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## **“Summary of article by R. D. Collison Black: Jevons, Marshall and the Utilitarian Tradition”**

Utilitarian philosophy was an important influence on the development of neoclassical economics in the late nineteenth century. Two of the pioneers of the neoclassical school, W. Stanley Jevons and Alfred Marshall, had differing understandings of utilitarianism; this was one of the factors leading to their distinct approaches to economics. This article reviews and revises the conventional understanding of the differences between Jevons and Marshall, in relation to utilitarianism and other intellectual currents of their time.

### **UTILITARIANISM AT MID-CENTURY**

By the middle of the nineteenth century, some aspects of utilitarianism were widely accepted in English social and economic thought. While many classical economists did not consider themselves Benthamites, the use of the “greatest happiness” principle for judging economic policy was no longer controversial. Still, it was not yet evident that utilitarianism would become central to future developments in economics. Other intellectual trends, such as the theory of evolution, historical methods of inquiry, and philosophical idealism appeared to be rising in importance. Interest in utilitarianism revived with the publication of John Stuart Mill’s treatise on the subject in 1863; Mill presented a substantial reworking of utilitarian moral philosophy, differing from Bentham in several respects.

Against this background, Jevons and Marshall developed their new theories, each drawing in their own way on the utilitarian tradition. The conventional interpretation of their differences is that Jevons was a thoroughgoing Benthamite, whereas Marshall was hardly a utilitarian at all. This simple, clear-cut view is incomplete, but not entirely wrong.

### **JEVONS VS. MARSHALL: THE STANDARD INTERPRETATION**

Jevons’ best-known works, in both economic theory and policy, are directly and explicitly based on Bentham’s theories. Jevons encountered Bentham’s utilitarianism in his early religious and philosophical education. Although he read a variety of other philosophers, they had less influence on him; he dismissed Kant, for example, as “full of wordy nonsense.” Jevons opposed Mill’s reinterpretation of utilitarianism, objecting to Mill’s assumption that some kinds of pleasure are intrinsically more desirable and more valuable than others. Reliance on Bentham’s unidimensional net sum of pleasure and pain allowed Jevons to introduce the mathematical model of constrained maximization into economics. Despite the obvious problems of

measurement of utility, Bentham's approach seemed to provide an adequate theoretical basis for addressing practical policy debates.

Marshall, according to John Maynard Keynes, was "at the opposite pole from Jevons" in his philosophical orientation. Although he never explicitly departed from utilitarian approaches to economics, Marshall made an extensive study of other philosophical traditions. He went to Germany to read Kant in the original, and was also influenced by Hegel. Marshall's first Cambridge appointment was to a lectureship in moral science, not economics. Trained in mathematics as well as philosophy, he seems to have been reluctant to draw too heavily on either discipline in the development of his economic theories.

Both Jevons and Marshall were convinced of the importance of measurement for the development of economic analysis, but they drew different conclusions about the problems that arose. Jevons granted that measurement of pleasure and pain was nearly impossible, but went on to construct a theory based on hypothetical measurements of utility and disutility. Marshall insisted that motives for economic activity must be indirectly measurable in terms of money, and retained the notion of utility maximization as the key to demand theory, but objected to basing economics on so crude a foundation as hedonistic psychology. Human nature, in his view, involved more complex motivations than mere pleasure and pain. While Jevons used mechanical analogies to explain economic processes, Marshall was more inclined to adopt biological and evolutionary images.

## **SPENCER, MILL, AND THE FUTURE OF ECONOMICS**

None of the above description is incorrect; yet it is a bit too tidy and simplified. Could Jevons, as some authors have suggested, have ignored the debates about evolution, one of the most important intellectual developments of his day? Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, and Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* in 1862. In fact, Jevons was well aware of these developments, and had a high personal and intellectual regard for Spencer. Although Jevons disagreed with some of Spencer's political conclusions, such as his unqualified faith in the virtues of *laissez-faire*, he was inclined to accept Spencer's philosophical blending of utilitarian and evolutionist ideas.

Jevons certainly preferred Spencer's approach to Mill's revision of utilitarianism; attitudes toward John Stuart Mill were one of the sharpest differences between Jevons and Marshall. While Jevons preferred Bentham's original over Mill's modified utilitarianism, Marshall was influenced by Mill both in his philosophy and in his economic theory. Mill's more complex, multi-faceted view of human character and motivation, and his assumption of qualitatively different types of pleasure and pain, appealed to Marshall and many of his contemporaries.

Ultimately, the most important difference between Jevons and Marshall lay in their conceptions of the direction in which economics should develop. Jevons favored a division of the field into subdisciplines or even separate sciences, while Marshall envisioned a synthesis of history, theory, and empirical observation. The difference might seem to fit into Amartya Sen's dichotomy between the "engineering-based" and the "ethics-related" origins of economics; but these categories do not capture the entire story.

Jevons unquestionably did see some branches of economic theory in terms of mechanical analogies, and proceeded in a manner that could be loosely identified with an engineering orientation. In contrast, Marshall saw economics in organic, biological terms; this perspective is not necessarily related to ethics, although for Marshall it was. However, Marshall's particular view of the relation between ethics and economics may have contributed to the disinterest in ethics on the part of later economists. While Marshall argued for a broad understanding of human nature, behavior, and moral philosophy, he saw the potential for scientific advance as confined to the quantifiable economic realm of motives that could be set against the measuring rod of money.

It may be contended that it was... Jevons whose vision of the reconstructed science of economics in terms of sub-division and specialization contributed most, and most directly, to the narrowing of the subject. In contrast to this, Marshall's vision of an economic biology using a combination of methods and incorporating a social ethic as an integral feature would seem to have pointed towards making economics a much broader discipline. So indeed it did, but Marshall's reluctance to move outside the firm ground of measurable motives, combined with his... [use of bland, colorless language to express the ethical implications of economics], made it possible for many later economists to disregard the fact that Marshallian economics was intended to be ethics-related. (15-16)