THE BEST OF THE OLL #21

Jeremy Bentham, "The Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number" (1830)
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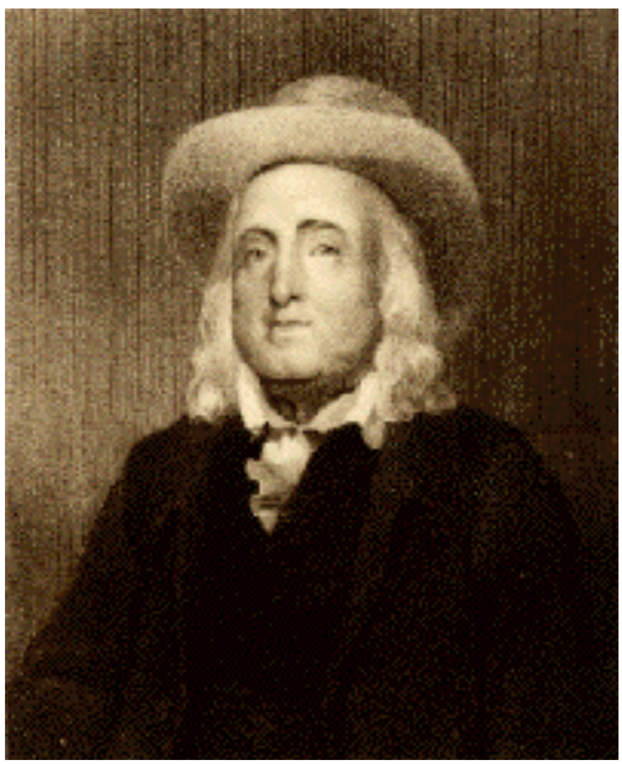
"The right and proper end of government in every political community, is the greatest happiness of all the individuals of which it is composed, say, in other words, the greatest happiness of the greatest number."



Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

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[July, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) trained as a lawyer and founded the early 19th century school of political thought known as "Benthamism" or utilitarianism which was based upon the idea that governments should act so as to promote "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" of people. He spent much of his life attempting to drawn up an ideal Constitutional Code, but he was also active in parliamentary reform, education, and prison reform. He influenced the thinking of James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill.

Bentham in *A Fragment On Government* (1776) had argued that what the legislator should strive for is "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". He provides a summary of his views in a *Constitutional Code* one volume of which was published in 1830 but which was left unfinished at this death. In this extract Bentham defines the two principles on which he bases his political theory, namely the greatest happiness-principle and the self-preference principle. He notes that traditionally rulers have pursued their own "self-preference" or happiness and that of their supporters, at the expence of the happiness of the society at large. He calls this group the "sinister interest." Bentham believes that a political constitution can be so written that a system of punishments and rewards is created to ensure that rulers and their friends act in order to promote the interests and happiness of the greatest number of people in the community. In this way he believes that the two principles, that of the self-preference principle and that of the greatest happiness-principle can be reconciled. This extract also is a good example of Bentham's rather pedantic style of writing.

His ideas were further developed by J.S. Mill in the book *Utilitarianism* (1861-1863). Benthamite utilitarianism became the dominant liberal theory of ethics in the English speaking world in the 19th century. It challenged the natural rights theory which had been popularized by John Locke in the 17th century and had been the dominant theory of ethics during the 18th century when it profoundly influenced the participants in the American and French revolutions.

Although Bentham and Mill were advocates of strictly limited government, later in the 19th century utilitarianism was used by the "New Liberals" to justify much more extensive regulation by the state in order to maximize the total amount of "happiness" in society.

"In the eyes of every impartial arbiter, writing in the character of legislator, and having exactly the same regard for the happiness of every member of the community in question, as for that of every other, the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the members of that same community, cannot but be recognised in the character of the right and proper and sole right and proper end of government, or say, object of pursuit. For the designation of the opposite, or reverse of what is right and proper, the term sinister may … be employed. Accordingly, in so far as between the happiness of the greatest number, and the happiness of any lesser number, any incompatibility or successful competition is allowed to have place, it may be styled a sinister end of government…"

"*The Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number*" (1830)[1]

INTRODUCTION.

