
Research on Well-Being

Some Advice from Jeremy Bentham

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Jeremy Bentham provided a comprehensive list of the sources of pleasure and pain, rather in the manner of modern researchers into human well-being. He explicitly used the term *well-being* and made both qualitative and quantitative proposals for its measurement. Bentham insisted that the measurement of well-being should be firmly based on the concerns and subjective valuations of those directly concerned, in the context of a liberal society. Those who wished to superimpose other judgements were dismissed as “ipsedixitists.” He also addressed, though of course could not solve, some of the measurement problems more recently tackled by “neo-Benthamites.” The paper concludes that many of Bentham’s observations about the measurement of well-being are still relevant to issues in current research.

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On the face of it, Bentham is the very last person to turn to for advice on research into well-being. Modern researchers concern themselves with the rich panoply of human experience rather than utility derived merely from goods and services: they also stress agency, liberty, human rights, equality, justice, and the common interest rather than narrow self-interest. Bentham, by way of contrast, is held to have emphasized mechanical, calculating, self-interested economic man and to have insisted upon the flawed metric of the “greatest happiness” principle. This paper concentrates on Bentham’s own utilitarianism rather than on his utilitarianism as filtered through James and John Stuart Mill, Sidgwick, and modern utilitarian philosophers.¹ Bentham’s

1. An interesting account of Bentham within the context of economics and utilitarianism is given in Bonner (1995).

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canvas was vast, and it is impossible to cover all of it.² Here we concentrate on Bentham the would-be scientific policy maker (rather than Bentham the philosopher), acting on the principle that any action of the legislator should always be judged by whether or not it “appears . . . to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question” (Bentham [1780] 1970).

The paper is written in the form of injunctions from Bentham.³ We are not, of course, obliged to heed them. The argument for heeding them is that the issues with which Bentham was grappling are strikingly similar to some of the issues faced by modern researchers in the measurement and analysis of well-being. In a sense both he and they are engaged in the same research program. Section I deals with the more qualitative injunctions which, it is argued, are non-trivial and relevant across the whole field of research. His more qualitative advice is as follows. Include, in your list of factors affecting well-being, all those things (and only those things) to which your respondents attach importance; define the boundaries of your polity clearly; count everyone equally; encourage open debate and free expression; and beware of appeals to what is “self-evident.” I shall be arguing that these are by no means as uncontroversial or as obvious as they might seem. Section II deals with Bentham’s more quantitative injunctions. Bentham, uniquely in the utilitarian tradition, proposed a framework of quantitative analysis which foreshadowed what I shall call the modern “neo-Benthamite” approach.⁴

If it is possible to measure individual subjective well-being or happiness directly, it might be asked, why bother to collect a list of component elements? There would, indeed, be no point if one was concerned only with measuring utility. However, Bentham the would-be scientific policy analyst was concerned with measuring the prospective *effects* of policy changes on utility. To measure these *ex-ante* (that is to say, without actually carrying out the policy), it would be necessary know what the components of utility were.

2. The recent authoritative *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Bentham (Rosen 2004) devotes relatively little space to the issues discussed here; neither are they much discussed in recent editions of *Utilitas*, the successor to the *Bentham Newsletter*.

3. Though merely an expository device, this is consistent with Bentham’s rather hectoring style.

4. For example, Winkleman and Winkleman (1998), and Layard (2003, 2005) which appeared after the first draft of this paper was written.

I. Bentham's Qualitative Injunctions

(a) Make an exhaustive list of the factors which actually affect well-being/ill-being

Sooner or later the modern researcher turns to drawing up lists of factors which may or may not affect an individual's well-being. Such lists may simply be a catalogue of what gives people pleasure, or they may be driven by a structured notion of what constitutes a good life. In the latter case one thinks of Sen's notion of "functionings" or "beings and doings," limited by "capabilities" (1985b, 1987); of Nussbaum's Aristotelean eudaemonic list based on the virtues (Nussbaum and Sen 1993); or of Doyle and Gough's list of human needs (1991).⁵ Bentham (also in the Aristotelean tradition) had produced his own lists. They are interesting because of their comprehensive nature (particularly compared with the economist's rather thin concept of economic welfare) and because of their explicit relation to well-being.⁶

Two of Bentham's lists are considered. One (see appendix, table 1) is taken from the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Bentham [1780] 1970, ch. 5). Happiness, it will be remembered, depends upon the balance of pleasures and pains of various sorts. Bentham was rather given to making lists, and similar ones crop up elsewhere in his work. A more detailed alternative statement is to be found in his eight-page "Table of the Springs of Action" (Bentham [1817] 1983; see appendix, table 2: the extensive thesaurus of synonyms and antonyms which Bentham indefinitely provided is suppressed).

