

“Happiness Is the Greatest Good” by Jeremy Bentham



Bentham, The Warren J. Samuels Portrait Collection at Duke University

About the author... Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) abiding concern in life was the total reform of British society and law based on the principle of utility. He believed this principle was the most reasonable guide to both individual morality and public policy. He formed the "Westminster Review" and convinced radicals, opposed to both the Whigs and Tories, to join the Benthamite movement. The group founded University College, London.

About the work... In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*,¹ Bentham attributes the inconsistency of English law, its complexity as well as its inhumanness, to its foundation on the moral feelings of "sympathy" and "antipathy." He argues that the laws of all nations should be rationally based, not emotionally based, on what appeared to him to be the self-evident principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. In an effort to apply this principle of utility to legal reform, Bentham de-

1. Jeremy Bentham. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.

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velops the hedonistic, or as it is sometimes called, the felicific calculus. As an ethical teleologist,² Bentham devises a method of calculating the most pleasure *vis-à-vis* the least pain by means of a quantitative scale. Historically, the hedonistic calculus was a major step in the development of rational decision theory and utility theory.

From the reading...

“An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility... when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.”

Ideas of Interest from *Morals and Legislation*

1. According to Bentham, what are the causes of human action? What is the principle of utility?
2. Explain what Bentham means by the principle of asceticism. Is this principle related to the principle of sympathy and antipathy? Why does Bentham think that these principles lead to inconsistent application and undue punishment?
3. Can pleasure be quantified? Explain whether you think the use of the hedonistic calculus for the individual and for society is feasible.
4. What does Bentham mean when he explains that motives are neither bad nor good? Why doesn't Bentham think that evil motives can be productive of over-all good? Explain his analysis of motives.

2. *I.e.*, Bentham believes our behavior is directed toward and shaped by the purpose of seeking pleasure.

The Reading Selection from *Morals and Legislation*

Of the Principle of Utility

Chapter I—i. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain. subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

Chapter I—ii. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever. according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

Chapter I—iii. By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

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Chapter I—iv. The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what is it?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

Chapter I—v. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

Chapter I—vi. An action then may be said to be conformable to then principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility, (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.

From the reading...

“The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one tenth part of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day’s time they will have turned it into a hell.”

Chapter I—vii. A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by a particular person or persons) may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it. . . .

Chapter I—viii. Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none. . . .



A Tea Resale Establishment near Lincoln’s Inn Fields, where Bentham studied law after Oxford, Library of Congress

Of Principles Adverse to that of Utility

Chapter II—ii. A principle may be different from that of utility in two ways: I. By being constantly opposed to it: this is the case with a principle which may be termed the principle of asceticism. 2. By being sometimes opposed to it, and sometimes not, as it may happen: this is the case with another, which may be termed the principle of sympathy and antipathy.

Chapter II—iii. By the principle of asceticism I mean that principle, which, like the principle of utility, approves or disapproves of any action, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; but in an inverse manner: approving of actions in as far as they tend to diminish his happiness; disapproving of them in as far as they tend to augment it. . . .

Chapter II—ix. The principle of asceticism seems originally to have been the reverie of certain hasty speculators, who having perceived, or fancied, that certain pleasures, when reaped in certain circumstances, have, at the long run, been attended with pains more than equivalent to them, took occasion to quarrel with every thing that offered itself under the name

of pleasure. Having then got thus far, and having forgot the point which they set out from, they pushed on, and went so much further as to think it meritorious to fall in love with pain. Even this, we see, is at bottom but the principle of utility misapplied.

Chapter II—x. The principle of utility is capable of being consistently pursued; and it is but tautology to say, that the more consistently it is pursued, the better it must ever be for human-kind. The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one tenth part of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day’s time they will have turned it into a hell.

Chapter II—xi. Among principles adverse to that of utility, that which at this day seems to have most influence in matters of government, is what may be called the principle of sympathy and antipathy. By the principle of sympathy and antipathy, I mean that principle which approves or disapproves of certain actions, not on account of their tending to augment the happiness, nor yet on account of their tending to diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, but merely because a man finds himself disposed to approve or disapprove of them: holding up that approbation or disapprobation as a sufficient reason for itself, and disclaiming the necessity of looking out for any extrinsic ground. Thus far in the general department of morals: and in the particular department of politics, measuring out the quantum (as well as determining the ground) of punishment, by the degree of the disapprobation.

Chapter II—xii. It is manifest, that this is rather a principle in name than in reality: it is not a positive principle of itself, so much as a term employed to signify the negation of all principle. What one expects to find in a principle is something that points out some external consideration, as a means of warranting and guiding the internal sentiments of approbation and disapprobation: this expectation is but ill fulfilled by a proposition, which does neither more nor less than hold up each of those sentiments as a ground and standard for itself.