Section I. First Principles described in General Terms.

To whatever portion of the field of thought and action the literary work in question belongs, it has been found convenient, and is accordingly usual, to place at the beginning of it some opinion or opinions, embracing in their extent the whole of the portion in question, or as large a portion of it as may be.

On this occasion a number of expressions mutually related, are found needful or convenient, and are accordingly usually employed.

Take, for example, first principles, leading principle, first lines, outlines, positions, axioms, aphorisms.

If, in the composition of the work, the design be to recommend a certain course of action as proper to be pursued for the attainment of a certain end, thereupon come certain other words and phrases of correspondently extensive import. Of this sort are ends, objects of pursuit, means, obstacles,—helps, counterforces, acting in opposition to the obstacles.

Where the object of the inquiry and discussion is, what is the course of action which, with relation to the field in question, is proper to be pursued? a necessarily concomitant object of regard throughout is,—the course actually pursued: pursued in the community which the writer has in view.

If the course actually pursued is in all points the same with the course proper to be pursued, it is well; and unless on the supposition that, in default of apposite warning and instruction, a departure to an extent more or less considerable may have place, any work on the subject in question would be useless, and by him in whose opinion such coincidence has place, cannot consistently be undertaken.

In regard to some expressions, viz. course proper to be pursued, course not proper to be pursued; one matter of fact there is, which, on every occasion, it may be of use to the reader to have in mind. This is, that everything, of which any such phrase can be, in an immediate way the expression, is a certain state of mind on the part of him by whom the expression is employed; the state of his mind with relation to the subject-matter of the discourse, whatsoever it happens to be.

> ***"When I say the greatest happiness of the whole community, ought to be the end or object of pursuit, in every branch of the law—of the political rule of action, and of the constitutional branch in particular, what is it that I express?—this and no more, namely that it is my wish, my desire, to see it taken for such, by those who, in the community in question, are actually in possession of the powers of government; taken for such, on the occasion of every arrangement made by them in the exercise of such their powers, so that their endeavours shall be, to render such their cause of action contributory to the obtainment of that same end."***

The state of mind will be the state of one or more of his intellectual faculties, in one word, his understanding,—or the state of his sensitive faculties, in one word, his feelings, or the state of his volitional faculties, in one word, his will, his desires, his wishes.

Thus in the case here at present on the carpet. When I say the greatest happiness of the whole community, ought to be the end or object of pursuit, in

[1] Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843). 11 vols. Vol. 9. Chapter: Introduction. <oll.libertyfund.org/title/1999/131259>.

every branch of the law—of the political rule of action, and of the constitutional branch in particular, what is it that I express?—this and no more, namely that it is my wish, my desire, to see it taken for such, by those who, in the community in question, are actually in possession of the powers of government; taken for such, on the occasion of every arrangement made by them in the exercise of such their powers, so that their endeavours shall be, to render such their cause of action contributory to the obtainment of that same end. Such then is the state of that faculty in me which is termed the will; such is the state of those particular acts or modifications of that faculty, which are termed wishes or desires, and which have their immediate efficient causes in corresponding feelings, in corresponding pleasures and pains, such as, on the occasion in question, the imagination brings to view.

In making this assertion, I make a statement relative to a matter of fact, namely that which, at the time in question, is passing in the interior of my own mind;—how far this statement is correct, is a matter on which it belongs to the reader, if it be worth his while, to form his judgment.

Such then being the desire, truly or falsely expressed by me, but at any rate expressed by me—in his breast has that same desire a place? If so, then may it be worth his while to apply his attention to the course herein marked out by me, under the notion of its being correspondent, and contributory, and conducive to the attainment of that same end. On the other hand, if so it be, that that same desire has no place in his breast, on that supposition, generally speaking, it will be a useless trouble to him to pay any further attention to anything contained in it.

