A Happy Naturalist? Jeremy Bentham and the Cosmic Morality of *The Octopus*

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Can a naturalist writer be happy? Is it possible to wrest satisfaction from the cosmic events that conspire to make "la bête humaine" (Zola) a plaything of impersonal forces? Is there a philosophical position that can deduce an ethical postulate from what appears to be merely a biological fact, namely that "Nature . . . ha[s] no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest [lies] in the species, the race," as Jack London puts it in "The Law of Life" (973–74)? The conclusion to Frank Norris's *The Octopus* seems to suggest that a possible answer to all three questions is "yes." In reconsidering the current critical consensus that judges the meliorist conclusion of *The Octopus* to be an aberration in Norris's work, I intend to show how the development of a naturalist ethics out of a naturalist anthropology can be harmonized with Benthamite utilitarianism.

Charles Darwin's mid-nineteenth century reconceptualizations of natural history and the descent of man were received in the United States with disdain in part because the absence of a metaphysical dimension was considered scandalous. To the present day, the apparent "godlessness" of science in general, and evolution in particular, raises in some quarters the implied fear of ethical relativism. Yet the history of philosophy knows convincing and valid models of ethical reasoning without a transcendent dimension, ranging from Aristotelian virtue ethics to social contract theory. Relativism is by no means the only possible consequence of God's diminished status. Literary scholarship has effectively analyzed the anthropology of American naturalism, an unsentimental analysis of the human condition with an unflinching look at its physical realities, but has yet fully to define the concomitant naturalist ethic that in its outlines is classically utilitarian.

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Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) introduced the "greatest happiness principle" or the "principle of utility"—a term he borrowed from David Hume (Sweet sect. 2)—firmly into ethical reasoning, thus laying the groundwork for the more sophisticated utilitarianism that his follower John Stuart Mill formulated in the next generation. In the words of a prominent scholar:

> Neither the natural law, with its notion of a universal reason, nor the divine law, with its notion of revelation, nor the common law, with its notion of antiquity, nor the empirical municipal law can offer a satisfactory answer to the question of critical ethics. Only an entirely different notion, according to Bentham, can show the way out of these difficulties: this is the notion of utility. (Baumgardt 131)

The revolutionary idea that moral right and wrong could be adjudicated, not by reference to a precedent moral law as in Biblical and Kantian thought, but by reference to the outcome of an action, so resonated with Thomas Jefferson—who obtained the idea via John Locke—that "the pursuit of happiness" became enshrined in the unalienable rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence.[1] The political and social goals of the revolutionaries of 1776 were quite simply meliorist; that is, they intended to improve people's situation within the world, without the warrant of dogmatic religion, and with the end, a better society—"a more perfect union," in the words of the U.S. Constitution—firmly in mind. The first set of commonalities between naturalist thinking in Norris's time and utilitarian ethics, then, is their shared willingness to do without God in improving a world-immanent situation and to judge an event ethically by the outcome it produces, not the rule it purports to put into action.

Yet strictly consequentialist ethics has a revolutionary whiff to this day. While social contract theory postulates that all members of a society have implicitly ratified a contract that makes their lives possible, utilitarians, more strictly, deduce a moral obligation to act from their emphasis on happiness. Employing a tool called a hedonistic calculus, they parcel out happiness in such a manner that the most persons benefit from it. Jeremy Bentham firmly believed that social problems could be solved by scientific calculation, especially through a reform of the legal system. This makes sense if we consider that the English legal system of his time was based on principles of retribution, not rehabilitation. Punishment made the criminals unhappy while contributing nothing to the happiness of crime victims. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (published in 1789, the year of the French revolution), Bentham

explained that the object of law, too, was to achieve the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" ("Bentham"). Utilitarianism in its simpler varieties always privileges humanity over humans, the common good over the individual good, the result over the motivation. A second set of commonalities between naturalist thinking in Norris's time and utilitarian ethics, then, is their shared "anthropology," by which I mean their emphasis on humanity at large instead of humanity in its individual manifestations. Naturalist writing frequently teaches its characters lessons of humility, thwarts their grandiose schemes through the interference of chance and larger physical and economic forces, and generally leaves them resigned to the knowledge that they are not as important as they thought.

