

# Moral progress through progress in moral theory

## How utilitarianism has shaped the project of modern moral philosophy

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In this paper, I will explore a more indirect route in which utilitarianism contributed to (the potential for) moral progress: through its impact on modern moral philosophy. I will attempt to reconstruct and organize various strands of utilitarian thought that have shaped the conceptual framework, the principles and the methods of moral philosophy today – i. e. I will reconstruct how moral philosophy became (essentially) moral theorising.

### Stage 1 | The invention of moral theory: searching for secular, scientific rationality

According to the three-stage narrative, early non-religious utilitarianism once began as a radical socio-political reform movement, but quickly adopted a supplementary strategy to morally improve society: namely changing people's beliefs by gaining a competitive rational advantage over rival socio-political movements. In times of groundbreaking scientific successes, it was only natural to embrace *science* as a paradigm for rational argumentation about normative questions. Utilitarians thus established new kinds of arguments and imported argumentative standards as well as concepts – most notably, **THEORY** as a fundamental concept – from science into the philosophical discussion of normative questions. J. S. Mill (and the Mill-Whewell debate) was a key driving force.

### Stage 2 | The formative period: elaborating the scientific paradigm

Utilitarians took the scientific methodology seriously in various ways, elaborating the scientific paradigm in moral philosophy by:

- establishing the autonomy of ethics as a normative study;
- learning to distinguish different normative spheres or domains for moral theories;
- establishing adequacy criteria for moral theory choice;
- identifying conceptual hierarchies,
- refining theories' conceptual frameworks;
- paving the way for the conceptual emancipation of different elements of moral theories.

Sidgwick was a key driving force in the emerging shift in utilitarianism's focus: from making moral progress to making moral theoretical progress.

### Stage 3 | The dissemination: uptake, legacy – and a tension

Within the newly opened conceptual space, the utilitarian tradition diversified, giving rise to a plethora of utilitarian-ish theories. Discussing these theories fuelled the dissemination of the transformed utilitarian model: doing moral philosophy in terms of (standards for) moral theories became a predominant – though not uncontested – paradigm and the textbook approach to (Western) moral philosophy. However, unlike in science, the anticipated fruits of moral theoretical progress (increased consensus on first-order moral questions and advances in first-order moral knowledge as intermediaries to a morally improved world) did not materialize quickly – a realisation that began to dawn on the later Sidgwick. The utilitarian movement (and Sidgwick himself) reacted with two opposing tendencies:

- “back to the roots”: focusing on questions of practical importance more directly and sidestepping or deflating theoretical issues; and
- “digging deeper”: addressing even more fundamental questions in other areas of philosophy and spelling out a wider net of dialectical implications.

Singer and Parfit have been key driving forces.

## Lessons and questions

The paper concludes with some lessons, hypotheses and further questions regarding the future of the utilitarian project.

1. There are different *kinds* of moral theoretical progress, many of which were established (indeed: paved the way for) in the utilitarian tradition: we can gain (moral) philosophical knowledge that is relevant to moral theorising in the form of

- conceptual progress;
- a rational systematisation of common sense;
- increasing the deontic adequacy of theories;
- rising deontic equivalence between theories;
- identification of new puzzles, innovative arguments, and unsolved questions;
- the uncovering of wide-ranging dialectical dependencies.

2. By focussing on making moral progress through moral theoretical progress, utilitarians increasingly adopted the scientific paradigm of doing moral philosophy. This profoundly transformed the nature of the utilitarian project, creating tension with its origins as a radical socio-political reform movement. While suggesting

**THE EXPLANATORY HYPOTHESIS:** Roughly, the more a utilitarian thinker focuses on moral theoretical progress the less morally progressive the content of their thinking turns out to be.

to account for differences in progressiveness *within* the utilitarian tradition, this line of development within utilitarianism also leaves us with

**A VEXING QUESTION:** Which understanding of utilitarianism is *better*, in utilitarian terms?

(Are we witnessing a similar development, tension, and question in the effective altruism movement?)

3. One step further: If moral progress hinges substantially on moral theoretical progress which in turn depends essentially on higher cognitive abilities (for conceptual clarity, differentiation, argumentative precision etc.), then the erosion of these abilities poses a chief hindrance to making the world a better place. Perhaps, it is not irrational to have high hopes and to believe that we will succeed in making moral theoretical progress. However, it is irrational not to worry about the possibility that we might fail, after all, due to the widespread erosion of the cognitive preconditions of moral theoretical progress. Does this mean that utilitarians should shift priorities towards developing and strengthening of these preconditions (in others)? And would this constitute an even greater departure from utilitarianism’s radical socio-political roots?