To this observation one exception, it is true, there is, and it is this, namely, that if the end in view, which it is his wish to see pursued, is different from this, it may be of use to him to take note of the arrangements herein proposed, as conducive to the end pursued by me, for the purpose of taking or recommending, such different and opposite arrangements as may prevent the attainment of the end proposed by me, and procure or promote the attainment of that other end, be it what it may, which is more agreeable to his wishes, —say, for example, the greatest happiness of some one member of the community in question, or of some other number smaller than the majority of the whole number of the members.

"When I say the greatest happiness of the whole community, ought to be the end or object of pursuit, in every branch of the law—of the political rule of action, and of the constitutional branch in particular, what is it that I express?—this and no more, namely that it is my wish, my desire, to see it taken for such, by those who, in the community in question, are actually in possession of the powers of government; taken for such, on the occasion of every arrangement made by them in the exercise of such their powers, so that their endeavours shall be, to render such their cause of action contributory to the obtainment of that same end."

So again, when I say,—In the breast of every ruler, on the occasion of the arrangements taken by him in the field of government, the actual end or object of pursuit, has, in the instance of every such arrangement, been his own greatest happiness, and that, in such sort as that wherever in his judgment there has been a competition between his happiness; and that of all the other members of the community in question taken together, he has, on each occasion, given the preference to his own happiness over theirs, and used his endeavours to giving increase to his own happiness, in whatsoever degree the aggregate of their happiness may, in his judgment, he lessened by it,—in saying this, I have been exhibiting the state of my own mind, viewed in another point of view, viewed as it were in another part of it—my judgment, the judicial faculty. I have given that, as my opinion, an opinion of which I am prepared to bring to view the efficient causes.

While I am so doing, I observe another writer who, on the score of my so doing, taxes me with egotism, or, to use another word, with dogmatism; meaning by dogmatism, the doing something which it is his wish, his desire, should not be done.

In answer to this charge what I say is, that either a man must do this, or he must forbear to write at all, for that it is not possible for a man to write without doing thus.

But this defence against the charge of dogmatism is not confined to self-defence against the charge of dogmatism: it has for its object the giving warning against that form of discourse to which the imputation expressed by the word dogmatism does really and properly attach.

In a work of self-biography, personality, called in English, when disapproved of, egotism, is at once unavoidable and agreeable. In a work on legislation, except in so far as it is unavoidable it is irrelevant, impertinent, and disagreeable. In a certain case, in the mouth of a public functionary, it is not only impertinent but insulting; and thereby, to every individual who is not by habit inured to insult, supremely disagreeable. This is where the rest of the community being brought upon the stage in the character of subjects of property, the speaker brings himself to view in the character of proprietor or owner of the property. Thus to speak is to spit in the face of every one who either hears or reads it.

The present is an occasion on which personality is unavoidable.

In saying, as above, the proper end of government is the greatest happiness of all, or, in case of competition, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, it seems to me that I have made a declaration of peace and good-will to all men.

On the other hand, were I to say, the proper end of government is the greatest happiness of some one, naming him, or of some few, naming them, it seems to me that I should be making a declaration of war against all men, with the exception of that one, or of those few.

Be the subject what it may, unless it be allowed to me to say, what, in relation to that subject, are my judgment, my feelings, or my desires, I cannot say anything in relation to it; and as to my judgment on each occasion, giving it, as I do, for no more than it is worth, it seems to me that it is on my part no unreasonable desire to be allowed—free from every imputation conveyed, or endeavoured to be conveyed, by the word dogmatism—to be allowed to give it.

"In saying, as above, the proper end of government is the greatest happiness of all, or, in case of competition, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, it seems to me that I have made a declaration of peace and good-will to all men. On the other hand, were I to say, the proper end of government is the greatest happiness of some one, naming him, or of some few, naming them, it seems to me that I should be making a declaration of war against all men, with the exception of that one, or of those few."

This being the basis on which all legislation and all morality rests, these few words written in hopes of clearing away all obscurity and ambiguity, all doubts and difficulties, will not, I hope, be regarded as misapplied, or applied in waste.