The ambitious narrative plan for Frank Norris's "epic of the wheat" includes an impersonal, large-scale approach to ethical reasoning. No single literary character is truly the protagonist; rather, the wheat itself, while not an agent, is the entity in whose service the characters act. Ethical considerations are not always limited to interhuman relationships, and Norris's actors are duly restricted in their ethical choices by forces that either are cosmic, such as the weather and its impact on harvests, or appear cosmic, such as the economic laws that govern the production and dissemination of the product. The "epic of the wheat" is governed by an entity that cannot easily be called to account. Norris's scenario is comparable to later works indebted to naturalist thinking such as Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Dos Passos's *The Big Money*, novels in which impersonal entities, not traditional protagonists, provide the title. Large impersonal entities such as the wheat market, the meat market, or the stock market are so forceful as to diminish human agency. Limited agency notwithstanding, the several protagonists may still parcel out the available happiness and thus validate their actions with respect to the outcome.

Applied specifically to *The Octopus*, the utilitarian calculus revalidates Presley and—to a smaller extent—Vanamee as fallible yet normative characters and lends greater authority to their statements at the end of the novel than many critics wish to give them. The concluding passage of the novel that has disappointed so many readers as escapist or deluded strikes a rhapsodic tone:

> Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived: the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (1097–98)

In 1987, Torsten Pettersson rehearsed the list of critics—from Granville Hicks to Malcolm Bradbury—who have found the inconsistency between the terrible events in the narrative and the positive conclusion a liability. More recently, Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler, in their magisterial biography of Norris, interpret the concluding passages as the confused ramblings of a "psychologically unhinged" (124) Presley who is relying for authority on the "even less mentally stable seer" (125) Vanamee. In other contexts, they describe Presley as "mentally and emotionally debilitated" (354); in addition, they quote approvingly the unsigned reviewer of the *Boston Evening Transcript* (31 July 1901: 12), who also laments Presley's comments and even mistakes them for Norris's authorial voice. McElrath and Crisler do not share that conflation of author and character,[2] but the barrage of voices that denigrate the novel's ending is formidable enough to cause some trepidation in anyone wishing to adjust the regnant critical view.

Admittedly, the dénouement of the novel is uncommonly upbeat for a naturalistic text that has tracked the downward fates of two dozen people over 600 pages, with frequent references to vast forces, both natural and mechanical. I don't want to deny that the deaths of Harran, Annixter, Hooven, and the others in the trench fight are deplorable, nor do I want to take away from the bitter cynicism with which Norris effectively juxtaposes the death by starvation on Nob Hill of Mrs. Hooven with Presley's eerie experience of the sumptuous dinner at Shelgrim's house. If the novel ended with this Hobbesian episode, I'd fold my tents. But the closing portions of the novel including the brief "conclusion" create a feeling of satisfaction—a sense of poetic justice—that is rare in Norris and rare in naturalistic writers generally.

To see the extent of the difference, consider the ending of *McTeague*, which is drenched in death. Marcus is dead, McTeague soon will be, and the "half-dead canary" (572) in his gilt prison emblematizes the prison of Death Valley. *Sister Carrie*, *Maggie*, "The Law of Life," and *The Awakening*—to name a few canonical works—end on a more determined bleak note than does *The Octopus*. *McTeague* is thus strictly deterministic: neither Trina, nor Marcus, nor the dentist can ultimately escape the fates predetermined by their hereditary characteristics. *The Octopus*, by contrast, is more developed, is itself only the first installment in a larger project, and admits the possibility of change through learning, a thought first raised by Donald Pizer in 1955 ("Another Look").

In seeking to defend the conclusion as consonant with utilitarianism, I find myself in the opposite camp from McElrath and Crisler. Their so-

ber assessment of *The Octopus's* conclusion as "ironic moments in a novel that ends contrapuntally" (125) is built upon placing this episode in the context of Norris's Berkeley years and the influence upon him of his theistically committed science professor, Joseph Le Conte. Remarkably, more and more readers have recently suggested critical terms that would harmonize with utilitarian thinking, though they have, curiously enough, not called them utilitarian.

