

# Jeremy Bentham on Utilitarianism

## 1. **Who** was Jeremy Bentham, and what are his key ideas on utilitarianism?

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was a British philosopher and social reformer best known for formulating utilitarianism. He was a child prodigy: his father found him reading a multi-volume history of England as a toddler, and he could read and write Latin by the age of three. By seven, he would perform Handel's violin sonatas after dinner for his parents' guests. Shortly after his twelfth birthday, Jeremy Bentham went up to The Queen's College, Oxford, where he was awarded a BA in 1763 and a MA in 1766. After graduating, he trained as a lawyer and was called to the bar in 1769, but he never practised. Instead, he dedicated his life to writing and social reform, involving himself in various progressive endeavours like the abandoned Panopticon project of 1791, which aimed to upgrade prisons, and the Thames Police Bill of 1800, which established the world's first regular and professional police force. Arguably, Jeremy Bentham's most famous work of philosophy is *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published in 1789, which introduced utilitarianism to the world (including the central ideas listed below).

### **Utilitarianism is hedonistic:**

utilitarianism requires moral agents to act according to the principle of utility (i.e. to maximise good outcomes and minimise evil outcomes). For Jeremy Bentham, good outcomes are those that promote the most happiness or pleasure for those affected.

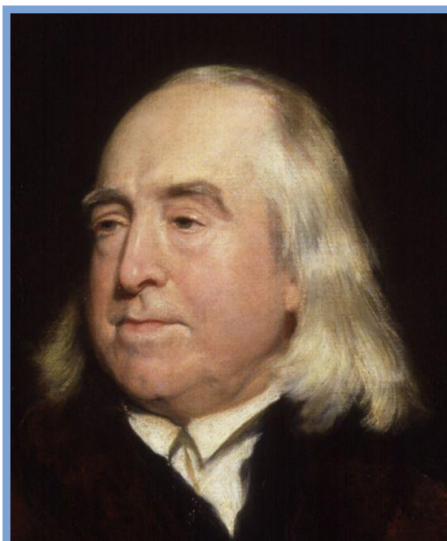
### **Utilitarianism is natural:**

the way the universe works underpins utilitarianism as a normative ethical theory. The biology of the human body means that people experience pain and pleasure, which overwhelmingly influences how they behave. Nature supports a utilitarian approach to ethical decision-making.

### **Utilitarianism is mathematical:**

with utilitarianism, the complexities of ethical decision-making can be approached using a dispassionate mathematical method. The hedonic calculus helps moral agents consistently and rationally calculate any given action's morality, given its context and likely consequences.

## 2. **How** do Jeremy Bentham's key ideas on utilitarianism work?



Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham's key ideas on utilitarianism form an argument that supports ethical decision-making based on evaluating any given action's probable outcomes. He provided various instructions about how to go about this. Most famously, he directed moral agents to adopt the principle of utility when confronted with ethical dilemmas and use the hedonic calculus to choose the course of action that will produce the most good for all those affected by it (equating good with the promotion of pleasure).

**Utilitarianism is hedonistic:** Jeremy Bentham's first key idea is that utilitarianism is hedonistic. Being a utilitarian is about promoting that which is pleasurable and preventing that which is painful. Some later utilitarians rejected the idea that utilitarianism is hedonistic because they did not equate good with pleasure (or not with pleasure alone). However, Jeremy Bentham argued that the action that promotes the most happiness or pleasure is synonymous with the action that produces the most good. The principle of utility encapsulates this idea by requiring utilitarians to act in ways that produce the largest measure of pleasure for those affected by their actions.

**Utilitarianism is natural:** in the opening sentence of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham wrote, "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." These two sentences capture his key idea that utilitarianism is a theory supported by nature. Human biology inescapably and significantly influences human behaviour by making the promotion of pleasure and prevention of pain the primary concern of right-thinking people. In the third chapter of his work, Jeremy Bentham defined nature as the primary source of pain and pleasure and one that other sources must modify to achieve their aims. Courts, communities and religions can only reward or punish people by using painful or pleasurable experiences provided by nature (i.e. human biology and universal laws). He argued that our ethical decision-making should work with nature rather than against it.

**Utilitarianism is mathematical:** Jeremy Bentham's third key idea was unlike anything anyone had hitherto thought of in the field of ethics. He argued that people could solve moral dilemmas mathematically by evaluating the quantity of pain or pleasure a given action is likely to produce. He suggested seven measurement criteria: intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, fecundity (i.e. the likelihood of similar sensations following the first), purity (i.e. the likelihood of opposite sensations not following the first), and extent (i.e. the number of people affected). Philosophers call this collection of criteria "the hedonic calculus". Its development was a breakthrough in ethical thinking because it made it possible to consistently and rationally evaluate potential courses of action by their likely consequences. The hedonic calculus forms the basis of act utilitarianism, and it is this type that has been built upon by all of the theory's subsequent formulations.

3. **Why** are Jeremy Bentham's key ideas on utilitarianism important?

**They consider and promote extensive social reform:** Jeremy Bentham's key ideas are reformatory because they provide a roadmap for ethical decision-making that considers all those affected by an action. He believed that social reform of this nature would make society a fairer place.

**They dismiss conventional wisdom:** in the Kingdom of Great Britain, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* completely upended the established ethical framework of Christianity. The development of utilitarianism began in earnest the process of secularising moral decision-making.



**A courtroom:** Jeremy Bentham wanted to reform the way laws were made.

**They provide the foundational principles of all types of utilitarianism:** Jeremy Bentham's key ideas form the groundwork for all other utilitarian theories. The principle of utility is taken up in one way or another by ideal, negative, and preference utilitarianism. However, its objective is modified because these types do not directly equate the good with the pleasurable. Likewise, the hedonic calculus has inspired the development of other mathematical methods for evaluating the rightness or wrongness of hypothetical courses of action.

### George Thinks

Jeremy Bentham was one of the most controversial philosophers of his time because much of his work flew in the face of established thinking. Today, we're more at home with his ideas because of the ever-increasing influence utilitarianism has exerted over society. Reading *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, it becomes clear that the force of Jeremy Bentham's thought comes from his ability to take a simple idea, in this case, the principle of utility, and relentlessly follow it through to its ultimate conclusion (however shocking). By modern standards, we don't consider most of Jeremy Bentham's thinking particularly controversial or surprising, but this only goes to show how far we've come. Utilitarianism has its critics, and it's difficult to deal with plenty of the challenges levelled against it. Nevertheless, when Jeremy Bentham first formulated it, he was trying to make the world a better place in his own pedantic but persuasive fashion. At least to my mind, his mission has met with some success in the years since he lived and wrote.