SECTION II. FIRST PRINCIPLES ENUMERATED.

The right and proper end of government in every political community, is the greatest happiness of all the individuals of which it is composed, say, in other words, the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

In speaking of the correspondent first principle, call it the greatest-happiness principle.

In speaking of this end of government, call it the right and proper end of government.

The *actual* end of government is, in every political community, the greatest happiness of those, whether one or many, by whom the powers of government are exercised.

In general terms, the proof of this position may be referred to particular experience, as brought to view by the history of all nations.

This experience may be termed *particular,* inasmuch as the particular class of rulers is the only class concerned in it, to which it bears reference. This may be called the experimental or practical proof.

For further proof, reference may be made to the general, indeed the all-comprehensive, principle of human nature. The position which takes this fact for its subject, may be termed an axiom, and may be expressed in the words following.

In the general tenor of life, in every human breast, self-regarding interest is predominant over all other interests put together. More shortly thus,—Self-regard is predominant,—or thus,—Self-preference has place everywhere.

"The right and proper end of government in every political community, is the greatest happiness of all the individuals of which it is composed, say, in other words, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In speaking of the correspondent first principle, call it the greatest-happiness principle.... In the general tenor of life, in every human breast, self-regarding interest is predominant over all other interests put together. More shortly thus,—Self-regard is predominant,—or thus,—Self-preference has place everywhere. "

This position may, to some eyes, present itself in the character of an axiom: as such self-evident, and not standing in need of proof. To others, as a position or proposition which, how clearly soever true, still stands in need of proof.

To deliver a position in the character of an axiom, is to deliver it under the expectation that, either it will not be controverted at all, or that he by whom it is controverted, will not, in justification of the denial given by him to it, be able to advance anything by which the unreasonableness of his opinion or pretended opinion, will not be exposed. Of this stamp are the axioms laid down by Euclid. In the axioms so laid down by him, nothing of dogmatism will, it is believed, be found.

By the principle of self-preference, understand that propensity in human nature, by which, on the occasion of every act he exercises, every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness, whatsoever be the effect of it, in relation to the happiness of other similar beings, any or all of them taken together. For the satisfaction of those who may doubt, reference may be made to the *existence* of the species as being of itself a proof, and *that* a conclusive one. For after exception made of the case of children not arrived at the age of which they are capable of going alone, or adults reduced by infirmity to a helpless state; take any two individuals, A and B, and suppose the whole care of the happiness of A confined to the breast of B, A himself not having any part in it; and the whole care of the happiness of B confined to the breast of A, B himself not having any part in it, and this to be the case throughout, it will soon appear that, in this state of things, the species could not continue in existence, and that a few months, not to say weeks or days, would suffice for the annihilation of it.

Of all modes in which, for the governance of one and the same individual, the two faculties could be conceived as placed in different seats,—sensation and consequent desire in one breast, judgment and consequent action in another, this is the most simple. If, as has with less truth been said of the blind leading the blind, both would, in such a state of things, be continually falling into the ditch; much more frequently, and more speedily fatal, would be the falls, supposing the separation to have place upon any more complex plan. Suppose the care of the happiness of A being taken altogether from A, were divided between B and C, the happiness of B and C being provided for in the same complex manner, and so on; the greater the complication, the more speedy would the destruction be, and the more flagrant the absurdity of a supposition, assuming the existence of such a state of things.

Note that, if in the situation of ruler, the truth of this position, held good in no more than a bare majority, of the whole number of instances, it would suffice for every practical purpose, in the character of a ground for all political arrangements; in the character of a consideration, by which the location of the several portions of the aggregate mass of political power should be determined; for, in the way of induction, it is only by the greater, and not the lesser number of instances, that the general conclusion can reasonably be determined; in a word, mathematically speaking, the probability of a future contingent event, is in the direct ratio of the number of instances in which an event of the same sort has happened, to the number of those in which it has not happened; it is in this direct ratio, and not in the inverse.

