

Jeremy Bentham

by John Hamlin

2011

<http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/4111/2111-home/CD/TheoryClass/Bentham/Jeremy%20Bentham.htm>

Jeremy Bentham introduced the distinction between individual "hedonic calculation" (maximizing individual utility) as a basis of a *positive* theory of behavior, and social calculation (maximizing aggregate utility) as a *normative* theory of social organization.

"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." (Bentham, 1780).

Bentham argued that virtually all humans seek to maximize their "happiness", defined as the surplus of pleasures over pains. He also posited that *all* human actions arise from the hedonic calculus. Altruism, asceticism, love, duty, a desire for freedom, obedience to the law, faith, etc. are reducible to individual pleasure and pain calculations. By applying his utility hypothesis so widely, Bentham made it empirically unverifiable. No piece of evidence could conceivably be brought up to disprove it.

Bentham also correlated happiness with the means to happiness. The wealthier a person is, the greater the happiness he can attain. However, he recognized the principle of diminishing marginal utility, i.e. that the greater the amount of utility a person already has, the smaller will be the utility gain of any extra increment of wealth.

The critical question Bentham puzzled over was whether the unhindered pursuit of individual happiness could be reconciled with morality. The only ethical principle he accepted was that increasing general happiness is "good", while decreasing it is "bad". From the outset, then, Bentham dismissed all "ipsedixitisms", i.e. moral judgments based on criteria such as "sympathy" or "intentions". Similarly, all abstract notions of social ethics like "natural rights", "social justice", etc. were hogwash. For Bentham, only consequences mattered. Actions are to be judged strictly on the basis of how their *outcomes* affect general utility.

But what is general utility of a society? Bentham argued it was no more and no less than the sum total of individual utilities of all members of a society. Whom we include in our definition of "society" depends on our sphere of consideration. It may be a nation, it may be all of humanity. It may be confined to living adult voters, or it may embrace all people and generations yet unborn.

He emphasized the need for equal weights in this summation: no person's utility counted more than another's (it somehow slipped Bentham's notice that this presumption implicitly introduces elements of some "natural law" doctrines, but so be it).

Insisting that individuals are the best judges of their own happiness, Bentham had an automatic tendency to default to non-interference by government. However, he recognized that individual actions of one individual often implicated the happiness of others and that individuals may not have the incentive or ability to coordinate concerted actions that improve aggregate utility.

As such, Bentham laid some responsibilities in the hands of the State. The first obligation is to not let people suffer needlessly. This means guaranteeing a minimal subsistence level of income to ensure survival for all citizens and the provision of security of individuals (as well as their property) against the violence of other citizens or foreign nations.

The second obligation is to encourage abundance, both of wealth and of population. This was a tricky issue. If wealth is constant, then a greater population will reduce wealth *per capita*. However, Bentham believed that a plentiful population is necessary for defense. At any rate, as argued by [Paley](#) (1785), by the principle of diminishing marginal utility and direct summation of utility, a large but poor population might have a higher "aggregate utility" than a small and rich population.

The third obligation was equality of means. By the principle of diminishing marginal utility, an extra £1 contributes less utility to a rich man than it does to a poor one. Consequently, reallocation of income to complete equality is desirable as the utility loss of the rich is more than compensated by the utility gain of the poor. However, he recognized that radical redistribution can also thwart incentives and productivity, and thus decrease general abundance. Bentham argued that some amount of redistributive taxation is warranted, but it must be carefully balanced against these other considerations. He thought that progressive inheritance taxes, as they have few adverse effects on incentives, were the best solution.

Mill (1850) implicitly defined the ideal population as that which maximized average happiness per head (a definition later attributed to Cannan). Sidgwick (1894) defined maximum happiness = average happiness x population, a solution greatly applauded by Edgeworth (1877, 1881).

Social utility was a bit more complicated. He invoked Helvetius's phrase, "greatest happiness for the greatest number" as his general ethical principle. Bentham dismissed all notions of "natural rights" or "social contracts" as enshrined in Blackstone's *Commentaries* and political documents such as the 1776 American *Declaration of Independence* and the 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. He also dismissed all "ipsedixitisms", i.e. moral judgments based on criteria such as "sympathy" or "intentions". For Bentham, only consequences mattered. Actions are to be judged strictly on the basis of how their *outcomes* affect general utility.

If the objective is to maximize light in a room, it might be better to use one strong lamp rather than five weak candles.

The responsibilities of the State are laid out in several different places. The first obligation is to not let people suffer needlessly. This means guaranteeing a minimal subsistence level of income to ensure survival for all citizens and the provision of security of individuals (as well as their property) against the violence of other citizens or foreign nations. The second obligation is to encourage abundance, both of wealth and of population. This was a tricky issue. If wealth is constant, then a greater population will reduce wealth *per capita*. However, Bentham believed that a plentiful population is necessary for defense. At any rate, by the principle of diminishing marginal utility and direct summation of utility, a large but poor population might have a higher "aggregate utility" than a small and rich population.

Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals* (1780) was the founding document of British [utilitarianism](#). It was here that he first articulated its basic foundations:

"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." (Bentham, 1780).

Thus, Bentham introduced the distinction between individual "hedonic calculation" (maximizing individual utility) and social "hedonic calculation" (maximizing social utility).

As William Hazlitt recalled, "Bentham has lived for the last forty years in a house in Westminster...like an anchorite in a cell, reducing law to a system, and the mind of man to a machine." Bentham was a rather eccentric man with a peculiar taste for odd words (e.g. he referred to his after-dinner strolls as "post-prandial vibrations"). Karl [Marx](#) regarded him as a "purely English phenomenon" and "a genius by way of bourgeois stupidity." ([Marx](#), 1867: p.758n.).

Bentham's defense of usury (1787) is a direct attack on Adam [Smith](#)'s recommendation of legal limits on the rate of interest.

Bentham was a great friend of James [Mill](#) and was the mentor of the latter's son, John Stuart [Mill](#). His essentially singular criteria for judging policy proposals - *maximum felicitas* - "greatest happiness for the greatest number", is best captured in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals* (1780), and has been the bedrock for [English Utilitarian](#) philosophy. Naturally, Bentham was the father of the "utility function" so ubiquitous in modern economics (and he was aware of diminishing marginal utility). However, for his policy propositions to be useful, Bentham assumed that utility was effectively comparable across people, a proposition which most modern economists reject.

A constant political activist, he made substantial contributions to education -- including his bizarre 1817 "sense-data" theory of language. Bentham also founded the [University College London](#), specifically designed to be accessible to Non-Conformist, Catholic and Jewish students.

Bentham was the quintessential English eccentric. He was particularly fond of inventing new words with tangled Greek and Latin roots rather than just using their humble English

equivalents. Some of his lexical constructions have caught on, e.g. "international", "maximize" and "codification". Others, like "post-prandial vibrations" (after-dinner walks) remained confined to Mr. Jeremy's circle.

Bentham's most bizarre coup came after his death in 1832. As stipulated in his [will](#), Bentham's [embalmed body](#) was dressed and placed on display in a glass cabinet in the hallways of UCL. His body is still there today and, apparently, it is still wheeled in to preside over the annual meeting of university administrators. He also left his estate as an endowment to UCL and tens of thousands of pages of unpublished papers and tracts for successive generations to dig through (which they are still doing).