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# *Was William Godwin a Utilitarian?*<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss whether the political thought of late eighteenth-century British philosopher William Godwin—as expressed in his best known work, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in three different editions during the 1790s—is best described as utilitarian.<sup>2</sup> The significance of this issue and its resolution is threefold. First, it is important within Godwin scholarship, especially as once popular utilitarian readings of his thought have been discredited in recent years. My objective in what follows is to go some way towards a rehabilitation of the utilitarian reading. Second, attention to this issue informs understandings of late eighteenth-century utilitarianism, which is important given the disputes among historians about both the origins of the tradition and which individual thinkers can be deemed to have assisted in its development. Thirdly, it speaks to a methodological problem in the history of ideas because ascribing

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<sup>1</sup> A much earlier version of this paper was presented to the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies Conference at St. Hugh's College, Oxford in January 2006. I am grateful to the audience there, to the *JHI* referees, and especially to Dario Castiglione, Iain Hampsher-Monk, and Mark Philp for comments and criticism. I worked it up to its current form, under ideal conditions, while a visiting scholar at University of California, Berkeley's Center for British Studies in Autumn 2007 and I thank Mark Bevir and James Vernon for hosting me.

<sup>2</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1798]). Though currently out of print, this edition remains the most easily accessible.

a utilitarian moral theory to Godwin involves a rejection of the claim, associated with the work of Quentin Skinner, that we cannot ascribe to past thinkers concepts that they lack the linguistic means to express.

I begin by noting that even though utilitarianism is not particularly difficult to define as a moral theory, the precise nature of its history is a matter of some dispute, with a number of different writers linked to its inception. I then concentrate on the question of the identity of Godwin's *Political Justice*, introducing first the textual evidence that would seem to vindicate a utilitarian interpretation and second, the increasingly popular case against such an interpretation. I distinguish two different arguments against a utilitarian reading. The first is based on Godwin's non-hedonistic account of human happiness, which I argue does not threaten his claim to be part of the utilitarian tradition because it posits an unjustifiably narrow view of the essential characteristics of a utilitarian theory. The second is based on a contextualist concern about the problem of prolepsis: that Godwin could not have intended to contribute to a tradition of non-hedonistic utilitarianism that did not yet exist and I argue that this worry relies ultimately on an erroneous understanding of historical meaning.

### THE HISTORY OF UTILITARIANISM

As an approach to moral and political philosophy, utilitarianism does not seem especially hard to define. There are certainly different justifications available for the approach. As Will Kymlicka observes, utilitarian theories can be ultimately reducible to justificatory foundations that are either egalitarian or teleological and these foundations reflect substantively different moral concerns.<sup>3</sup> However, between any two utilitarian theories with divergent justifications, there remains a recognizable commonality: the moral or political *end* of both theories is the promotion of "utility." Utility does not of course mean the same thing in every moral theory. Indeed, it can represent any one of a number of values, including "pleasure," "happiness," "desire-satisfaction," and "welfare." But what all utilitarian theories have in common is each regards the generation of utility as the measure of a morally correct individual act (or political rule).

This definitive feature of utilitarian moral theories would seem to make them rather easy to identify. And yet the precise history of utilitarianism as a tradition in moral philosophy is far from straightforward. There is no

<sup>3</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30–35.

clear point of agreement over its inception as the rival claims of a number of interested parties show. In his celebrated essay on the subject, John Stuart Mill suggests that it is a doctrine with a demonstrably ancient lineage. He cites Plato's documented discussion between Socrates and Protagoras as a clash of "the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Mill identifies the history of utilitarian thought as a progression all the way from "Epicurus to Bentham."<sup>5</sup>

It is of course Jeremy Bentham who is customarily regarded as the philosophical founder of the doctrine, and as the writer who first systematized utilitarianism as a comprehensive approach to moral and political questions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His version had both psychological and normative components. Individual moral agents are, according to Bentham, subject to two "sovereign masters," pain and pleasure, and are psychologically predisposed to seek the latter and avoid the former. At the same time, individuals, morally speaking, should seek to maximize pleasure and it then follows from this that the role of the state is to ensure the "greatest happiness for the greatest number." Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, which introduced the utility principle, was published in 1789, a mere four years prior to the first edition of Godwin's *Political Justice*.

Given the fact that the two were contemporaries, one obvious way of establishing Godwin's utilitarian credentials would be to identify some intellectual link between his own writing and that of Bentham. Such a link has been suggested by Don Locke, for instance, who claims that Godwin "read and ignored [Bentham] while writing *Political Justice*'s first edition."<sup>6</sup> Locke, however, fails to provide any evidence to support his claim about Godwin having read Bentham and it seems unlikely to have been the case. Godwin was not shy about revealing his intellectual influences in *Political Justice* and though he cites Aristotle, Berkeley, Beccaria, Hutcheson, Rousseau, Hume, Burke, Paine, and others, he makes no mention of Bentham. Nor does he appear prominently in Godwin's meticulously maintained diary entries for the period of composition of that work and was never part of his social "circle."<sup>7</sup> This is not in fact surprising, since Bentham's

<sup>4</sup> J. S. Mill, "Utilitarianism," *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 10: 205.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 172.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) especially the appendices.

*Introduction* was actually not widely read until well after the publication of *Political Justice*.

