

OF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY

from *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1780

Chapter I - OF THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY

Utilitarianism was a political, economic and social doctrine which was widespread at the beginning of the 19th century among the industrial middle class whose interests it suited. Jeremy Bentham was the main theorist of this doctrine. The text below illustrates some of the most significant elements in the utilitarian doctrine

TASK

Identify from the text:

- a) The definition of utility
- b) The principle on which it is based
- c) The way in which utility can affect policies

I. 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.

[...]

III. By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

[...]

V. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be *for* the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

VI. An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility, (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.

VII. A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by a particular person or persons) may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the

principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.

Adapted from <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML1.html>