Chapter II—xiii. In looking over the catalogue of human actions (says a partizan of this principle) in order to determine which of them are to be marked with the seal of disapprobation, you need but to take counsel of your own feelings: whatever you find in yourself a propensity to condemn, is wrong for that very reason. For the same reason it is also meet for punishment: in what proportion it is adverse to utility, or whether it be adverse to utility at all, is a matter that makes no difference. In that same proportion also is it meet for punishment: if you hate much, punish much: if you hate little, punish little: punish as you hate. If you hate not at all,

punish not at all: the fine feelings of the soul are not to be overborne and tyrannized by the harsh and rugged dictates of political utility.

Chapter II—xiv. The various systems that have been formed concerning the standard of right may all be reduced to the principle of sympathy and antipathy. One account may serve to for all of them. They consist all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of the author’s sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself.

Value of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain

Chapter IV—i. Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the ends that the legislator has in view; it behooves him therefore to understand their value. Pleasures and pains are the instruments he has to work with: it behooves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value.

Chapter IV—ii. To a person considered by himself, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by itself, will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.

Chapter IV—iii. These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself. But when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any act by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account; these are,

5. Its fecundity, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.
6. Its purity, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasure or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They

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are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.



The Royal Gallery, House of Lords, London, England, Library of Congress

Chapter IV—iv. To a number of persons, with reference to each of whom to the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones; *viz.*

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.
5. Its fecundity.
6. Its purity.

And one other; to wit:

7. Its extent;

that is, the number of persons to whom it extends; or (in other words) who are affected by it.

Chapter IV—v. To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as

follows. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
2. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain.
4. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain, and the impurity of the first pleasure.
5. Sum up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that individual person; if on the side of pain, the bad tendency of it upon the whole.
6. Take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of good tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is bad upon the whole. Take the balance which if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency, with respect to the same community.

Chapter IV—vi. It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.

Chapter IV—vii. The same process is alike applicable to pleasure and pain, in whatever shape they appear: and by whatever denomination they are distinguished: to pleasure, whether it be called good (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or profit (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of, distant pleasure,) or convenience, or advan-

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tage, benefit, emolument, happiness, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called evil, (which corresponds to good) or mischief, or inconvenience. or disadvantage, or loss, or unhappiness, and so forth. . . .

Of Motives

Chapter X—ix. No motives either constantly good or constantly bad. In all this chain of motives, the principal or original link seems to be the last internal motive in prospect: it is to this that all the other motives in prospect owe their materiality: and the immediately acting motive its existence. This motive in prospect, we see, is always some pleasure, or some pain; some pleasure, which the act in question is expected to be a means of continuing or producing: some pain which it is expected to be a means of discontinuing or preventing. A motive is substantially nothing more than pleasure or pain, operating in a certain manner.

Chapter X—x. Now, pleasure is in itself a good: nay, even setting aside immunity from pain, the only good: pain is in itself an evil; and, indeed, without exception, the only evil; or else the words good and evil have no meaning. And this is alike true of every sort of pain, and of every sort of pleasure. It follows, therefore, immediately and incontestably, that there is no such thing as any sort of motive that is in itself a bad one.



General View and High Street, Oxford, England, Library of Congress

Chapter X—xi. It is common, however, to speak of actions as proceeding from good or bad motives: in which case the motives meant are such as are internal. The expression is far from being an accurate one; and as it is apt to occur in the consideration of most every kind of offence, it will be requisite to settle the precise meaning of it, and observe how far it quadrates with the truth of things.

Chapter X—xii. With respect to goodness and badness, as it is with very thing else that is not itself either pain or pleasure, so is it with motives. If they are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects: good, on account of their tendency to produce pleasure, or avert pain: bad, on account of their tendency to produce pain, or avert pleasure. Now the case is, that from one and the same motive, and from every kind of motive, may proceed actions that are good, others that are bad, and others that are indifferent. . . .

Chapter X—xxix. It appears then that there is no such thing as any sort of motive which is a bad one in itself: nor, consequently, any such thing as a sort of motive, which in itself is exclusively a good one. And as to their effects, it appears too that these are sometimes bad, at other times either indifferent or good: and this appears to be the case with every sort of motive. If any sort of motive then is either good or bad on the score of its effects, this is the case only on individual occasions, and with individual motives; and this is the case with one sort of motive as well as with another. If any sort of motive then can, in consideration of its effects, be termed with any propriety a bad one, it can only be with reference to the balance of all the effects it may have had of both kinds within a given period, that is, of its most usual tendency.