Bentham's utilitarian political philosophy, though obviously innovative in its systematic nature, clearly did not emerge from nowhere and it is widely accepted by scholars that some sort of utilitarian thought did exist prior to his writings, though there remains no consensus over any point of inception. For example, Sidgwick's *Outlines of the History of Ethics* locates the emergence of utilitarianism with Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, published in 1711. John Rawls, by contrast, describes Sidgwick's selection of Shaftesbury as made "somewhat arbitrarily" and suggests instead that it is Francis Hutcheson that "seems to have been the first to state quite clearly the principle of utility" through his argument that "that action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers; and that, worst, which, in like manner, occasions misery."<sup>8</sup>

Those who have attempted to chart recent histories of utilitarian thought have been no more certain of its origins. Frederick Rosen has suggested that Hume's sustained use of "utility" as a concept in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is sufficiently significant both on its own terms and for its influence over Bentham for Hume to be described as the first "classical" utilitarian.<sup>9</sup> Yet Rosen also acknowledges the lack of scholarly "agreement about what, if anything, being a utilitarian meant in the eighteenth century."<sup>10</sup> Other histories of utilitarianism written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as those offered by Leslie Stephen, Élie Halévy, and John Plamenatz, offer a vision of the philosophy as something like an all-encompassing ideology, one that was not merely available to late eighteenth-century philosophers, but was seemingly unavoidable.<sup>11</sup> For example, according to Halévy's account, in the 1790s

Alongside of Bentham, and independently of him, [utilitarianism] was developing, and was being transformed and continually en-

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London: Routledge, 2003). See Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Nicholas Capaldi, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) for rejections of the claim that Hume can convincingly be read as part of the utilitarian tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians* (London: Duckworth, 1900); Élie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952); John Plamenatz, *The English Utilitarians* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958).

riched by new principles. . . . Burke, Mackintosh, Paine, Godwin and Malthus contributed to it in works have remained classical. Now all these men, to whatever party they might belong, Godwin no less than Burke, Malthus no less than Godwin, were supporters of the principle of utility. It is clear that the doctrine of utility was becoming the universal philosophy in England.<sup>12</sup>

Halévy's thesis is clear: utilitarianism was the "universal philosophy" of the late eighteenth century and virtually every thinker writing at that time invoked it in some form or another.

Yet such an approach seems to be wrong-headed unless the "principle of utility" in question is to lose all its meaning. To pick just one example, the political theories advanced by Burke on the one hand and Godwin on the other are completely divergent in almost every respect. A distinction is therefore required between the mere rhetorical deployment of the term "utility" and its systematic usage within a discernible utilitarian political *theory* unless the term is to lose its significance. As Mark Philp observes, unlike the "exacting standards of precision" associated with modern philosophical utilitarianism,

In the late eighteenth century, except in the pages of Bentham whose readership was very limited, utility was by no means a single principle by which to judge all acts; to appeal to utility was merely to claim that if an institution was to be justified it had to be shown that it furthered people's interests.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, then, in order for a thinker to be considered a utilitarian, it is not enough that that person invokes the concept of "utility." It seems that a thinker must go much further, and, like Bentham, systematically apply the principle to moral and political reasoning. The crucial question to be addressed here, then, is whether Godwin does so in *Political Justice*.

#### THE CASE FOR A UTILITARIAN INTERPRETATION: HAPPINESS AS THE FOUNDATION AND END OF MORALITY IN *POLITICAL JUSTICE*

The foundations of Godwin's moral philosophy are partly revealed in the reasons he gives for rejecting rival theories. One such theory is the social

<sup>12</sup> Halévy, *Philosophic Radicalism*, 153–54.

<sup>13</sup> Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 72.

contract tradition and its location of political right in the obligations that arise from a compact between individuals. The aspect of the social contract tradition that Godwin is keenest to reject is its view that the act of promising is of moral significance. "It is not," Godwin explains, "because I have promised that I am bound to do that for my neighbour which will be beneficial to him and not injurious to me."<sup>14</sup> Rather, he claims that the "only" basis for keeping our promises is that doing so "tends to the welfare of intelligent beings."<sup>15</sup> This entails that we must also break our promises whenever doing so will generate more "welfare" than keeping them. Godwin also rejects the possibility that individuals might have any discretionary entitlement to keep their promises in ordinary or mundane circumstances on the grounds that such ordinary circumstances simply do not exist: "there is nothing which is truly indifferent" because "all things in the universe are connected together."<sup>16</sup> Unlike social contract theorists, for Godwin, "the foundation of morality is justice" and the "criterion" of justice is "the influence my conduct will have upon the stock of general good."<sup>17</sup> Godwin explicitly states that,

Pleasure and pain, happiness and misery, constitute the whole ultimate subject of moral enquiry. There is nothing desirable but the obtaining of the one and the avoiding of the other. All the researches of human imagination cannot add a single article to this summary of good. Hence it follows that wherever pain exists, there is an evil. Were it otherwise, there would be no such thing as evil. If pain in one individual be not an evil, then it would not be an evil for pain to be felt by every individual that exists, and forever. The universe is no more than a collection of individuals.<sup>18</sup>

The basis of morality is thus the capacity for "individuals" to experience pleasure and pain; the former is good and is to be pursued whereas the latter is an evil to be avoided.

