



# The English Utilitarians - Volume I

*Leslie Stephen*

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The English Utilitarians of whom I am about to give some account were a group of men who for three generations had a conspicuous influence upon English thought and political action. Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill were successively their leaders; and I shall speak of each in turn. It may be well to premise a brief indication of the method which I have adopted. I have devoted a much greater proportion of my work to biography and to consideration of political and social conditions than would be appropriate to the history of a philosophy. The reasons for such a course are very obvious in this case, inasmuch as the Utilitarian doctrines were worked out with a constant reference to practical applications. I think, indeed, that such a reference is often equally present, though not equally conspicuous, in other philosophical schools. But in any case I wish to show how I conceive the relation of my scheme to the scheme more generally adopted by historians of abstract speculation.

I am primarily concerned with the history of a school or sect, not with the history of the arguments by which it justifies itself in the court of pure reason. I must therefore consider the creed as it was actually embodied in the dominant beliefs of the adherents of the school, not as it was expounded in lecture-rooms or treatises on first principles. I deal not with philosophers meditating upon Being and not-Being, but with men actively engaged in framing political platforms and carrying on popular agitations. The great majority even of intelligent partisans are either indifferent to the philosophic creed of their leaders or take it for granted. Its postulates are more or less implied in the doctrines which guide them in practice, but are not explicitly stated or deliberately reasoned out. Not the less the doctrines of a sect, political or religious, may be dependent upon theories which for the greater number remain latent or are recognised only in their concrete application. Contemporary members of any society, however widely they differ as to results, are employed upon the same problems and, to some extent, use the same methods and make the same assumptions in attempting solutions. There is a certain unity even in the general thought of any given period. Contradictory views imply some common ground. But within this wider unity we find a variety of sects, each of which may be considered as more or less representing a particular method of treating the general problem: and therefore principles which, whether clearly recognised or not, are virtually implied in their party creed and give a certain unity to their teaching...

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