

BOOK REVIEW

Cathy Gere. *Pain, Pleasure, and the Greater Good. From the Panopticon to the Skinner Box and Beyond*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. 304 pp.
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This is an extraordinary book, not just because of the reasons usually involved in academic writing, but also, and most importantly, because of the bravery of the author. Cathy Gere, Associate Professor of History at the University of California (San Diego), has decided to dig into what laid behind human experimentation during the Cold War. The subject would have been already too difficult to explore, but Gere has gone far beyond the simple survey of a rather obscure chapter in the history of medicine. The book begins with a case study on the human experimentation procedures undertaken from the early 1930s in Tuskegee (Alabama), where six hundred black men were conscripted into medical research, for the study of syphilis, without their consent or knowledge. According to Gere, what truly matters in this case is not simply the ethical qualities of those involved, but their epistemic values and the moral theories that inspired them. After all, the moral reasoning that permeated their practices was no other than utilitarianism: the famous philosophical doctrine that claims that our principal obligation, as moral beings, is to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number, even

if this involves some kind of unwanted and secondary effects. Instead of taking sides far too quickly, Gere opts for exploring the rationale that triggered the episode, not with the intention to make an easy judgment on those involved, but rather with the purpose to understand what was at stake, then and now. She declares from the very beginning of the book that “the drama of stopping Cold War human experimentation was not a battle between good and evil, but rather a conflict between two conceptions of the good” (p. 4). This effort to comprehend the morality of actions that many of us would consider at best dubious and at the worst utterly despicable, serves to provide a much more sophisticated way of writing history than the mere accumulation of accusations or, as it happens very often today, a distorted view of the past, based on prejudices and political ideologies.

Once the main issues of the book have been presented, the text combines social history with history of ideas. Gere begins this particular genealogy of morals by following the footsteps of thinkers like John Locke, David Hume and Jeremy Bentham, who, despite their good names as egregious philosophers, were behind the most dramatic decisions ever taken in the history of medicine. The second and third chapters explore the long eighteenth century, with a discussion that also takes into consideration other social measurements and scientific practices partly inspired by utilitarian principles, like the Anatomy Act of 1831, “the purest piece of Benthamite reasoning ever to make it into law” (p. 123). The book moves then into the Victorian era. The general reader may not be that familiar with the names of Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer and Samuel Tuke, but the discussion by Gere is both illuminating and informed. From psychiatry to evolutionary biology, it is not difficult to see how much of our current ethical concerns, in the history of medicine and beyond, are embedded in utilitarian principles. The human experiments performed in Tuskegee, as well as many others undertaken before and after the Second World War, Gere argues, were based on the same sort of ethical logic that informed the principles of humanitarian sacrifice, so much in vogue during the Second World War. Furthermore, the conflict against the evil represented by the Nazis was not much different from the medical war against disease. In both cases, the achievement of a greater good depended on the sacrifice of some for the benefit of many. Though much of these utilitarian principles were called into question during the Nuremberg trials, the case does not look that simple when observed from a distance. For one thing, the Nazis claimed that their experiments were similar to those undertaken anywhere else on other prisoners. And they were right. Even more, Gere also shows how the issue of informed consent, so essential to contemporary medicine, was based on Kantian principles and German philosophy.

The final chapters of the book focus on the dangers to which the alternative to utilitarian reasoning may lead us. The rigorous principle of autonomy, in which no other moral requirement is invoked apart from the idea of never turning any subject into a means towards an end, does not come up naturally. On the contrary, Gere explains how much of the neoliberal economic principles that led to the dismantlement of the welfare state from the 1970s came

up from anti-utilitarian principles. And vice versa, she is also willing to show how much of our current environmentalist commitment also depends on utilitarian principles, according to which the sacrifices of some are essential for the happiness and welfare of the many.