exactamente esto con el Utilitarismo clásico.

Desde este punto de vista, los iberoamericanos identificamos el utilitarismo con la tradición radical e ilustrada vinculada con la reforma que, a lo largo de los siglos XVII y XVIII, intentó minar en nuestras sociedades los fundamentos de la sociedad conservadora. Este objetivo no fue alcanzado, al menos no por completo; por esa razón, la empresa del Utilitarismo permanece viva entre nosotros.

Al final de este trabajo, argumentaré que los utilitaristas españoles e iberoamericanos conectan el Utilitarismo con el radicalismo filosófico y político y que, dentro del Utilitarismo hispano, desempeña un importante papel la crítica de las funciones sociales y políticas de la Religión.

Quizás, parte del futuro del Utilitarismo en nuestro contexto cultural dependa de una vuelta de la Teoría a sus raíces radicales, también en cuestiones religiosas.

**Palabras clave:** John Stuart Mill, David Hume, Jorge Luis Borges, religión, deísmo, teísmo, funcionalismo, verdad.

1. INTRODUCTION. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

I'm a Spanish philosopher devoted mainly to the origins of Utilitarianism; I have studied and translated Hume and Bentham into Spanish and have felt always that the movement which goes from empiricism to liberalism passing through utilitarianism is a very Spanish mood of thought, at least more than others very commons at my country.

I was born in Seville, the city where was published one of the first translations of John Stuart Mill into Spanish in 1878. This is not a strange thing because Seville and Cadiz were the cities of origins for a good number of early Spanish liberals. If these liberals could see what in this day and age means to be liberal at our country I think they were terrified of so conservative a Spanish liberal could be, mainly worried about economics and no more. For that reason, this short paper has an evident object, to analyse the question of utility of religion, but has a less evident and deep intention, to honour modestly the courage of early liberals, specially of José María Blanco White or Blanco Crespo, friend of John Stuart Mill, sevillian writer as I am, worried about the role of

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3 John Stuart Mill, *El Gobierno representativo*, por John Stuart Mill. Vertido al castellano... con notas y observaciones por D. Siro García del Mazo... (Sevilla: [s.n.], Colección: Publicación de la "Biblioteca Científico-Literaria", 1878).

4 A recent Work on Blanco White with a certain attention to the relationship between Blanco and John Stuart Mill is Fernando Durán López, *José María Blanco White o la conciencia errante*: bio-
religion in our societies, as I also am, although in his case from a deep but critical religious belief, and an eminent Spanish and also English writer and poet. Having his presence in mind, died in exile in England, must be a duty for a Spanish utilitarian.

Settled these two intentions, I'm going to start this paper following Michael Walzer's counsel on how one must state, first, what a work is not going to be, better than what is to be.

From that viewpoint, I start firmly say that this is not a paper on the History of Utilitarianism, nor on David Hume and John Stuart Mill contributions to that history.

This is a paper about one of the possible approaches to Utilitarianism on a key question inside the contemporary societies: the role of religion, starting from the idea that religion is a deep multidimensional phenomenon. My vision is raised from neohumeanism more than from millian positions; notwithstanding, I postulate that view as a genuine utilitarian one.

Each cultural tradition makes a different approach to ethical and political theories. Spanish and Ibero-American utilitarians make exactly the same with Classical Utilitarianism.

The aims that could be the fundamental centres of Utilitarianism for Anglo-Saxon people, for example, the definition of economical agent, of rational decision procedure, the links with liberalism, the quest for animal rights, etc., could not have automatically exactly the same importance in others cultural areas.

From that point of view, Ibero-American people identify utilitarianism with radical and enlightened tradition linked with the reform that through XVIIth and XIXth centuries tried to mine the foundations of conservative society in our nations. This aim was not fulfilled, at least not completely; because of that the pursuit of Utilitarianism remains opened between us.

So, in the end, I will argue that Spanish and Ibero-American utilitarians connect utilitarianism with philosophical and political radicalism, and inside that Hispanic utilitarianism, plays an important role the criticism of social and political functions of Religion.

