

**BENTHAM'S RHETORICS VS COLERIDGE'S
POETICS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
UTILITARIANISM IN THE WESTERN WORLD**

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Розай Ж. П. (Валансьен, Франция) Риторика Бентама против поэтики Колериджа: значение утилитаризма в западном мире.

Jeremy Bentham is strikingly absent in the definition of Utilitarianism proposed by Robert Audi's 1995 edition of *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. There, J. S. Mill instead appears as its chief proponent, while a general conception of what utilitarianism stands for develops on two pages. If, here and there, Bentham has so far been hailed as the inventor of Utilitarianism, it is interesting to inquire why a (very) concise approach on Utilitarianism escapes the name of Bentham nowadays. If there is no real dialectic tension to be solved on such partial (and biased) information, the fact that Bentham was no professional philosopher not only provides a simple answer but also hints at an understanding of what he really referred to, beyond the mere development of Utilitarianism in Britain from the eighteenth century onwards.

J. S. Mill spoke of Bentham and Coleridge as of the «two great seminal minds» of the British 19th century. The fact that the two men were not professional philosophers (Bentham was a lawyer and Coleridge a poet) accounts for the way they are easily dismissed whenever philosophical argument comes to the fore. Yet, they exemplify an other kind of opposition which links them (and 19th century Britain) to Western thought at large: the opposition set by Aristotle between Rhetorics and Poetics, which proved so productive in the history of ideas.

This metaphysical «dialogue» between the base longing for material happiness and the lofty ideal of a spiritual quest reproduces one fundamental debate at the heart of our culture.

People have alleged that Utilitarianism as it appeared with Bentham was but the symptom of a general movement in Western Civilisation which started with Socrates' treatment of philosophy, though his message entailed a definitive break with Platonic and Christian traditions and bore the gist of modern thought. Different approaches have been tried in that direction (and even an attempt at conceptualizing Utilitarianism, linking it to a practical, a scientific and a philosophical point of view).

Our point of view aims at showing that the opposition between Bentham's rhetorics and Coleridge's poetics is apt to reproduce a central dynamics in the Western world, still working today in the opposition between moderns and postmoderns and whose basic meaning lies in its hermeneutic nature. Eventually, the final touch articulates an answer to the debate setting forth verisimilitude as opposed to truth (which might be very much Bradleyan in topic and tone): how far can Utilitarianism dream of becoming normative when it is, first and foremost rhetorical in tone and scope, guided not by transcendental ideals (in which J. S. Mill indulged, trying perhaps a synthesis of the «seminal minds» he alluded to) but by the illusory hope of reaching happiness thanks to the Dogma of interest.