The promotion of pleasure and avoidance of pain clearly represents the foundation and end of morality for Godwin. This is made plain in the very first of the "summary of principles"—added to the third edition of *Political Justice*—which states that "the true object of moral and political disquisi-

<sup>14</sup> Godwin, *Political Justice*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 217–18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 221.

tion is pleasure or happiness.”<sup>19</sup> “Morality” is, for Godwin, as he later puts it, “nothing else but a calculation of consequences” and alternative ethical schemes, such as those that demand individuals to “do our duty without regard to consequences,” are “completely absurd and self-contradictory.”<sup>20</sup> A morally worthy action is simply one that produces more pleasure than pain. This is the reason why the belief that promises somehow represent the foundation of morality is more than merely mistaken; such a belief is actually pernicious, since it inevitably ignores our duties to promote happiness. For Godwin, “It may be my duty to relieve, upon some occasions, the wretchedness of my neighbour” rather than settle a debt I had promised to honor.<sup>21</sup>

There are no limits to the demands of morality for Godwin. “I am,” he asserts, “bound to employ my talents, my understanding, my strength and my time, for the production of the greatest quantity of general good.”<sup>22</sup> “Everything in my power” is bound to the “general weal.”<sup>23</sup> Since our obligations are defined by our “power,” this rules out any geographical or relational limitations to our moral duties and individuals are obliged to act to maximize human happiness whenever they are able to do so. This belief informed his argument that in situations of extreme moral emergency, we must act with strict impartiality, even when this entails the sacrifice of our loved ones at the expense of the greater good.<sup>24</sup> This impartiality also applies to our own life and thus in “extraordinary” cases, in which “I can promote the general good by my death more than by my life, justice requires that I be content to die.”<sup>25</sup> The legitimacy of an act of suicide is a matter of calculation: it is only permissible as long as it will promote the general good.<sup>26</sup>

In *Political Justice*, Godwin uses the terms “pleasure,” “happiness,” “good,” and “utility” interchangeably. But what exactly does he mean by them? The best definitions can be found in his chapter “On Good and Evil.”<sup>27</sup> Herein, he claims that

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>24</sup> For accounts of this aspect of Godwin’s thought, see D. H. Monro, *Godwin’s Moral Philosophy: An Interpretation of William Godwin* (Oxford, 1953), 9–35; and Robert Lamb “The Foundations of Godwinian Impartiality,” *Utilitas* 18 (2006): 134–53.

<sup>25</sup> Godwin, *Political Justice*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 177–78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 389–406.



Good is a general name, including pleasure, and the means by which pleasure is procured. Evil is a general name, including pain, and the means by which pain is produced. Of the two things included in these general names, the first is cardinal and substantive, the second has no intrinsic recommendations, but depends for its value on the other. Pleasure therefore is to be termed an absolute good; the means of pleasure are only relatively good.<sup>28</sup>

This passage provides strong evidence of the utilitarian foundations of Godwin's thought; particularly the claim that pleasure is an end in itself, an "absolute good," whereas the means to achieving pleasure are of only instrumental importance.

### A HIERARCHY OF HAPPINESS

In his "summary of principles," Godwin makes an explicit and very important distinction between qualitatively different "classes" of human pleasures: "primary" and "secondary." The "primary" class comprises "the external pleasures of the external senses." He then goes on to explain that

In addition to these, man is susceptible of certain secondary pleasures, as the pleasures of intellectual feeling, the pleasures of sympathy, and the pleasures of self-approbation. The secondary pleasures are probably more exquisite than the primary: Or, at least, the most desirable state of man is that in which he has access to all these sources of pleasure, and is in possession of a happiness the most varied and uninterrupted. This state is a state of high civilization.<sup>29</sup>

This differentiation of primary and secondary forms of pleasure is very important and distinguishes Godwin's idea of happiness from that of Bentham, for whom pleasure is relative to the individual and is measured in the quantity of pleasure it generates, a sentiment captured in Bentham's reputed remark that playing pushpin can be of as much value as reading poetry. For Godwin, by contrast, internal pleasures such as that of intellectual feeling, sympathy, and self-approbation are intrinsically superior to sensual plea-

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

asures. Thus, presumably pushpin is qualitatively inferior to poetry no matter how much an individual agent happens to enjoy it. “Sensual pleasures,” though still valuable are “momentary” and because of this “fill a very short portion of our time with enjoyment, and leave long intervals of painful vacuity.”<sup>30</sup>

Godwin reveals his intellectual debts to the Epicurean tradition, and approvingly cites its belief that pleasure is the “supreme good” for humans. But, in his view, the mistake of this tradition of thought lay in its individualism: its treatment of pleasure as subjective to the individual agent, with whom it located the appraisal of an ethical action. Thus, the “error” of the Epicureans lay “in confining that pleasure which is the proper scope of human actions to the pleasure of the individual who acts, and not admitting that the pleasure of others was an object which, for its own sake, could, and ought to be pursued.”<sup>31</sup> What the Epicureans correctly observed, then, was the basic foundation for their philosophy, the commitment to the belief that “pleasure is the supreme good,” something which “cannot be denied by him who is sufficiently attentive to the meaning of the word.”<sup>32</sup> But the problem with the agent-relative utilitarianism that they advanced is that it licenses *any* sort of behavior that is pleasurable to the individual, even that which is harmful to others.<sup>33</sup> Godwin is quite unequivocal in his support for an objective standard of pleasure on the grounds that, despite differences in education and personal circumstances, there remains “a common [human] nature, and that common nature ought to be consulted”<sup>34</sup> when assessing moral values.

