

Use this in conjunction with the outlines I provided you and the readings.

Jeremy Bentham is credited with being the founder of British utilitarianism. Simply put, utilitarianism is a belief that the moral worth of any action (policy, law, etc.) is judged by its general utility, that is the greatest good for the greatest number. This is often built around the notion of individual happiness or pleasure. This idea will create a problem later and the idea of happiness for the greatest number is dropped. However, the original ideas are well worth pursuing since they get at not only a conception of human nature that still is assumed by many but more importantly an inherent contradiction that social theorists often have to confront and try to work out. They may use different language to do so but they need to come to some resolution.

Bentham having read a work by Joseph Priestley around 1768 (Priestley also had some influence on Martineau) seems to be where he captured the notion "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." A current popular notion pertaining to the rule of law implied (particularly as stated by William Blackstone in **Commentaries on the Laws of England**), that common law was the best form, and always has been, or organized society. Blackstone's was a conservative, status quo oriented approach which made it difficult to tinker with or delete laws. Thus the rule of law became a standard in England but more dramatically in the U.S. Bentham takes this notion to task in (www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/2111/bentham/Bentham_government.html) "**A Fragment of Government**" published in 1776. All law, according to Bentham, should be evaluated according to the principle of "utility," or as he states it, "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong." A law should be judged good or bad depending upon whether or not it increased general happiness of the population.

The base of the theory, and that which creates problems for everyone, is the distinction between individual "hedonic calculation" (maximizing individual utility) as a basis of a positive theory (a theory that purports to describe behavior that is actually practiced as opposed to norms or standards that ought to be practiced) of behavior, and social calculation (maximizing aggregate utility) as a normative theory of social organization, that is, a theory that describes a norm or standard of behavior that ought to be followed as opposed to one that actually is followed. The motivating factor for human behavior was what we call the pleasure - pain (or mini maxi) principle. People do what is best for them based on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. It goes without saying that sometimes choosing the least painful will be the most pleasure one can expect from a certain line of action. Like Beccarie before him, Bentham argued that virtually all humans seek to maximize their "happiness", defined as the surplus of pleasures over pains. All human behavior can be measured by these motivating factors (He also realized, like George Casper Homans later talked about as diminishing return, the more one has the less important "more" will be)

The critical question for Bentham was whether the unhindered pursuit of individual happiness (Smith) could be reconciled with morality. Positivism in science ought to apply to realm of the moral as well. That is, movement towards perfection happens and is desirable. The only ethical principle he accepted was that increasing general

happiness is "good", while decreasing it is "bad". One can see that the notion of natural rights and the rule of law hinders that improvement in the quality of human life.

Bentham dismissed all moral judgments based on criteria such as "sympathy" or "intentions"; and all abstract notions of social ethics like "natural rights" (social contract theory), "social justice," or other abstractions. Actions are to be judged strictly on the basis of how their outcomes (consequences) affect 'general' utility, sum total of individual utilities of all members of a society.

So, what is Utility? Individuals are the best judges of their own happiness, this seemingly implies non-interference by government. He recognized social dilemma that agency and structure implies, that is, actions of one individual often impinge on the happiness of others. How do you balance those things? Your right to smoke and kill yourself doing so is your right, one might argue, but in so doing you not only endanger others caught in your smoke, but you also detract the the general good as your actions impact your family, your work relations, and the overall improvement of society at large.

Where Social Contract Theory suggests that the role of the "State" is to mediate the intersection between the individual and society, Bentham maintains the state must do something more. (We will discuss Smith later, but he reduces the role of the state to a large degree.) Do not let people suffer needlessly, guarantee a minimal subsistence (now we talk about minimum wage, welfare etc., England had the poor laws) and secure individuals (as well as their property) against the violence of others (criminal law) or foreign nations (defense). Society needs to encourage abundance, both growth of wealth and population. The dilemma was, a greater population grows the more overall reduction in wealth, or wealth per capita. But a large population is necessary for defense against external threat (those nasty terrorists) and internal (those thieving criminals).

One way to approach the problem is to generate an equality of means, within limits. Reallocation of income to reach equality between people is desirable. The rich will miss a dollar less than the poor will gain from the dollar - a greater utility! William Buffet could drop a few thousand dollars, or million (which he does by the way, as does Bloomberg, and Gates) and you and I would gain a good deal. A \$500 rebate helps you a lot and has little impact on the wealthy. The dicey part comes in that you don't want to squash incentives and productivity (remember his moral dilemma between individual interest and moral obligation to public good) at the same time you help the common good. Progressive inheritance taxes, was his solution.

Social utility was a bit more complicated, that notion of the "greatest happiness for the greatest number." This centers more around a question of morality. Some might argue from this that; the ends justify the means! It can in fact be applied that way. As noted, he dismissed all notions of "natural rights" or "social contracts" as-well-as notions of moral judgments based on criteria such as "sympathy" or "intentions," and suggested that only consequences mattered. Actions are to be judged strictly on the basis of how their outcomes affect general utility.