Bert Bender quotes a passage from Le Conte's "The Genesis of Sex," which Bentham would have understood:

> For, as our physiological functions are primarily divisible into two great groups, viz., the nutritive and the reproductive . . . so all our physical functions are also primarily divisible into two groups, the egoistic and the altruistic—the one concerned only about the well-being of self, the other about the well-being of the race. (79)

The word "altruistic" in this context is interesting. While Bentham does not talk much about altruism, though he advises "sexual prudence" (Kauder 413), Mill does include altruism in his philosophical positions and even supports government intervention in the bringing about of happiness to the many (see Kauder). Le Conte, in the passage above, specifically identifies the sexual instinct as not personal or egoistic. In the larger scheme of things, sexual gratification is a negligible issue. The sexual instinct is altruistic in that it continues the human race, and in that respect it is utilitarian. Bender concludes that Norris "clearly reflects this discussion . . . in his development of Annixter in *The Octopus,*" as Annixter unites with Hilma Tree and becomes a "'generous, kind, and forgiving man'"; in other words, an altruistic utilitarian (79). Annixter's death and Hilma's stillborn child are terrible events, but they do not invalidate utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, like the Declaration of Independence, does not promise the achievement of happiness; it just mandates its pursuit, i.e., the command to act with everyone's happiness in mind. The tragic events of the novel merely drive home the lesson that no law of just reward exists in a non-metaphysical world driven by chance.

There can be no doubt that Frank Norris was receptive to those segments of the intellectual climate of his time that saw the possibility for a positive development of humankind, but direct influences are difficult to trace. Pragmatism was to incorporate aspects of outcome-oriented thinking in its comprehensive philosophy, but William James's terminology did not reach a wider audience before the publication of *Pragmatism* in 1907, five years after Norris's death, although James had used the term in an 1898 lecture at Berkeley. Norris was ill with tropical fever in the

fall of 1898 but began assembling material for *The Octopus* in those months (see McElrath and Crisler, 339–40). It is highly unlikely that he would have absorbed James's thought at this time. As kindred spirits go, Herbert Spencer is a far more likely candidate. Spencer advocated an ethics of perfectibility that was classically utilitarian in looking towards results yet at the same time reserved a place for altruism. In his *Principles of Ethics* (1897), particularly in sections 389 and 390, Spencer is critical of that kind of "hot-headed philanthropy . . . [that] . . . has led to a redistribution of benefits irrespective of deserts" but he demands nonetheless that the "requirements of equity must be supplemented by the promptings of kindness" (270). Keeping "restraints" and "positive beneficence" in balance, Spencer argues that, except for strictly private behavior and that portion of life ruled by principles of Justice, "nearly all the remainder of conduct becomes the subject-matter of Beneficence, negative or positive" (422). If Norris read this treatise, he might have been struck by the following passage that links California with the rest of the world much as his epic of the wheat was intended to do:

> A world which, from the far east of Russia to the far west of California and from Dunedin in the North to Dunedin at the Antipodes, daily witnesses deeds of violence, from the conquest of one people by another to the aggressions of man on man, will not easily find place for a social order implying fraternal regard of each for each. (426)

Henry Sidgwick criticizes Spencer's too optimistic application of teleological principles in his ethics when, as he charges, Spencer avoids teleology in his *Principles of Biology*, but this criticism appeared after the publication of *The Octopus* and would, in any case, not match the sweeping manner in which Norris has Presley articulate the novel's concluding vision.[3] Recent discussions of Spencer characterize his version of utilitarianism as "liberal utilitarianism," a version which places restrictions on the primacy of utility-based thinking by asserting respect for persons.[4] Norris was too much of a traditional naturalist to bind the hands of fate and circumstance too tightly. Neither the victims of the trench fight nor the starving Mrs. Hooven are given their just deserts as persons. Norris's handling of the plot of *The Octopus* instead suggests attempts to maximize utility, and this commitment helps explain how he deals with the suffering of his admirable characters and how he finally constructs the conclusion to the book. In addition, he may have felt attracted to the manner in which Spencer sometimes grounds his scientific ethics in examples from the animal world, as when Spencer assigns value judgments to squirrels and dogs who either do or do not behave in a manner consis-

tent with their own welfare.[5]