In the chapter “On Good and Evil,” Godwin further delineates his hierarchy of pleasures through a “scale of happiness,” which ranks social groups into classes on this basis. The “first class,” which enjoys only the basest form of happiness, is made up of manual laborers. Thus,

We will conceive a man working with his hands every day to obtain his subsistence. He rises early to his labour, and leaves off every night weary and exhausted. He takes a tranquil or a boisterous refreshment, and spends the hours of darkness in uninterrupted slumber . . . his cares are few, as he has scarcely known the pressure of absolute want. . . . The range of his ideas is scanty; and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 391.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 391–92.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 392.

the general train of his sensations comes as near as the nature of human existence will admit to the region of indifference. This man is in a certain sense happy. He is happier than a stone.<sup>35</sup>

The sort of pleasure experienced by this individual is of little importance to Godwin, even if the individual in question considers himself to have “scarcely known the pressure of absolute want.” A contrast is then drawn between the life of this aforementioned laborer and the next on the scale, the hedonistic man “of rank, fortune and dissipation.” This person enjoys “all the luxuries of the palate” and “with a happy flow of spirits and a perpetual variety of amusement . . . is almost a stranger to *ennui*.”<sup>36</sup> The individual from this class clearly seems quite happy. But it is not only the case that this individual thinks himself happy in the same way as the laborer does. Indeed, he actually *is* happy on Godwin’s definition of the term: his life is full of pleasure. However, Godwin again rejects the pleasure of the man of rank and fortune and does so almost as forcefully as that of the laborer. This is because even though the man of fortune is “happier than the peasant,” he remains a “model of ignorance” and “rarely thinks of anything beyond himself.”<sup>37</sup> The man of rank is clearly happier than the laborer because he experiences more pleasures; but these are merely pleasures of the external senses and the value of these primary pleasures are automatically negated by the disutility caused by the lack of secondary pleasures.

The representative of the third class Godwin introduces is “the man of taste and liberal accomplishments,” who is described as a philosopher or poet, one who will be “recollected with pleasure, and extolled with ardour, by generations yet unborn.”<sup>38</sup> This individual is capable of a more sophisticated level of happiness than either of the previous two, who in their individual tastes “were only a better sort of brutes.”<sup>39</sup> The man of taste has access to an overbalance of secondary pleasures, but is still not quite at the highest point of the scale. At this highest point is “the man of benevolence” and “exalted generosity,” who is aware that “there is no true joy but in the spectacle and contemplation of happiness” and that the “highest” of human pleasures are “the pleasures of disinterestedness.”<sup>40</sup> The happiness

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 393.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 393–94.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 394.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 395.

experienced by the benevolent person that acts in a virtuous manner—and Godwin defines a virtuous action in utilitarian terms, as one that has the “tendency to contribute to general happiness”<sup>41</sup>—is therefore more valuable than that experienced by someone who acts in a hedonistic manner.

## THE CASE AGAINST A UTILITARIAN INTERPRETATION: (1) THE ARGUMENT FROM NON-HEDONISM

So, to recap: for Godwin, the foundation and end of morality is the promotion of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; the scope of morality is very extensive, such that each of our actions are subject to moral assessment and we are obliged to do everything in our power to promote the general good; and there is an objective and qualitative definition of what constitutes human pleasure. Given this account of Godwin’s moral philosophy, it is not surprising that many have interpreted him as a utilitarian thinker. In fact, he has occasionally been presented as the most thoroughgoing utilitarian philosopher in its history. Leslie Stephen, for example, describes him as an “ultra-utilitarian.”<sup>42</sup>

As noted earlier, the histories of utilitarianism written in the twentieth century by Stephen, Halévy, and Plamenatz, all include Godwin as a key figure in their accounts. But such a utilitarian interpretation of *Political Justice* has not been confined to large-scale historical narratives; it has also proved popular within specialized accounts of Godwin’s thought. D. H. Monro, for example, asserts that “Godwin was not a confused and half-hearted utilitarian, but an exceptionally clear-sighted one, who has been much neglected by the historians of utilitarianism.”<sup>43</sup> In *The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin*, John Clark suggests that,

Godwin’s ethical, social, and political philosophy are grounded in a form of hedonistic utilitarianism. . . . Utility is the guiding principle of his entire moral philosophy and is the criterion which he sets up for all ethical and political decision making. . . . For Godwin, “political justice” is equivalent in meaning to social utility.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen, *The English Utilitarians*, 231.

<sup>43</sup> Monro, *Godwin’s Moral Philosophy*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> J. P. Clark, *The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 93–4.

Peter Marshall has further claimed that “in his ethics, Godwin is a thoroughgoing utilitarian”<sup>45</sup> and any “departures from utilitarianism are more apparent than real.”<sup>46</sup> And Don Locke’s conclusion is that Godwin is a “classic Utilitarian, at one with Bentham and with Mill.”<sup>47</sup> Given the abundance of textual evidence supporting a utilitarian reading of *Political Justice* and the ubiquity of this interpretation, there would seem to be no question about Godwin’s claim to be part of this philosophical tradition.

However, though once the dominant reading of Godwin’s best-known philosophical work, the utilitarian interpretation has been subject to significant criticism in recent years. The two figures that have marshalled the most noteworthy cases against a utilitarian interpretation of Godwin are F. E. L. Priestly (in the introduction to his edition of *Political Justice*) and Mark Philp (in *Godwin’s Political Justice*).<sup>48</sup> Priestly’s argument stems from his observation that

The language of utility was almost inescapable for a writer of Godwin’s generation. Consequently, we find Godwin accepting the doctrine that pleasure and pain are the only absolute good and evil, and from time to time subordinating various virtues to utility, insisting they have value only as a means to pleasure.<sup>49</sup>

He then concludes that “the phrases of utility in Godwin are merely verbal substitutions for the Christian duties of self-denial and love of one’s neighbour.”<sup>50</sup> However, since Godwin considers and rejects outright, the Christian commitment to loving one’s neighbor in Book II of *Political Justice*, the notion that the term “utility” merely functions as a substitute for it can be dismissed as unsustainable.<sup>51</sup> That said, Priestly is here offering two serious and specific objections to a utilitarian reading of *Political Justice*.

First, he suggests that such an interpretation is misleading because the phrase “utility” had a much more general meaning in the eighteenth century than today: its use was “inescapable.” The claim is not just that the

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason*, 172–73.

<sup>48</sup> See also William Stafford, “Dissenting Religion Translated into Politics: Godwin’s Political Justice,” *History of Political Thought* 1 (1980): 279–99.