Chapter X—xxx. What then? (it will be said) are not lust, cruelty, avarice, bad motives? Is there so much as any one individual occasion, in which motives like these can be otherwise than bad? No, certainly: and yet the proposition, that there is no one sort of motive but what will on many occasions be a good one, is nevertheless true. The fact is, that these are names which, if properly applied, are never applied but in the cases where the motives they signify happen to be bad. The names of those motives, considered apart from their effects, are sexual desire, displeasure, and pecuniary interest. To sexual desire, when the effects of it are looked upon as bad, is given the name of lust. Now lust is always a bad motive. Why? Because if the case be such, that the effects of the motive are not bad, it does not go, or at least ought not to go, by the name of lust. The case is, then, that when I say, “Lust is a bad motive,” it is a proposition that merely concerns the import of the word lust; and which would be false if trans-

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ferred to the other word used for the same motive, sexual desire. Hence we see the emptiness of all those rhapsodies of common-place morality, which consist in the taking of such names as lust, cruelty, and avarice, and branding them with marks of reprobation: applied to the thing, they are false; applied to the name, they are true indeed, but nugatory. Would you do a real service to mankind, show them the cases in which sexual desire merits the name of lust; displeasure, that of cruelty; and pecuniary interest, that of avarice.

From the *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. 13,

“All punishment is mischief; all punishment in itself is evil.”

Related Ideas

“Classical Utilitarianism Web” (<http://www.la.utexas.edu/cuws/index.html>). Writings and commentary on Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick being developed by Dan Bonevac at the University of Texas.

“Decision Sciences: How the Game Is Played” (<http://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/news/publicat/nsf0050/decision/decision.htm>). *National Science Foundation*. An introductory overview of utility and game theory, including a discussion of its limitations.

“Jeremy Bentham ” (<http://www.utm.edu/research/ep/b/bentham.htm>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An excellent encyclopedic overview of Bentham’s life and thought.

From the Bentham’s *The Commonplace Book*

“The greatest happiness for the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.”



Houses of Parliament from the River, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Utilitarianism is often cited as a consequentialist or teleological ethics. Consequentialism is the doctrine that the morally correct action is an action maximizing the good; hence, consequentialism is not so much concerned with the means used as it is concerned with probable outcomes, ends, or goals of activities. Utilitarianism holds only pleasure or happiness is an intrinsic good, whereas consequentialism implies that there may well be other intrinsic goods, such as knowledge, that some persons might not desire. In any case, the question arises whether or not something instrumentally bad can lead to something intrinsically good. Do we actually judge the goodness of an action only by its consequences? Do the ends justify the means in some cases? Construct and analyze a few examples in support of your view.
2. Bentham seems to equate happiness with pleasure. Are there significant differences between pleasure and happiness? Do the characteris-

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tics of time, sensation, or emotion differ for each? Can one be happy while in painful circumstances? Provide some specific examples in support of some of the distinctions you notice.

3. If pleasure for Bentham is intrinsically good, would anything count as being intrinsically bad? Bentham is often called a hedonist. Hedonism is the ethical view that pleasure alone is an intrinsic good for persons. Does Bentham believe the descriptive generalization that all persons in fact *do* seek pleasure (a view called psychological hedonism), or does he believe that all persons *should* or *ought* to seek pleasure, even though some persons might not (a view called ethical hedonism)? Relate your answer to Bentham’s theory of motives.
4. When Bentham explains the principle of utility in terms of the individual and in terms of the community, does he commit the fallacy of composition?³ He writes above, Chapter I, V, “It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual.”
5. Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach has said, “Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser” and “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” Compare these statements to “As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.”⁴ What would be Bentham’s reaction to the later statement? Has Bentham overlooked anything in asserting that motives are not an exception to his theory?
6. Attempt to do a detailed calculation of the total amount of pleasure and pain comparing sleeping-in with attending philosophy class. If you are sleeping, then would it follow that you are experiencing neither pleasure nor pain because you are not conscious? In your calculation, be sure to include the extent of the pleasure you bring to the other members of the class. If you have problems, try assigning pleasure as an ordinal relation rather than a cardinal relation, or check the Internet to see if anyone else has attempted calculating some specific instances.

3. The fallacy of composition involves the implication that a characteristic of a part of a something is attributable as the same characteristic of the whole. For example, the inference, “ Since human beings are mortal, someday the human race must come to an end” is an instance of this fallacy. If all the players on an all-star team are excellent players, it would not logically follow that the team is an excellent team. In other words, in the fallacy of composition, the name of the characteristic in the predicate is used ambiguously.

4. *Proverbs*, 23: 7.

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