Claiming serious philosophical content for *The Octopus* requires passing what I call the "Pizer test." Don Pizer warns in "The Problem of Philosophy in the Naturalistic Novel" that we should not mistake a novel in which philosophical ideas are uttered for a philosophical novel that expresses the author's value system. Neither should we assume that "quasi-philosophical discourse that is both blatantly intrusive and puerile in content" (59) has more than metaphorical value. Consequently, I must assess the seriousness of the optimistic utterances in their context. Recent criticism has paved my way: though not mentioning utilitarianism by name, Eric Carl Link has noted, in his discussion of theodicy in Norris's work, that "post-Darwinian responses to the problem of evil . . . require a perceptual shift away from the horrors of individual experience and towards the embrace of an arcing principle that views evolutionary processes as inherently ameliorative" (91). The narrative "arc" of *The Octopus* performs such a process, and its necessary conclusion, its *telos*, is the paragraph at the end of the novel quoted above. Relying on Le Conte, like Bert Bender, Link uses language straight from the playbook of utilitarianism to construct a workable theodicy: "This apotheosis of virtue, for Le Conte, is the teleological end toward which evolution is ultimately working" (100–01). The burden of proof for establishing the presence of utilitarian thinking—my object in this essay—is considerably lower than that for a workable theodicy. Presley's concluding paragraph alone is insufficient to convince readers of the presence of a benevolent God behind the whole scheme of events, but it rings true in a universe that accepts utilitarian explanations. Bentham's and Mills's views about the common good for humanity clearly constitute an "arcing principle," one that focuses not on "the horrors of individual experience" but measures the sum total of happiness. And there is another critical "arc": more than a half-century ago, in December 1955, Donald Pizer began defending Presley's concluding thoughts in *The Octopus* by invoking "Norris' belief in nature's didacticism" ("Another Look" 224 n.11) and even linking him back to transcendental thought. Since that time, Pizer has consistently argued for a humanistic perspective on American naturalism that would balance its grim determinism. In specifically claiming Benthamite utilitarianism today, I pick up Pizer's suggestion and seek to bring this narrative arc to completion. For a moment, one might believe that Norris, in letting utilitarianism have the last word in *The Octopus*, hearkens back to his master Howells who, in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, has the minister, Sewell, give like-minded advice to the Laphams who appear

inconsolable over Irene's distress after learning that Tom Corey loves Penelope instead.[6] At the end of chapter 18, Sewell makes the Laphams see that their "duty" (!) is to let "[o]ne suffer instead of three, if none is to blame" (1085). Sewell anchors his advice in Christianity and ratifies it with a blessing. Now, such an application of utilitarian thinking is palatable to most readers, I trust, within canonical realist texts such as Howells's novel. To extend its momentary working to the more strictly naturalist writer Norris may be uncommon in current critical discourse, but it appears to me somewhat more satisfying than Pettersson's suggestion that "many naturalist writers recoiled from the starkest consequences of their convictions" and "would therefore on occasion give their determinism a surprising optimistic slant" (93).

Once receptive to a utilitarian, optimistic reading of portions of *The Octopus*, we see both narrative and structural features that validate the conclusion. Though *The Octopus* is deterministic with respect to the harsh fates suffered by some of its most sympathetic characters, still Presley and Vanamee, through the narrative space afforded to them and the details of their psychological development, have a narrative authority that exceeds that of the blustering Hooven, the corrupt Lyman Derrick, the one-dimensional Delaney, and the unfortunately typecast Behrman. If Vanamee were not intended to be a main, perhaps normative character, the novelist would have to be faulted for giving a seemingly inordinate amount of room to Vanamee's repeated nightly séances at Angéle's grave and their redemptive function. The spiritual ingredients of his transformation may not be palatable to everyone, but Vanamee's fate is an exemplification of the fates of the farmers. Deprived of what he most cares about, he undergoes catharsis and healing. More important, Presley serves as a kind of conscience of the novel: as a writer struggling to find his subject matter he is an *alter ego* of Norris. While it remains foolish to equate Norris with Presley, still Presley provides the narrative frame. Few readers remember that he not only concludes the novel, he also opens it as he takes his bicycle ride across the ranch country. Our view of the landscape is conveyed through Presley's eyes; our initial value judgments are determined by his thoughts. By making Presley the teller of the narrative frame, Norris has him enacting the kind of "arcing principle" suggested by Link. Presley's "arc" begins to be traced when he tells the truth about "The Toilers" in his poem and is concluded when he accompanies the humanitarian shipment of wheat to India. When the conspiratorial band of brothers, the League, is destroyed, he remains behind as a kind of latter-day Ishmael who survives to tell the tale. Presley has authority

