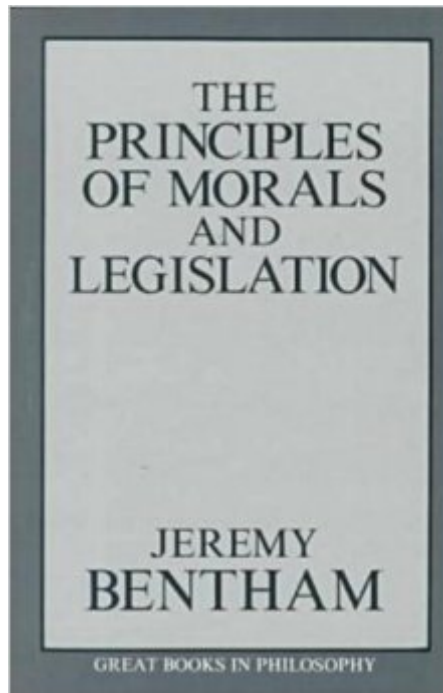


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# The Principles Of Morals And Legislation (Great Books In Philosophy)



## Synopsis

Jeremy Bentham's work on *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* emerges from its historic roots in hedonism and teleology as a scientific attempt to assess the moral content of human action by focusing on its results or consequences. Proceeding from the assumption that human beings desire pleasure (and avoid pain), Bentham's unique perspective, known as utilitarianism, is used to construct a fascinating calculus for determining which action to perform when confronted with situations requiring moral decision-making the goal of which is to arrive at the "greatest happiness of the greatest number." Toward this end, he endeavors to delineate the sources and kinds of pleasure and pain and how they can be measured when assessing one's moral options. Bentham supports his arguments with discussions of intentionality, consciousness, motives, and dispositions. Bentham concludes this groundbreaking work with an analysis of punishment: its purpose and the proper role that law and jurisprudence should play in its determination and implementation. Here we find Bentham as social reformer seeking to resolve the tension that inevitably exists when the concerns of the many conflict with individual freedom. *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* offers readers the rare opportunity to experience one of the great works of moral philosophy, a volume that has influenced the course of ethical theory for over a century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jeremy Bentham's *Bentham Utilitarianism* is essentially based on his desire to move away from the moral philosophy of Judeo-Christian ethics, or the deism of Adam Smith, and move toward a

philosophy that could underpin an atheistic perspective. Bentham wants to come up with a decision making calculus which is simultaneously applicable to issues in economics (politics) and ethics (morals). Bentham claims that for all actions there are two distinctly measurable outcomes, pain and pleasure. Bentham comes up with a Principle of Utility (p.1). This essentially boils down to the observation that positive utility (pleasure) is generated by activities that generate sensations of pleasure while negative utility (pain) is generated by activities which generate sensations of pain. One can approve or disapprove of any action to the extent that it increases happiness (pleasure) or decreases pain. Approve, in Bentham's system, translates as good or right. Disapprove, in Bentham's system, translates as bad or wrong. How is this system implemented? Bentham claims that there are lots (units) of pleasure and pain that all decision makers can calculate precisely and exactly. The value of the lots will be more or less depending on the duration, intensity, and certainty of the pleasure. All actions are equally good if the sum of the amounts of pleasure resulting from each action is equal. This is where economists come up with their indifference curve analysis and hedonic calculus. Unfortunately, Bentham fails miserably in his attempt to demonstrate that human decision makers have the capacity to calculate exactly in quantitative terms. He never answers the question, "How do humans actually make the quantitative calculations?", upon which Bentham's entire edifice of decision making is so precariously balanced. He merely asserts it: "...

Jeremy Bentham's ideology on human pursuit of pleasure contains many strengths and weaknesses. Bentham's essay, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, separates the two root drives of human essence into categories of pleasure and pain. Bentham stresses the duality of the human mind's pursuit of pleasure, continuing from subjugation of others for ultimate attainment. He states that humans should not be grouped, due to personal conviction and perspective. Although the individual is part of a community, the individual's own pursuance of pleasure categorizes them as a utility; resulting in the term 'utilitarianism.' Several principles are listed by Bentham to support his argument that humanity has a distinct set of motives to create happiness or malcontent amongst the masses. Bentham relates these principles with empowered political bodies and why they continue to rule. One of Bentham's principles, the principle of sympathy and antipathy, praises the human ability to generally accept certain actions as an impersonal blow. Thus, if a utility does not feel threatened or in error, why relate consequences of actions to personal welfare? In turn, should that individual measure out the consequences of others' actions fearing for their own external welfare? Bentham's perspective on human methodology as a

strict functioning environment of social cues has many flaws. Determination of values as 'right' or 'wrong' does not review the complexities of human social environment. Empowerment was not an anti-puritanical event that occurred in society; but a constitution of human need for order.

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