These lists⁷ are not at all as narrow as a knowledge of only secondary sources on Bentham might have suggested.⁸ He, like Adam Smith before him, recognized the importance of being a member of society as well as having material goods. To function in society one must be able to enjoy the

5. For more recent reviews of the now extensive literature, see Saith (2001), Alkire (2002), and Clark (2002).

6. It is of interest that his discussion was much appreciated by Alfred Marshall, who contrasted the richness of Bentham's analysis of wants and desires (and that of continental writers) with their much narrower treatment by subsequent English economists (Marshall [1890] 1920).

7. Indeed, with respect to functioning in society Bentham's lists stand up pretty well in comparison with the more modern lists reviewed, for example, in the survey by Alkire (2002).

8. Something similar is true of Bentham's proposed system of education (1817) which was, of course, utilitarian but not narrowly so, for it could provide "a richly stocked and variegated garden of art and science" to nourish the mind and prevent *ennui* in later life.

pleasures and pains of curiosity, of skill, of good name, of piety, of power, of good, of reputation, and of association. Several of these capacities also feature in Nussbaum's list (Nussbaum and Sen 1993), which is hardly surprising as both she and Bentham (in his case via Hutcheson; see Hutcheson [1728] 1969) drew ultimately on Aristotle. Sen, like Bentham, broadens "functionings"⁹ well beyond the standard narrow concerns of economics:

[My] approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various 'doings and beings', with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings. Some functionings are very elementary, being adequately nourished, being in good health, etc., and these may be strongly valued by all, for obvious reasons. Others may be more complex, but still widely valued, such as achieving self respect or being socially integrated. (Nussbaum and Sen 1993)

Bentham's "functionings" were those of the late 18th century, so we would not expect them to correspond exactly with those that are emphasized today. His injunction was a strictly empirical one: only those items which actually affect people's own assessment of their well-being should be included. The list should in no way be imposed: hence Bentham's contempt for the "ipsedixitists" (see injunction [f], below).

(b) Allow for "other-regarding" motives

Bentham clearly wished his list to include other-regarding¹⁰ as well as self-regarding pleasures and pains. These could be quite wide in scope, covering malevolence as well as benevolence, bad will as well as good. Bentham accepted the orthodox view of political economists that self-regarding actions would normally dominate. However, self-interest would often be inconsistent with maximizing the "greatest happiness." How could the interests of individuals and those of society be harmonized? Partly, of course, by appropriate punishments. But also by the exercise of "virtue" through other-regarding actions (along with prudence and probity).¹¹ In the

9. See Crocker (1992, 1995) for useful accounts of the Sen-Nussbaum approach. In particular, Crocker (1992) reviews what he calls the commodities, the utility, the basic needs, and finally the capabilities approaches for assessing well-being.

10. So, in as far as he lists other-regarding actions, Bentham includes some aspects of Sen's notion of "agency" as something to be distinguished from well-being (Sen 1992).

11. Griffin (1986) carefully examines the role of prudence in the life plans of rational individuals. In his excellent account, desires are regarded as "primitives" which have to be modified by reason and prudence before they are acceptable as a basis for policy. "To my mind the

introduction to *Deontology*, Bentham outlines his theory of how happiness and virtue may be brought into equivalence.