<sup>49</sup> F. E. L. Priestly, “Critical Introduction,” *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946), 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Godwin, *Political Justice*, 169.

term “utility” was everywhere; it is that in *being* everywhere, the term is bereft of any real meaning and is certainly removed from its modern conceptual incarnation. Thus, whilst it *appears* to modern readers as Godwin’s fundamental philosophical commitment, it is just that, an appearance, made inevitable by the rhetorical conventions of the time. As the earlier discussion should make clear, Priestly does have a point. The term “utility” *was* very widely used by eighteenth century thinkers, so much in fact that there is considerable disagreement over of the exact origin of the modern doctrine of utilitarianism and who can subsequently be regarded as its adherents. As intimated above, the historical accounts of scholars such as Halévy seem to have ignored the problems posed by this wide usage and have reached the erroneous conclusion that it was a “universal philosophy” shared as much by Burke as Bentham.

However, the analysis of Godwin’s foundational moral beliefs above (and the supporting textual evidence) should be enough to reject Priestly’s claim about the ubiquity of “utility” and its relevance for understanding *Political Justice*. Although, the term “utility” was indeed difficult to escape, it was not impossible to do so; after all, not every late eighteenth century thinker did use it. More importantly, as hinted at earlier, there is an obvious difference between: (1) those thinkers who simply use the term; (2) those who use it in a systematic manner to invoke a concept that can be equated with human pleasure or happiness; and (3) those who use the concept as the foundational principle of their moral theories. As shown, Godwin’s *Political Justice* reveals not only (1) but also uses (2) and (3) and it is this that marks his thought out from a writer like Burke, who might fit the criteria of (1) but not (2) or (3). Godwin clearly deploys utility in a systematic manner (or at least believed he did) and evidently makes it the foundation and end of his moral arguments. Consider the following passage:

. . . there is no action of our lives which does not in some way affect that happiness. Our property, our time, and our faculties may all of them be made to contribute to this end. . . . There is not one of our avocations or amusements that does not, by its effects, render us more or less fit to contribute our quota to the general utility.<sup>52</sup>

Here Godwin could not be more explicit: “happiness,” which is the “end” of morality, means the same thing as “general utility.” There is no evidence

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 192.

to suggest that this equation is carelessness on Godwin's part or that he means something other than what he says: any argument to this effect is simply unsustainable when confronted with the text.

The second objection that Priestly provides to demonstrate Godwin's non-utilitarianism is that he

. . . overturns the whole utilitarian scheme by introducing a qualitative sense of pleasures, by depreciating the strength and value of the direct pleasures of the senses, and by insisting that the highest pleasure is to be found only through the pursuit of virtue. In all this he is akin to Price and to the writers of the Moral Sense school, who insist on the pleasures of self-approbation and disinterestedness, and deny the supremacy of the pleasures.<sup>53</sup>

Priestly's second argument actually seems incompatible with his first: if utility is merely a verbal substitution for the Christian Golden Rule, then it cannot also mean pleasure. But even if this second point is considered alone, it is ultimately unconvincing. The argument is that Godwin cannot be considered a utilitarian thinker because he departs from Bentham's hedonistic conception of happiness. Whereas Bentham leaves calculations of pleasure to be construed ultimately in terms of its quantity, Godwin does not, and therefore, according to Priestly, cannot be considered to be a utilitarian. His scale of happiness shows that pleasure is measurable only in qualitative and non-hedonistic terms: the benevolent agent is automatically happier than those further down the hierarchy of pleasure. It would have to be for him to be able to argue that there are secondary pleasures (of intellectual feeling, sympathy and self-approbation) and that these are superior to primary pleasures (of the external senses). Though both are pleasures—and are therefore to be desired—equal quantities of secondary and primary variants are not equally worthy: in fact, the two are in some sense incommensurable.

The understanding of pleasure or happiness outlined in *Political Justice* is undeniably qualitative rather than quantitative. But it need not follow from this that this qualitative understanding demonstrates the “overturning” of utilitarianism. This would only be the case if the proposition that *only hedonistic moral theories are describable as utilitarian* held true. But such a narrow definition of utilitarianism seems unwarranted. The only way to sustain this definition would be to ascribe to utilitarian theories

<sup>53</sup> Priestly, “Critical Introduction,” 15.

hedonism as an essential characteristic. Yet there seems nothing to justify this: utilitarianism is and has always been a complex philosophical doctrine and such essentialism can only serve to mask this complexity. Such a definition would seem to be dubious historically, as it would appear to posit ahistorical characteristics to an approach to moral and political philosophy that underwent significant historical development. The definition would also act to exclude utilitarians that are not strict hedonists. Thus, it would inevitably require the exclusion of John Stuart Mill from the utilitarian tradition of which he clearly thought he was part. It is not clear whether Mill believed he was offering a substantial reformulation of utilitarianism or merely was (as he claimed to be) making explicit aspects of the theory that had always been implicit, but his well-known argument is that the doctrine recognizes a qualitative distinction between kinds of pleasure; that some pleasures are more valuable than others.<sup>54</sup> It is because of this that Mill can assert in decidedly Godwinian parlance that

. . . no intelligent being would consent to be a fool . . . even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.<sup>55</sup>

The same thought that drives Mill's well-known contention that it is "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" underpins Godwin's claim that "no comparison can be made between the virtue of Socrates, and that of a Hottentot or a Siberian."<sup>56</sup>

Both Godwin and Mill defend a form of utilitarianism with a qualitative conception of happiness. But to imply that the existence of this qualitative element "overturns" the core elements of the theory seems wrong, because it relies on an unjustifiably essentialist understanding of what it means to be a utilitarian. To claim that this essentialist understanding of what it means to be a utilitarian is unwarranted is, it should be stressed, not to claim that utilitarian theories do not have some essential characteristics. It is rather to suggest that a broader understanding of the essential characteristics as the belief that the promotion of human pleasure (and corresponding minimization of human pain) forms the basis of morality should be invoked rather than a narrower understanding that relies on a fixed,

<sup>54</sup> "There is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation." Mill, "Utilitarianism," 211.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 212; Godwin, *Political Justice*, 299.



hedonistic understanding of the pleasure at stake. There are no historical or philosophical grounds to endorse the narrow, hedonistic understanding.