In this work was crucial the interpretation of Utilitarianism, and of radical reformism, as a political movement not tempered or ambiguous.
concerning religion, but radically encountered with the social role of that phenomenon. By that reason, every form of functionalist revisionism that appeals to a possible connivance of Utilitarianism, quoting mainly to Mill at *Utility of Religion*, with any kind of fundamental role of any type of religion, conventional or desacralized (post-modern), in our societies, provokes in Spanish radicals immediate horror and obliges us to re-read the history of the Theory. And in that new reading of the history of Utilitarianism, at least in the dominions of Philosophy of Religion, I think that is better defensible the humean “radicalism” (in the sense of going to the roots restoring epicureism) than the so-called “comtian peudosociologism” by John Stuart Mill.

Maybe, part of the future of Utilitarianism in our cultural context depends of a turn of the Theory to its radical roots, also in religious subjects.

Jorge Luis Borges, the most British of Spanish-American writers, has a short tale concerning a Chinese wise man hidden inside a garden of forking paths in order to avoid the unavoidable, in his case, the death by the hands of a killer. I think there is a resemblance between that wise man and Mill’s position concerning religion, radicalism and atheism. He tends to hide the connections between utilitarianism and atheism, globally considered as a criticism, radical criticism, of religion, in order to facilitate the acceptation in his society of that kind of theory, but at the end, first, this evident connections tends to appear and, second, if we suppress this connections, as they were one of the main foundations, for example, of its importance and acceptance in Ibero-American world, we could be contributing to the disappearing of utilitarianism in that context.

So, we have to re-read Utilitarian tradition in a more radical way, not as a mere precedent of economical liberalism and a completely neutral, and so conservative, evaluative tradition.

Now, the historiographical question, not the political one, more interesting after that conclusion is the following one: could this laicism, and its religious agnosticism that serves as a basis, find a coherent defence, articulated and global, in the Works by John Stuart Mill, or has more to watch to a more enlightened foundation, maybe more humean?

Answer this question requires, although in a short manner, to refer to the role of Hume at the *invention of utilitarianism*.

2. Hume and his conflictive relationships with the calm history of Utilitarianism

“Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism and ...it proves at least excessive, if not inappropriate and confusing, to affirm with Plamenatz not
only that Hume is the founder of utilitarianism (Plamenatz, 1966, pág. 22) but that it is the most important figure of this way of thought followed only, in second place, by John Stuart Mill (ibid., pág. 122).⁵⁶

Every linguistic tradition has tended to interpret David Hume, and every author, in agreement with its peculiar philosophical history. In the Spanish-American area for more than a century philosophical reflection has been dominated by the enormous influence of the German and French thought.

Since approximately a quarter of a century and specially in the last decade, though with some previous and distant precedents, in Spain and Ibero-America, there has taken place a strong receipt of the Anglo-Saxon and North-American thought, in the course of which has increased notably the attention devoted, by means of translations and monographs, to David Hume's thought.

As a result, we have nowadays, a Latin and Hispanic Hume—he's not only going to be the “nordic epicurean”-, that I think characterised by a predominant attention to his Ethics and by an anti-rationalistic reading of his works.

In this Hume’s reception in the Ibero-American thought the attention to this thinker has gone joined to a parallel recovery of utilitarianism, tied to the Spanish and Portuguese liberalism (more political than economical at that moment) in its origin but later eliminated and forgotten by these lands. Recent works of members of the Staff of the Bentham Project have insisted on the importance of these links.⁶ So, in the Latin-American area Hume and the utilitarianism seem to have gone joined in the same lot, taken for granted that Hume can be interpreted as a utilitarian, or at least as a protoutilitarian, and that the utilitarianism was recognizing Hume as one of his founding parents. But, these two questions are not clear at all.

Then, it is fundamental for the ultimate consolidation of an specific reading of David Hume's thought in the Hispano-American dominion, to put in clear the relationships—if so- between Hume and utilitarianism.

Because in the dispute on the birth of Utilitarianism, one of the essential points, as we have seen in the text of Esperanza Guisán, is

that of David Hume's role in the conformation, so to say, of the classical theory.