by the sheer number of pages Norris devotes to his character. Presley's prominent position invites readers to lend greater credence to the final paragraphs given to him. And if we do that, for a moment, we will find in the paragraphs the ingredients of a responsible ethical system, utilitarianism.

In his extensive though terminologically inconsistent theoretical pronouncements on naturalist and romantic fiction, Norris made clear what the attitude of the naturalist writer should be: he must pry, peep, and peer.[7] But not everyone can be a naturalist *writer*. In his novels, then, Norris exemplifies the kind of ethic that naturalist *subjects* might adopt: people, in other words, who embrace the naturalist world view concerning determinism, heredity, and chance. Such people are not monads. They live in a society, and that position is an impetus for them to act in a utilitarian manner. The "League" founded by the ranchers is an attempt, though a failed one, to put utilitarian solidarity into practice. After the trench fight, the wounded help each other *regardless* of which side they fought on:

> The surviving members of both Leaguers and deputies—the warring factions of the Railroad and the People—mingled together now with no thought of hostility. . . . The horror of that dreadful business had driven all other considerations from the mind. The sworn foes of the last hour had no thought of anything but to care for those whom, in their fury, they had shot down. (998)

As Presley steams across the Pacific, he reflects on the dramatic and traumatic events that have brought him to this point, but he quickly foregrounds Vanamee's final appeal to "the larger view . . . the greatest good to the greatest numbers" (1097). A few pages before, Norris has given his readers the atavistic satisfaction of drowning Behrman in his own wheat. Now Presley, in the service of the same cosmic force, the wheat that won't die, "that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm" (1097), is extending the empire of the wheat by accompanying it on its passage to India and its humanitarian mission to feed the hungry. This world-wide perspective not only transcends individual human fates through the large scale it employs, it also appropriately depersonalizes the entire issue of what the right thing to do might be. We are now not talking of individuals but "nations." The "Nirvanic calm," a reference to the final state of Hindu spirituality achieved after toiling through subsequent reincarnations, is a supremely impersonal state, one in which the individual no longer exists but instead has become released into union with cosmic harmony. Impersonality,

lack of attention to an individual human fate in favor of humanity at large, large-scale thinking—all these are constitutive attributes of utilitarianism. They are also stock-in-trade elements of naturalistic writing, but with important differences: when a naturalist describes the indifference of the universe, he customarily unmasks his previous naiveté. Deep down, many a naturalist is just a step away from a disappointed theist who has painfully given up his faith in the face of incontrovertible evidence. Stephen Crane's famous passage in "The Open Boat" is emblematic: the budding naturalist has to give up throwing bricks at the temple because neither exists. But—and this is my claim—this naturalist still conceives of the world in the theological terms of bricks and temples: if they existed, he would so use them. The utilitarian, meanwhile, always looking for happiness, merely adjusts his frame of reference: the universe is indifferent, to be sure, but the quantity of disposable happiness might as well be used to make as many people as possible happy. The outcome of Jack London's "The Law of Life," for example, in privileging the species over the individual, is deplorable for the individual but laudable for the increase in happiness among Koskoosh's tribe. London's Northern tribe practices a form of utilitarianism.