THE CASE AGAINST A UTILITARIAN INTERPRETATION:  
(2) THE ARGUMENT FROM PROLEPSIS

In *Godwin's Political Justice* Mark Philp offers a comprehensive case against Godwin's place in the utilitarian tradition, which is comprised of four arguments. His first argument is that Godwin is not an act-utilitarian and to support this he cites various aspects of his thought, including the objective, qualitative conception of happiness. He notes that "when commentators claim that Godwin is a utilitarian they mean that he holds that pleasure defines the good to be pursued, and that we ought to do whatever maximises the quantity of that good."<sup>57</sup> As Philp points out, this view is false because Godwin is not a hedonist interested solely in the quantity of pleasure: he is not a utilitarian in this sense, a sense in which some earlier commentators seem to have read him. Even more crucially, as Philp points out, central to Godwin's thought is the commitment to an inviolable "right to private judgement," which guarantees individuals a certain sphere of freedom that Benthamite act-utilitarianism cannot.<sup>58</sup> There cannot be a successful act-utilitarian interpretation of Godwin.

Philp's three other arguments are directed against a rule-utilitarian reading of *Political Justice*, a reading that could comfortably accommodate both the qualitative conception of happiness and the inviolable right to private judgment. First, Philp contends that "even if we find it helpful to characterise Godwin in this complex way, we have no ground for claiming that he was trying to advance this complex form of utilitarianism" because it is "just too sophisticated for this period."<sup>59</sup> Second, he argues that "Godwin's position is not adequately represented by this complex utilitarianism if he values other goods or ends than pleasure" and "does not value them solely for the pleasure they produce."<sup>60</sup> Third, he claims that Godwin collapses the means of achieving pleasure into the ends it embodies, which means "there is no way to describe the pleasures of wisdom independently

<sup>57</sup> Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 83.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Godwin, *Political Justice*, 193–97. For discussion, see Robert Lamb "William Godwin on the Morality of Freedom," *History of Political Thought* 28 (2007): 661–77.

<sup>59</sup> Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

of the wisdom itself” and therefore “the value sought becomes a state of cognition, not a state of desire satisfaction or pleasurable sensations.”<sup>61</sup>

Though distinct, Philp’s second and third arguments against a rule-utilitarian interpretation make substantively the same point: that Godwin’s theory values goods or ends that are non-hedonistic, such as the acquisition of certain cognitive states. Both are undoubtedly true. However, these would only necessarily threaten a rule-utilitarian interpretation if it were accepted that one must be a strict hedonist in order to be a utilitarian, which, as noted above in reference to the claims advanced by Priestly, seems to be vulnerable to charges of an assumed and unjustifiable essentialism. As noted, utilitarianism is—in both historical and contemporary terms—a complex doctrine, one that has developed over time and there does not seem any compelling reason to exclude non-hedonistic versions. For Godwin, as well as for Mill, the development of the intellect cannot be prised apart from pleasurable experience, as it is constitutive of the higher or secondary pleasures. It does not therefore seem crucial that Godwin prefers human intellectual development to pleasure, when his definition of true, objective pleasure is human intellectual development. It can be argued that this definition of happiness is philosophically unsatisfactory by virtue of its apparent circularity, but that circularity need not prevent it from being a utilitarian definition. So Philp’s second and third arguments against a rule-utilitarian interpretation seem vulnerable to the same criticisms as Priestly’s claim about non-hedonistic utilitarian theories.

But Philp’s first argument against a rule-utilitarian reading is quite different and concerns a suggestion of anachronism; that modern commentators have thrust upon Godwin’s political theory a conceptual category that was simply not available to him at the time of writing. The sort of complex theory Godwin appears to be defending cannot be utilitarian as it is “too sophisticated for the period”; it would be historically unsound to credit him with a theory of such complexity because such complexity did not yet exist. Philp suggests that “we can only accept this complex utilitarianism as describing the core moral doctrine of *Political Justice* if there is no alternative account of its coherence, or if any alternative account is equally lacking in contextual support.”<sup>62</sup> Philp’s alternative account locates Godwin’s political writings in the tradition of Rational Dissent—to which his ideas, especially his defense of the pivotal “right to private judgement,” were hugely indebted—and, on this basis claims his political theory is best described

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 84.

as a form of non-utilitarian “perfectionism.”<sup>63</sup> Philp’s detailed analysis of Godwin’s perfectionism and his debt to Rational Dissent is certainly compelling. But what is less compelling is his auxiliary thesis that the ascription of perfectionism somehow rules out utilitarianism; that his educational immersion in and belonging to a perfectionist tradition somehow prevents his articulation of a utilitarian theory.