Wheresoever the happiness of others is affected by the conduct a man pursues, his own happiness, it will be shewn, will in some way or other be affected by the manner in which theirs is affected by it. On every such occasion, in order to know in which way the act he is about to perform may be most conducive to his own happiness it thence becomes necessary for him to consider and, as far as may be possible, to know in which ways their happiness is likely to be affected by it. (Bentham [1834] 1983, introduction)

It is evident that Bentham has in mind quite a complex reflective process: there should be an *empirical* evaluation of how others are affected which then has to be absorbed into a happiness function. When moving from individual to collective action, the policy maker has to include the effects of a proposed policy on *everyone* in the polity. So, if the relief of destitution would increase the well-being of the benevolent better-off as well as that of the destitute, this has to be taken into account. But Bentham's researcher is not allowed to impose such effects: they may be admitted only via individual happiness functions.

(c) Consider ill-being as well as well-being

Bentham defined *well-being*¹² as the excess of pleasure over pain. *Well-being*, he thought, was a more suitable term than *happiness*, which was much too upbeat.

[Happiness] seems not only to lay pain in all its shapes altogether out of the account, but to give it to be understood that whatsoever have been the pleasures that have been experienced, it is in a high and as it were superlative degree that they have been experienced. (Bentham [1834] 1983, 1.3)

best prospect for a utilitarian account of well-being is to hold on to the over-wide desire account and look for good reasons to rein it in" (Griffin 1986, 20). Lyons (1991), by contrast, offers a "differential interpretation" such that in politics, the interests of the whole community are served, whereas in private people serve their own interest (52). There is then, of course, no need to marry them up. I am grateful to Ian Gough for a helpful defence of this interpretation.

12. *Well-being* was a term which Bentham himself used. He was unhappy with *utilitarianism*, which he settled for, though reluctantly. *Greatest-happiness-ism* or *felicity-ism* would have been even more awkward (Bentham [1829] 1983).

He also insisted on distinguishing between well-being and ill-being:

[The] difference may, if it be on the pleasure side of the account, be termed the net amount of his well-being—or, more shortly, his clear well-being—or simply his well-being; if on the side of pain, net amount of his ill-being—or his net ill-being—or simply his ill-being. (Bentham [1834] 1983, 1.3)¹³

Bentham's emphasis on ill-being is very important in the context of destitution. Notice how he starts from the pains immediately associated with the physical body—cold, hunger, pain, disease. Indeed, the human body (often in its detailed workings, viz., the alimentary canal) is central to the pleasure/pain calculus. Utility may be in the mind, but Bentham knows very well that its causes are often bodily. Reduce the privations of the body, and you reduce unhappiness and increase well-being.

The well-being/ill-being distinction is a salutary one. First it is a reminder that ill-being is probably a characteristic of many people in poor countries:¹⁴ that the removal of the pains associated with ill-being is a priority in improving the “greatest happiness.” Second it is relevant to the concept of “need.” Though it is true that the “zero” score between well-being and ill-being, between pleasure and pain, has to be an arbitrary one, it is useful to think of “basic needs” levels as those below which well-being gives way to ill-being, for example nutrition or bodily warmth. Bentham's emphasis on the ill-being/well-being distinction is very close in spirit to modern work on basic needs (Doyle and Gough 1991). This will be especially relevant if the happiness function is asymmetric in that utility falls off much more rapidly below the basic needs level than it rises above it: Rosen (1999) suggests that “pain and the relief of it counted for far more in human happiness than the simple pursuit of pleasure.”¹⁵ The importance to respondents of “ill-being”

13. However, Bentham believed the balance would usually be positive, if only because net ill-being would induce suicide and be selected out.

Taking the whole of mankind together, on which side of the account does the balance lie, on the well-being or ill-being side? If religion were out of the question, the answer would require scarce a moment's thought; on the side of well-being beyond dispute; of well-being existence itself is a conclusive proof. So small is the quantity of pain necessarily accompanying the termination of existence. (Bentham [1834] 1983, 130-31)

14. A point emphasized to me by some of my colleagues carrying out research in the field, particularly in Ethiopia.

15. Rarely, subsistence levels are included in the economist's utility function, so that no positive satisfaction is possible unless these levels are met. More generally, if the utility function is asymmetric at the basic needs level, a transfer of \$1 to the very poor will increase well-being far more than a similar transfer to the nearly poor.

should be picked up automatically if injunction (a) is being followed but may be missed if, for example, a tightly structured questionnaire is being administered on a tick-box basis.

