

## Classical Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

### The Principle of Utility

“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. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of senses, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.”

***An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)***

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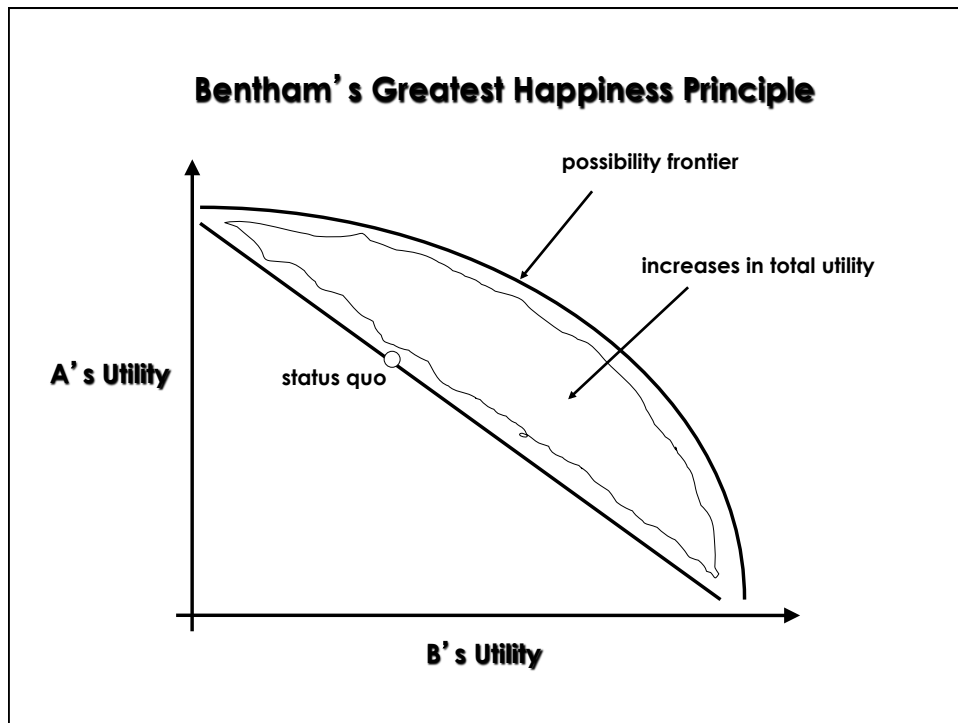
### **Features of Classical Utilitarianism**

1. Comprehensive and deterministic
2. Naturalistic
3. Egoistic, but not subjectivist
4. Consequentialist
5. Quantifiable: Cardinal scales with interpersonal comparisons of utility

### **The Role of Government**

**“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.”**

***An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation***



## Question:

Why do we need government?

## Answer:

The disconnect between  
individual and social utility, or:

The market-failure theory of  
government.

### **Bentham's example: Funding a war through taxes**

“If, for example, the commencement or continuance of a war being the question upon the carpet, if, upon his calculation, a hundred a-year during the continuance of the war, or for ever, will be the amount of the contribution which according to his calculation he will have to pay... if his expected profit by the war will be equal to 0, and no particular gust of passion intervene, to drive him from the pursuit of what appears to be his lasting interest upon the whole, – he will be against the war, and what influence it may happen to him to possess, will be exerted on that side.”

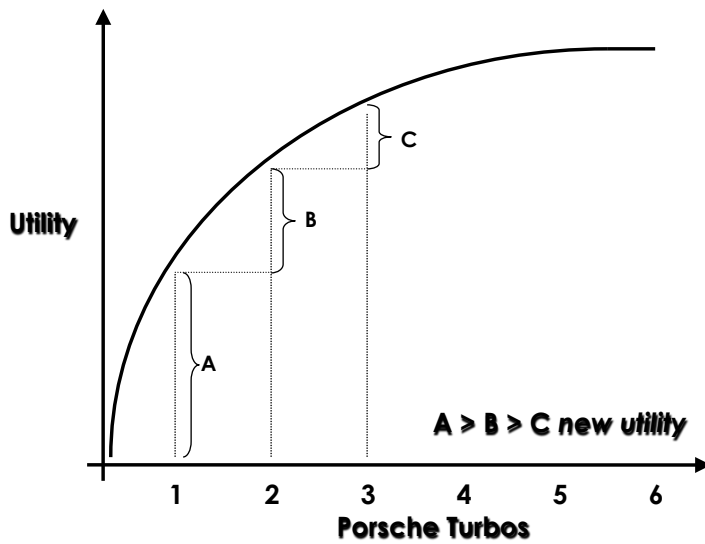
*The Psychology of Economic Man*

### Classical Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice

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### Diminishing Marginal Utility



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### **Practical and Absolute Equality**

“Suppose but a commencement made, by the power of a government of any kind, in the design of establishing it [absolute equality], the effect would be—that, instead of everyone’ s having an equal share in the sum of the objects of general desire—and in particular the means of *subsistence*, and the matter of *abundance*, no one would have any share of it at all. Before any division of it could be made, the whole would be destroyed: and destroyed, along with it, those *by whom*, as well as those for the sake of whom, the division had been ordained.”

### ***The Psychology of Economic Man***

What about rights?

## Individual motivation is vital

- “The great enemies of public peace are the selfish and dissocial passions—necessary as they are... Society is held together only by the sacrifices that men can be induced to make of the gratifications they demand: to obtain these sacrifices is the great difficulty, the great task of government.”
- ***The Psychology of Economic Man***

## Bentham, Workmanship, and Individual Liberty

“Law does not say to man, *Work and I will reward you* but it says: *Labour, and by stopping the hand that would take them from you, I will ensure to you the fruits of your labour—its natural and sufficient reward, which without me you cannot preserve.* If industry creates, it is law which preserves; if at the first moment we owe everything to labour, at the second, and every succeeding moment, we owe everything to law.”

**From *Principles of the Civil Code* (1843)**