Philp’s rejection of a utilitarian reading of *Political Justice* seems to be grounded, in part, in a methodological concern about what Quentin Skinner has termed the “mythology of prolepsis.”<sup>64</sup> Skinner describes this myth as the “conflation of the asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given historical episode and the meaning of that episode itself” and he illustrates his point through a discussion of the political thought of John Locke.<sup>65</sup> He suggests that although Locke is commonly and plausibly interpreted as “one of the founders of the modern empirical and liberal school of political thought,” this claim often becomes “elided into the claim that Locke was himself a ‘liberal’ political theorist.”<sup>66</sup> According to Skinner, this latter claim is simply implausible, because “Locke can scarcely have intended to contribute to a school of political philosophy which, so this interpretation suggests, it was his great achievement to have made possible.”<sup>67</sup> Skinner’s argument is, then, that any description of Locke as a “liberal” political theorist ignores the real meaning of his political writing. The reason that we know this is because the intention we ascribe to him (that of wishing to advance a liberal theory) was unavailable to him at his time of writing. One cannot seemingly intend one’s writings to contribute to a tradition that does not exist and, therefore, Locke cannot plausibly be described as a “liberal” political theorist.

Skinner’s suggestion has serious implications for interpretations of Godwin and for the history of utilitarian political thought in general because it reduces the meaning of concepts held by historical thinkers to the linguistic resources at their disposal. The lesson from Skinner’s example would seem to be that should the term “utilitarian” be absent from a thinker’s vocabulary—and thereby unavailable for deployment—then she cannot

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 80–98.

<sup>64</sup> Philp acknowledges the influence of Skinner’s methodological writings for his reading of Godwin. See *Godwin’s Political Justice*, Appendix E, 253–54.

<sup>65</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

be deemed to be part of the utilitarian tradition. It would thus pose insurmountable problems for a utilitarian interpretation of Godwin: he definitely could not have intended to be a “utilitarian” in this sense because the term utilitarian was not in existence at the time of writing. It did not become a popularly recognizable term used to describe individuals or a movement until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> How, then, could Godwin intend to advance a utilitarian theory when such an intention was not actually available to him at the time of writing?

Skinner introduces some empirical tests that can be applied to an interpretation to ensure that it avoids any mythology of prolepsis, which include

- (i) that B is known to have studied A’s works; (ii) that B could not have found the relevant doctrines in any writer other than A; and (iii) that B could not have arrived at the relevant doctrines independently.<sup>69</sup>

If Godwin were B, then, presumably in order for him to be considered a utilitarian, A would have to be Bentham (or any of the other figures regarded as the founders of the doctrine). As already noted, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Godwin read Bentham, so he fails the test (i). If (and only if) Bentham were viewed as the first thinker to offer a systematically utilitarian moral theory, then Godwin would likewise fail test (ii). However, it seems impossible to find any reasons to suggest that Godwin must fail test (iii). As discussed, there is no doubt that utilitarianism was emerging as a moral theory by the late eighteenth century; after all, it did emerge in the writings of Bentham. There does not appear to be any compelling reason to believe that a theory of the same species was not independently formulated by Godwin and the fact that the two figures offer different formulations provides no basis for granting one of them utilitarian status but not the other. Moreover, describing Godwin’s political theory as utilitarian does not threaten Philp’s claim about its “perfectionist” basis in *Rational Dissent*. Utilitarianism can be seen to account for what the theory approximates *as a theory* and perfectionism indicates the sources from which it is comprised and there is no reason to suppose that a utilitarian sum cannot be made up of perfectionist parts.

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<sup>68</sup> Though the term was apparently first used by Bentham in a letter in 1781, it did not become currency until much later, such that Mill thought he had invented it. See Mary Warnock “Introduction” in J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1962), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 75–76.

But even were Godwin to fail to satisfy the empirical tests identified above, the way in which Skinner presents the problem of prolepsis is actually problematic and it should not really provide an obstacle to a utilitarian reading. For one thing, it invites some deeply counter-intuitive interpretive conclusions. It would, for instance, seem to entail that we cannot regard even Bentham as a utilitarian, because of the non-existence of utilitarianism at his time of writing. But this seems completely wrong, since Bentham's entire political theory was founded on his "greatest happiness principle," based on calculations of individual "utility." It seems strange to suggest that simply because Bentham was the philosophical founder of utilitarianism he could not have meant to advance a utilitarian theory. In his act of being the first person to offer a systematic utilitarian argument, he was also, surely, himself offering a utilitarian argument. Bentham's argument simply *is* utilitarian and therefore he can be accurately described as a utilitarian thinker.

But more serious than any conflict with our interpretive intuitions is that Skinner's characterization of the problem of prolepsis actually trades on both a dubious representation of the way to understand the meaning of a past work and an erroneous understanding of the relationship between the concepts held by a person and the language used to express those concepts. His claim seems at first to rely purely on the intuitively plausible notion that an agent is incapable of holding a belief that can be empirically established as unavailable to that individual at the time of writing: that it would be completely wrong to suggest that Locke, say, had a favorite "Rolling Stones" album. But it actually relies on far more than this. The argument is concerned with a species of anachronism: the suggestion is that that the correct ascription of concepts to historical individuals depends on those concepts being identifiable as existing at the time of an author's writing and hence available for her use. Skinner's concern with this particular sort of anachronism can be separated out into two distinct claims: (1) that grasping the meaning of text depends on being sure of its performative nature (thus, Locke cannot be a liberal, nor Godwin a utilitarian because they cannot have meant to *intend* their writings to be such); and (2) that determining historical meaning depends on the linguistic resources available to the author in question (thus, Locke cannot be a liberal, nor Godwin a utilitarian because they were unable to frame their concepts in a certain linguistic fashion).