If such were the condition of human beings, that the happiness of no one being came in competition with that of any other,—that is to say, if the happiness of each, or of any one, could receive increase to an unlimited amount, without having the effect of producing decrease in the happiness of any other, then the above expression [1] might serve without limitation or explanation. But on every occasion, the happiness of every individual is liable to come into competition with the happiness of every other. If, for example, in a house containing two individuals, for the space of a month, there be a supply of food barely sufficient to continue for that time; not merely the happiness of each, but the existence of each, stands in competition with, and is incompatible with the existence of the other.

Hence it is, that to serve for all occasions, instead of saying the greatest happiness of all, it becomes necessary to use the expression, the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

If, however, instead of the word *happiness,* the word *interest* is employed, the phrase *universal interest* may be employed as corresponding indifferently to the interest of the greatest number, or to the interest of all.

In the eyes of every impartial arbiter, writing in the character of legislator, and having exactly the same regard for the happiness of every member of the community in question, as for that of every other, the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the members of that same community, cannot but be recognised in the character of the right and proper and sole right and proper end of government, or say, object of pursuit.

For the designation of the opposite, or reverse of what is right and proper, the term sinister may, in consideration of the relation borne to each other by the two terms, taken in their original physical sense, be employed.

Accordingly, in so far as between the happiness of the greatest number, and the happiness of any lesser number, any incompatibility or successful competition is allowed to have place, it may be styled a *sinister* end of government, or say, object of pursuit.

"For the designation of the opposite, or reverse of what is right and proper, the term sinister may, in consideration of the relation borne to each other by the two terms, taken in their original physical sense, be employed. Accordingly, in so far as between the happiness of the greatest number, and the happiness of any lesser number, any incompatibility or successful competition is allowed to have place, it may be styled a sinister end of government, or say, object of pursuit."

If as above, so it be, that in the situation of a ruler, whatsoever that situation be, the conduct of no man can reasonably be expected to be governed by any interest that stands, at that same moment, in opposition to that which, in his conception, is his own individual interest, it follows, that for causing it to take that direction, in which it will be subservient to the universal interest, the nature of the case affords no other method, than that which consists in the bringing of the particular interest of rulers into accordance with the universal interest.

Here, then, we have a third principle of the first rank, in addition to the two former ones. Call it, the *means-prescribing*, or *junction-of-interests-prescribing*, principle.

The first declares, what *ought to be*, the next, what *is*, the last, the *means* of bringing what is into accordance with what ought to be.

Meantime, this junction of interests, how can it be effected? The nature of the case admits but of one method, which is, the destroying the influence and effect of whatever sinister interest the situation of the individual may expose him to the action of; this being accomplished, he will thereby be virtually divested of all such sinister interest; remains, as the only interest whereby his conduct can be determined, his right and proper interest, that interest which consists in the share he has in the universal interest, which is the same thing as to say, that interest, which is in accordance with the universal interest, taken in the aggregate.

Be the act what it may, there are two modes, in either of which a man may be divested of the interest requisite to his performance of it: one is, the overpowering the force of whatsoever body of interest may be acting on him, in a direction tending to engage him in the performance of it, by a stronger counter-interest; this is the *direct* mode. The other is, the divesting him of the power of performing that same act; for that which, in his own eyes, it is not in a man's power to perform, it cannot, in his own eyes, be his interest to endeavour to perform; it can never be a man's interest to expend time and labour without effect. Considered in its application to a man's interest, this mode may be termed an *indirect* mode.

Thus it is, that by one and the same arrangement, application may be made to the power and the will at the same time, and in either mode the requisite junction of interests is capable of being effected or promoted.

A question that now immediately presents itself, is, whether to any individual, supposing him invested by the constitution in question with the supreme power, any inducement can be applied, by that same constitution, of sufficient force to overpower any sinister interest, to the operation of which, by his situation, he stands exposed? Inducements, operating on interest, are all of them reducible to two denominations,—punishment and reward. Punishment in every shape his situation suffices to prevent his standing exposed to; so likewise reward. Being by the supposition invested with supreme power, the matter of reward cannot be applied to him in any shape, in which he has not already at his command, whatever it would be in the power of the constitution, by any particular arrangement, to confer on him. To him who has the whole, it is useless to give this or that part.