Whereas the contemporary philosophers of Hume himself, Adam Smith for example, saw it as someone too much utilitarian, for what they considered to be an improper use of the concept utility, which they saw directly as a threat for the standard morality, in the second moment, and after Bentham, Mill and the millians will tend to see him as an author non-utilitarian, fundamentally, and it is my opinion, which I have already argued widely in another places7, because he moves away from the model of utilitarianism that the above mentioned authors consider to be the ideal one for a utilitarian theory or position.

This interpretative change in Hume's paper inside the utilitarian tradition coincides with Hume's vision as a radical sceptic, which of being true or at least plausible would constitute a problem for Hume's acceptance as a precedent, since it would question the possibility of any form of utilitarian calculation, defining this one in the way we want.

But, this Hume's interpretation is the proceeding one from his enemies of the common sense school, which Mill read with interest, and of the standard historiography of Oxford, represented by Green and other British Hegelians. Hume was a threat for the metaphysics that they were practising (as Kant advertised very well, but in his case in a constructive way), so that the best politics was to edit his works emphasizing the radical element of his scepticism. This is, to my way of thinking, the historical frame that allows to understand the utilitarian repudiation for Hume, and certainly that of Mill and the millians. Nevertheless, if Hume is a moderate sceptic and a probabilistic thinker, this impediment is eliminated and we will be able, without problems, to consider him a protoutilitarian with many things to say, specially, in the area of the utilitarian philosophy of the religion, one of the fundamental points in any radical speech.

John Stuart Mill was never very inclined to recognise David Hume among the “parents” of Utilitarianism. It is not a chance that refers to Hume as prince-of-dilettanti and that indicates as his principal problem the sceptical radical character of his conception of knowledge, by the way, the dominant interpretation in life of Mill that crystallised in the 1874 with the beginning of the edition of the Philosophical Works of Hume by T.H. Green & T.H. Grose, and also with the spreading of this sceptical version by means of the works of the Scotch school of common sense, very estimated by Mill:

“Hume, the prince of dilettanti, from whose writings one will hardly learn that there is such a thing as truth, far less that it is attainable; but only that the pro and con of everything may be argued with infinite ingenuity, and furnishes a fine intellectual exercise. **This absolute scepticism in speculation very naturally brought him round to Toryism in practice; for if no faith can be had in the operation of human intellect, and one side of every question is about as likely as another to be true, a man will commonly be inclined to prefer that order of things which, being no more wrong that every other, he has hitherto found compatible with his private comforts.** Accordingly Hume’s scepticism agreed very well with the comfortable classes, until it began to reach the uncomfortable: when the discovery was made that, although men could be content to be rich without a faith, men would not be content to be poor without it, and religion and morality came into fashion again as the cheap defence of rent and tithes.” (Mill, 1969: p. 80, footnote, my italics.)

Hume’s relation with the Utilitarianism needs a wide review and, though much has been written throughout the time, on this question, it is still opened. Fred Rosen in his *Classical Utilitarianism* has re-evaluated recently Hume’s importance for the utilitarian theory. It is already a classical topic in the utilitarian theory, since even Henry Sidgwick approached it, certainly in a very sensible and interesting form; for Sidgwick, position with which basically I agree, Hume was very important in the history and genesis of the utilitarianism in spite of the fact that he neither was, could not even be, a classical utilitarian, between other things because, though he considers the utility to be crucial in the evaluation of the behaviour, he never said, and probably he had never been ready to say, that utility was the only foundation for our moral judgments.\(^8\)

One of the possible elements of Mill’s rejection to Hume, besides the dominant interpretation in the epoch of Mill of Hume’s thought as radically sceptical, was Mill’s rejection for the humane approaches on the religious phenomenon, by the way very similar in some respects to those sustained by Bentham and Mill’s father, James Mill, both more enlightened than romantics.

But, if we assume that the millian philosophy of the religion, or at least a very important part of it, is expressed in *Utility of Religion* and in *Theism*, would be appropriate to wonder for the adequacy of this millian philosophy to the utilitarian tradition. Was Mill a utilitarian in religious topics?

The thesis of this work is that the humean philosophy of religion, its
evaluation of the epistemological aspects, relatives to its utility, and also
of its individual and social function of utility, are more strictly utilitarian
than the Mill’s own approaches.