Both claims are suspect. The first claim about performativity relies on a certain understanding of the meaning of a work: that it must be under-

stood as a form of action intended by an agent rather than as an expression of that agent's beliefs. But, as Mark Bevir points out, if it is accepted that the meaning of an action is *comprised* of the beliefs held by an individual, the object of study must shift to the beliefs represented by the action rather than any concern with either illocutionary force (understood as the purpose of the text as speech-act) or pro-attitudes (understood as the desire for a certain state of affairs to be brought about).<sup>70</sup> The question of whether or not Godwin intended to contribute to (or establish) a certain tradition of political theorizing can be reduced to questions about his beliefs but reduced no further than this. So, in this case, the focus shifts from the question of whether or not Godwin was intending to contribute to the utilitarian tradition in *Political Justice* to the question of whether the beliefs expressed in that text are utilitarian. The effect of this shift is to undermine any question of whether or not Godwin intended his action to contribute to a certain tradition, which becomes irrelevant to the meaning of the work. As shown, there is no dispute that the core belief that Godwin wished to express in that text was that morality consisted of the promotion of pleasure at the expense of pain and which was identified earlier as the broadly understood property essential to utilitarian theories. So, once the interpretive concern shifts from attention to individual intentions understood as motives to perform, to attention to intentionality understood as beliefs, describing Godwin as a utilitarian becomes plausible.

The only way then for Skinner to maintain that a problem of prolepsis remains to render such a description misleading would be for him to endorse a certain understanding of the relationship between concepts and the languages used to express those concepts. He could claim that because concepts are necessarily parasitic on language, to express a belief in X it is necessary for there to be an existing linguistic concept of "X" to express a belief in. So, in this case of a linguistic "accessibility principle,"<sup>71</sup> the term "utilitarian" would have to exist in order for Godwin's beliefs to be describable as such. And, because the term did not actually come into existence until the early nineteenth century, the problem of prolepsis remains: Godwin cannot express a belief in something that does not yet exist. This seems in fact what Philp has in mind in the case of Godwin. His rejection of a utilitarian interpretation and his positing of a perfectionist alternative

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<sup>70</sup> See Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129–42.

<sup>71</sup> Gad Prudovsky, "Can we ascribe to past thinkers concepts they had no linguistic means to express?," *History and Theory* 36 (1997): 15–31, at 24.

apply mainly to the first, 1793 edition of *Political Justice* and he suggests that that by the second, 1795 edition “there are no longer sufficient grounds for rejecting [a complex] utilitarian interpretation . . . in favour of a perfectionist account.”<sup>72</sup> Yet he nevertheless does imply such a utilitarian reading remains problematic. He maintains that in the case of the second and third editions, “describing him in [utilitarian] terms is a little odd” since “he can hardly be said to offer this sophisticated form of utilitarianism *as* a sophisticated form of utilitarianism.”<sup>73</sup> This is undoubtedly correct, in the sense that it cannot be claimed that Godwin himself could have characterized his writing as “utilitarian.”

But this claim is also mistaken as it depends on a faulty theory of historical meaning. It rests ultimately on a concern with linguistic meaning rather than about hermeneutic meaning: it suggests that the meaning of Godwin’s utterance can be gained from considering simply what the words he used meant conventionally, rather than the individual viewpoint he wished to express in using those words.<sup>74</sup> So, even though the view that “justice is served by the generation of human happiness, understood in qualitative terms” can be attributed to Godwin, the claim is that this view did not have any link to being a utilitarian in a conventional sense, because the particular convention of wishing to be a utilitarian was not available to authors writing at that time. But when reading *Political Justice*, hermeneutic interpretation requires attention not simply to what Godwin’s words mean in a linguistic sense, but rather what he intended them to mean; in other words, the beliefs that they provide evidence of. What Godwin meant in *Political Justice* cannot simply be read off from existing linguistic conventions, because such a reading off only provides evidence of the existence of conventional meaning, not the meaning of his ideas expressed in that work.

## CONCLUSION

Godwin’s contemporaries seem to have been quite well aware of the utilitarian foundations of his political thought. Coleridge, in his sonnet, “To William Godwin,” declared

<sup>72</sup> Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice*, 157.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>74</sup> See Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, especially 31–52 for a separation of linguistic from hermeneutic meaning and for the limited relevance of the former to historical interpretation.

And hymn thee, GODWIN! with an ardent lay;  
For that thy voice, in Passion's stormy day,  
When wild I roam'd the bleak Heath of Distress,  
Bade the bright form of Justice meet my way—  
And told me that her name was HAPPINESS.<sup>75</sup>

Whether or not Coleridge was actually able to refer linguistically to Godwin's political thought as "utilitarian" does not seem relevant to the question of whether he thought Godwin was a utilitarian. The important point would seem to be that Coleridge recognizes that, for Godwin, the basis of justice is human happiness. The aim of this article has been to go some way towards remaking the case for a utilitarian reading of Godwin's *Political Justice*, through both textual evidence that indicates the nature of his moral theory and reasons to reject textual and contextual cases against such a reading. Though the history of utilitarianism is less than straightforward, it is widely agreed that it is a tradition that emerged in the eighteenth century. There are plenty of figures in the early and mid-eighteenth century who have been, on occasions, described as utilitarians, including Hutcheson and Hume. Even if such claims are representative of over-interpretation, the language of utility was definitely an increasing part of political discourse by the late eighteenth century. Even if Bentham were the first person to rigorously apply utilitarianism as a moral and political principle, Godwin's *Political Justice* can plausibly be viewed as a contemporaneous version of the doctrine, which incorporates a qualitative dimension usually cited as a nineteenth century innovation offered by Mill. Godwin's claim to be considered an important part of the utilitarian tradition remains unthreatened by this qualitative element; indeed, if anything, it should really serve to highlight his unique importance in its development.

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "To William Godwin, Author of 'Political Justice,'" cited in Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason*, 88.