To a question to this effect, the only answer that can be given is sufficiently manifest. By reward, an individual so situated cannot be acted upon; for there exists no other individual in the community at whose hands he can receive more than he has in his own. By punishment as little; for there exists no individual at whose hands he is obliged to receive, or will receive any such thing.

The result is, that in a monarchy no such junction of interests can be effected, and that, therefore, by no means can monarchy be rendered conducive to the production of the greatest happiness of the greatest number; nor, therefore, according to the greatest happiness-principle, be susceptible of the denomination of a good form of government.

"in a monarchy no such junction of interests can be effected, and that, therefore, by no means can monarchy be rendered conducive to the production of the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

What, then, is the best *form* of government? This question may itself be clothed in an indefinite number of forms. What is the most eligible? what is the most desirable? what is the most expedient? what is the most right and proper? and so on. In whatsoever form clothed, it is resolvable into these two:—What is the end to which it is your will to see the arrangements employed in the delineation of it directed? What are the several arrangements by which, in the character of *means*, it is your opinion that that same end, in so far as attainable, is most likely to be attained?

To write an answer to this question—to write on the subject which it holds up to view—is virtually, is in effect, from beginning to end, to write an answer to one or other, or both of these questions.

To the first, my answer is,—the greatest happiness of all the several members of the community in question, taken together, is the end to which it is my desire to see all the arrangements employed in the delineation of it directed. *That* being taken for the end, to which it is right and proper that all legislative arrangements be directed, my opinion is, that so far as they go, the proposed arrangements which here follow would be in a higher degree conducive to it than any other could be, that could be proposed in a work which was not particularly adapted to the situation of any one country, to the exclusion of all others.

Should it be asked, *What* is the community which, by the description of the community in question, you have in view? my answer is,—any community, which is as much as to say every community whatsoever.

Should it be asked, *Why* is it your desire that the greatest happiness of all the several members of the community in question should be the end to which all the several arrangements employed in the delineation of the form of government, by which that same community is governed, should be directed? my answer is,—because on the occasion in question, such is the form, the establishment of which would in the highest degree be contributory to my own greatest happiness.

"Why is it your desire that the greatest happiness of all the several members of the community in question should be the end to which all the several arrangements employed in the delineation of the form of government, by which that same community is governed, should be directed? my answer is because the establishment of which would in the highest degree be contributory to my own greatest happiness."

Should it again be asked by any man, What proof can you give of this? what cause can any other person have for regarding as probable that what you are thus saying is conformable to truth? the only answer which would not be irrelevant, impertinent, egotistical, is this: Behold, for proof, the labour it cannot but have cost me to give expression to these several arrangements, and the so much greater labour which it cannot but have cost me to bring to view the reasons which stand annexed to them,—reasons which have for their object the causing them to be adopted and made law by the persons to whom, in the several communities, the power of determining on every occasion what shall be taken for law, and have the force of law, depends; viz. by showing that on each subject they are in a higher degree conducive to that end than any others that could be proposed.

In saying thus much, I have already laid down what, in my view of the matter, are the two positions, of which, in the character of first principles, the whole sequel of this work will be no more than the development and the application.

These principles are the greatest happiness-principle and the self-preference principle.

Notes

[1] Note by Bowring: Viz. the greatest happiness of *all.* See the ensuing paragraph.—*Ed.*

Further Information

Source

The edition used for this extract: Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843). 11 vols. Vol. 9. Chapter: Introduction. <oll.libertyfund.org/title/1999/131259>.

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Further Reading

Other works by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) <oll.libertyfund.org/person/172>.

School of Thought: 19th Century Utilitarians <http://oll.libertyfund.org/collection/23>.

"The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State."
[Ludwig von Mises, "Liberty and Property" (1958)]

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