In any case, the Spanish and Ibero-Americans relate utilitarianism to
the philosophical and political radicalism, and in this Iberian interpreta-
tion of utilitarianism, has an important paper the critique of social and
political functions of religion, much more near of Hume’s Dialogues or
his Posthumous and Impious Essays than of Mill’s Utility of Religion,
Nature or Theism.

An important Part of the future of Utilitarianism in our cultural con-
text lay in a return to its roots in radicalism, also in religious aspects.

Now, we have to say something more specific about the direct object of
this paper: the utility of religion at our age. What a humean utilitarian
has to say concerning that?

3. TWO DIFFERENT PROBLEMS, BUT CONNECTED

3.1. The truth of Religion

The work of rational and empirical critique led to end by Hume and
Kant, principally, has gone to concluding that, in no conventional sense
of the word “proof”, we provide no proof, conceptual or empirical, for the
existence of some class of divinity or for the existence of some class of
immortality of the soul; giving for granted that we concede some class of
meaning to the word “soul”, which is to grant a lot.

We do not know nor we are able to know what reveals the world nor
what will go on with us in a future after our death, and if we had to
feel something would be rather that we live in a terrible world, which
of being designed, only might be conceived by a wicked deity and which,
everything spends and disappears. But, even this is an analogical intu-
tion: of what we know nothing, the best thing is not to speak.

This is regarding what we are able to prove. Certainly, each one can
believe what wants, but another thing is to support that it can prove it.

The theoretical polemic on the foundation of the religious belief for
me finishes there.\(^9\) I think the practical polemic in relation with the
possible role of these indemonstrable beliefs in our lives seems to be
harder and more dangerous.

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\(^9\) This is not strictly so. I have devoted a long time to the arguments on God’s existence and the
immortality of the Soul, and also to the religious quarrel against the right to voluntary death,
i.e., to suicide and euthanasia. Cfr. my David Hume, Escritos impios y antirreligiosos (Edición de
4.2. Utility of Religion: On religious functionalism and its dangers

The idea that religion is useful from a social point of view, that its functions of social cohesion make it necessary or even justify it from a social point of view has a celebrated origin -though essentially critical- in *Utility of Religion* by John Stuart Mill. It has been revitalized in my country by some important sociologists and philosophers as a functionalist defence of religion. All of them share a functionalist vision of religion and therefore they will share also the problems that one such a definition of religion presents.

This religious functionalism supports that the supposedly progressive attempts of elimination of the religious foundation for the social systems, that the enlightened project to construct a human world, and nothing in excess of human, what has obtained is to leave without any foundation the normative ethical, juridical and social systems. Dead God, there is no another sustainable alternative. So, from a sociological point of view, it would be necessary to defend the utility of religion though epistemologically and ethically it is indefensible.10

Is there any alternative to this way of thinking on religion contemporary? It seems evident that every society needs values that draw it together; but are the heteronomy and the resignation to autonomy and to rational scrutiny of reality the only possible way? And if it is so, does not mean that the death itself of any kind of ethical proposal as an enterprise of relatively rational foundation of our vital world? Is it really sustainable the thesis that the fragmented, multicultural societies, polymorphic, in the end, post-modern or post-enlightened, can not but to be constructed by means of what we might name “civil religions”?11

Nevertheless, the project to constitute a civic, secular, pure and exclusively ethical alternative, to the religion has its problems. It can bear, for example, a disappearance of ethics in strict sense, since any ethics (provisional and revisable, though rational) when it takes up or tries to assume the functions of religion -principally the symbolic and stable

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11 “La religión civil consiste en la sacralización de ciertos rasgos de la vida comunitaria, que se plasma en un conjunto de rituales públicos, liturgias cívicas o políticas y devociones populares encaminadas a conferir poder y reforzar la identidad de una colectividad socialmente heterogénea, a la que se atribuye trascendencia mediante la dotación de carga numinosa a sus símbolos (mundanos o sobrenaturales) y carga épica a su historia. La religión civil ocupa un lugar estratégico dentro de las sociedades seculars y técnicamente avanzadas contemporáneas, aunque sus fronteras sean difusas y esté tan plagada de ambigüedades y ambivalencias como cualquier otro de los fenómenos religiosos de mínima complejidad.” *Ibid.*: p. 16. At this same place, the Spanish thinker Salvador Giner quotes to Rousseau, Pericles or Machiavelli -specially the first of all- as illustrious predecessors of the idea of civil religion or religion to the service of a secularised society.
classification of reality and human behaviour, bears the risk of stopping being an ethics at all.

