

Background

English utilitarian philosopher and social reformer. He first attained attention as a critic of the leading legal theorist in eighteenth century England, Sir William Blackstone. Bentham's campaign for social and political reforms in all areas, most notably the criminal law, had its theoretical basis in his [utilitarianism](#), expounded in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, a work written in 1780 but not published until 1789. In it he formulated the principle of [utility](#), which approves of an action in so far as an action has an overall tendency to promote the greatest amount of happiness. Happiness is identified with [pleasure](#) and the absence of pain. To work out the overall tendency of an action, Bentham sketched a [felicific \("happiness-making"\) calculus](#), which takes into account the intensity, duration, likelihood, extent, etc of pleasures and pains.

In Bentham's theory, an action conforming to the principle of utility is right or at least not wrong; it ought to be done, or at least it is not the case that it ought not be done. But Bentham does not use the word '[duty](#)' here. For Bentham, rights and duties are legal notions, linked with the notions of command and sanction. What we call moral duties and rights would require a moral legislator (a divine being presumably) but theological notions are outside the scope of his theory. To talk of natural rights and duties suggests, as it were, a law without a legislator, and is nonsensical in the same way as talk of a son without a parent. Apart from theoretical considerations, Bentham also condemned the belief in natural rights on the grounds that it inspired violence and bloodshed, as seen in the excesses of the French Revolution.

Bentham at first believed that enlightened and public-spirited statesmen would overcome conservative stupidity and institute progressive reforms to promote public happiness. When disillusionment set in, he developed greater sympathy for democratic reform and an extension of the franchise. He believed that with the gradual improvement in the level of education in society, people would be more likely to decide and vote on the basis of rational calculation of what would be for their own long-term benefit, and individual rational decision-making would therefore, in aggregate, increasingly tend to promote the greater general happiness.

Bentham had first-hand knowledge of the legal profession and criticised it vehemently. He also wrote a highly entertaining *Handbook of Political Fallacies* 1824, which deals with the logic and rhetoric of political debate.

Bentham figured prominently among the small number of men who became known as *philosophical radicals*, but his utilitarianism was not much discussed until the latter half of the nineteenth century. His prolific writings were published in part by devoted disciples, but some were published for the first time in the 1940s and after, and the publication of his complete works is still in progress. Among these writings is an analysis of the logic of deontic concepts, and *On Laws in General* contains a carefully elaborated theory of jurisprudence."

The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy
ed. Thomas Mautner