Naturalist writers seem not to have used the term "altruistic" commonly, but their recent commentators either use the term or describe scenarios that can reasonably be interpreted to foreground altruism, if altruism is understood as either a conscious or unconscious participation in increasing the happiness of others. Norris, over the course of *The Octopus,* transposes his own view of humankind, his naturalist anthropology, from Thomas Hobbes to Jeremy Bentham, and his maturation as a philosophical novelist can thus be described as a shift from a merely descriptive and analytical social contract theory to a normative utilitarianism. Again and again, naturalists had to acknowledge that the universe does not respond to human imprecations. But Benthamite consequentialist reasoning remains possible.

In his last conversation with Presley, Vanamee quotes Bentham's most famous phrase: "Look at it all from the vast heights of humanity—'the greatest good to the greatest numbers'" (1085). A few pages later, Presley's thoughts in free indirect discourse echo these sentiments. Although this view of things is clearly not very satisfying to the Annixters of this world, or to any characters whose lives have been sacrificed, I find this passage neither intrusive—measured by Norris's generous standard of intrusiveness—nor puerile. It does meet Pizer's requirement that we consider philosophical discourse as metaphorical, as an "'objective cor-

relative'" that heightens the "emotional reality in the work as a whole" ("Problem" 60). The cosmic irony of the scene is enhanced by its dramatic irony: unknown to Presley, Behrman's decomposing body is in the hold below his feet, encased in wheat.

The placement of the passage of cosmic optimism at the end of the book and its near-Emersonian euphoria suggest that even in a mechanistic and deterministic universe there remains a place, albeit small, for ethical reckoning—which is another word for the utilitarian calculus. The placement is enhanced by the programmatic announcement heading the last few pages (it is a "Conclusion" rather than just the final chapter). Though it is Presley who thinks these thoughts, the word "Conclusion" over the final chapter betokens authorial intention and authorial voice. Neither *McTeague* nor *Vandover and the Brute* are so marked. Moreover, *The Pit* ends with a programmatic "Conclusion" as well and, sure enough, the final scene suggests an overwhelmingly positive image. Not just Laura and Jadwin but all humanity will have a fresh start, as Laura likens their situation to Adam's and Eve's after their expulsion from Paradise in Milton's life-affirming version when she quotes, "'The world is all before us where to choose,' now, isn't it?" (414). Again, as in Howells, a happy marriage appears to give rise to the invocation of utilitarian thinking. So, too, with *The Octopus*: the novel was concluded when Norris married Jeanette Black, and he dedicated the book to his wife. We should thus at least allow for the possibility that marital bliss colored his outlook on life, making possible a benevolent though not perhaps a transcendent view of cosmic order.[8] In the best of circumstances, marital bliss can spell "the greatest happiness" for at least a small number of people, that number being two.

NOTES

1. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781, and his *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788. Jefferson would not have had to grapple with Kant when drafting the Declaration. But it is obvious that he preferred English to Continental philosophy.

2. For the most recent discussion of Presley's narratological position, see Frye.

3. See Sidgwick, "On Mr. Herbert Spencer's Principles of Ethics," 140–41.

4. See, for example, Weinstein, *Equal Freedom and Utility*.

5. Weinstein discusses some of these episodes on p. 143.

6. I am grateful to Donald Pizer for suggesting the link back to Howells when he first heard this paper presented at the 2007 American Literature Asso-

ciation conference. Jesse Crisler's detail-filled article on the mutual admiration of Howells and Norris ("Howells and Norris: A Backward Glance Taken") is instructive in tracing plot parallels between *Silas Lapham* and *McTeague* with reference to Trina's self-deprecating taste in art (234) as well as to a courtship conversation between Trina and McTeague which may mirror the interchange between Tom Corey and Irene over books (242); but Crisler does not, I believe, admit utilitarian happiness at work in Norris.

7. Norris is talking about what "Romance" does in his essay "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," but it is clear that the investigating activities described are to be performed by the naturalistic novelist.

8. McElrath and Crisler document the alleged story of the "shotgun affair" but conclude: "Still, there is no indication that Norris married in 1900 for any other reason than love, and all of the evidence concerning the quality of the marriage—save one brief testimony—spells a particularly happy union" (327).

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