Summon up, if what sociologists little worried by the justification but certainly by the function say it's true, then, a strictly secular approach has an unpleasant future since the complex current societies are very needed of factors of cohesion and stability and religion seems to be one of the most important. Now, it is not very clear that we win always on having chosen this way. If it is true, as John Stuart Mill indicates, that also religion introduces tensions derived from its excessive need of homogeneity, might not we test another way and try to achieve social stability using a less absolutist process? But, for it, the secular mind -or secularist- has to offer a evaluative alternative defensibly. If the way of Ethics can be crossed without the support stick of religion, then this one will have to be guided by some values that, without being transcendent, can act as stable points of reference.

4. VALUES IN A GODLESS WORLD?

In any case, the claims from "functionalism" seem to automatically assume that men even need terrible gods for not to annihilated one another. So, religion appears to be necessary from a practical point of view: or not?

At the end, I believe, that it continues being valid the words of Epicurus, which so much impressed Hume, Marx, Nietzsche: we are alone, the gods, if exist, ignore us, and if they do not ignore us are wicked and have created an unjust and cruel, inhuman world. And this all we have and know.

No God, no religion, no absolute certainty is going to free us of the conviction that we will die alone, that we will not have done enough to clean this terrible world. Only the certainty to have produced love, beauty and knowledge in the measurement of our possibilities can lead us to culminate our life with a clear conscience... and for that we do not need Gods.

There will come generations of human beings who will have known neither the blame nor the sin and their evilness or kindness will depend on them and nothing more than on them. Will be capable the human beings of looking straight ahead at the abyss that always has exist before us? Our life is a sigh and limited our capacities, but, beautiful in our misery, our kingdom is always the kingdom of this world.

This has been my metaphysical conclusion, but now I have to pass shortly to politics.
5. Political conclusion: We, Spaniards need a new radicalism not an old conservative liberalism.

I am conscious that we might doubt of the present importance of this problem for Utilitarianism as some understand it nowadays. And this would be a mistake because the history of Utilitarianism is essential for its future, especially in the Ibero-American countries, and in Spain and Portugal. If Utilitarianism is simply an element in the definition of the political liberal model, and nothing more, it is a very poor thing. The history of the ideas in our countries requires and demands of Utilitarianism not only this liberal bias, but also, so to say, a more radical inclination, more enlightened and less romantic, in which the commitment with the practical critique to all the levels of the organized religions and the theoretical refutation of theism can be crucial elements.

We might tend to think about Utilitarianism as a mere theory of rationality, evaluative neutral and only procedural, and it would be once more a mistake. I believe that it is possible to argue the need of a certain commitment of the utilitarian tradition with a laicist agnosticism. This would be truth at the age of Bentham, and of Hume, but not completely at the times of Mill and nowadays.12

A thing is that Utilitarianism can coincide, as John Stuart Mill argues in Utilitarianism, with the golden rule, and other different one, as a religious command not as a moral proposal, that it can form the basic sustenance of this theory. The John Stuart Mill’s Victorian worry for the image of Utilitarianism, can not lead us to forget its genesis as theory in the epicureism, basically an anti-religious theory that shapes the basic substratum that throughout centuries has served as link between all the authors and theories near to the Utilitarianism.

On one hand, the loss of the radical element of reform of Utilitarianism, of public voice, at least in this aspect but for extension in many others, with the development of a specifically liberal speech (or in many cases, simply conservative) in the current political national and international scene, which has taken place, initially in the Anglo-Saxon culture that saw it born, must not be, translatable simply to the Hispanic and Ibero-American area.

The current durability of Utilitarianism in Ibero-American Culture, of which it is a good sample the researchers’ wide presence of the above mentioned area in Mill’s bicentennial conference, depends on the emergence and development of a New Philosophical (and maybe political) Radi-

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calism, in which the cultural laicity and institutional political action (not the mere liberal neutrality) is a critical element.

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