(d) Define the domain of the polity

“The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it” (Bentham [1817] 1983, ch. 1).

Though his principle was devised as a universal one, Bentham was, in practice, overwhelmingly concerned with legislation and institutions (schools, prisons, and parliaments) at the level of the “state.” As Williams recognizes, “[T]he fathers of utilitarianism thought of it principally as a system of social and political decision, as offering a criterion and basis of judgement for legislators and administrators” (Smart and Williams 1963, 135). Bentham may therefore be said to be “parochial” in the sense that it is always the interests of the governed that are relevant (Lyons 1991). He intended that his “greatest happiness” principle could be applied at various levels—individual, community, state, or the whole human race—but it is crucial that the principle always applies to those “whose interest is in question,” that the boundaries are specified. This is not a trivial point. The domain of utilitarianism is the domain of the people for whom policy is being made.¹⁶ Within the polity, be it large or small, the test of action is whether or not it improves the total happiness of the governed. This question of the proper domain of utilitarianism is particularly relevant when the policy of one country (a donor) is purportedly constructed so as to improve the well-being of those in another country. Is the domain the whole population of the recipient country, its poor, its government, donor agencies, donors, or the whole global population? Bentham was a great constitution maker, and the logic of his position is that the domain of the polity is determined by the domain of the constitution. Political society has not, he argued (Bentham [1823] 1970, 437), been established the world over (as it should have been if it followed naturally from a state of nature!), so, following his logic, the domain of the policy maker has to be constrained by the domain

16. Though people within the polity may have benevolent (or malevolent) feelings towards “outsiders” and, in logic, these should be taken into account. Outsiders should be taken into account in so far as those in the polity felt benevolent or malevolent towards them: Bentham certainly did not intend it to apply beyond the human to other species (cf. Singer 2006).

of the legislature and of free debate. As a philosophy, utilitarianism should know no boundaries: as a recipe for policy makers, its domain has to be restricted.

(e) Remember that liberty is a necessary condition for the greatest happiness

Liberty has a special place in Bentham's system. He saw policy making as open and endogenous within a representative democracy with liberty as its cornerstone (Long 1977). His treatment is rather complex. Certainly, liberty features in his "Table of the Springs of Action" (Bentham [1817] 1983), but the love of liberty and of justice are there cited as examples of compound rather than simple pleasures: liberty is desired not for its own sake but for the "power" and "ease"¹⁷ it might bring. Bentham sees the provision of the security which enables people to enjoy their pleasures as an aspect of liberty: the state itself is an arrangement whereby they give up some of their liberty in exchange for security, because excessive liberty ends in anarchy. So people derive pleasure from liberty either directly or indirectly, but at this level of analysis it must always be possible to "trade off" the pleasures derived from liberty against other pleasures. On this interpretation, liberty cannot be special. In what sense, therefore, may it be said to be a "cornerstone"? Though Bentham did not see liberty as a "priority" (in the manner of Rawls), he did see it as a precondition for the greatest happiness principle to function as a basis for legislation. As a tireless campaigner for liberty of the press, he argued powerfully for the "liberty of public association"¹⁸ and even for "the security with which malcontents may communicate their sentiments, conceal their plans, and practise every mode of opposition short of actual revolt, before the executive power can be legally justified in disturbing them" (Bentham [1823] 1970, 485).

Bentham claimed (in an era without large-scale questionnaires!) that the process of policy making itself could not work without open discussion, as in this exchange:

[H]ad the debate [on government corruption] been . . . instituted on the footing of utility, the parties might at length have come to an agreement; or least

17. James (1973), in reviewing Long, sees Bentham's view as close to the positive definition of liberty, i.e., the ability to do what one wants to do.

18. That liberty had some sort of priority is indicated by Bentham's view that, though religious belief could be an obstacle to utilitarian analysis, he did not want to abolish it as he favoured freedom of religious expression (Schofield 1999).

to visible and explicit issue.—‘I say, that the mischiefs of the measure in question are to such an amount.—I say, not so, but to a less.—I say, benefits of it are only to such an amount.—I say not so, but to a greater.’ (Bentham [1823] 1970, 493)

Liberty was, indeed, the cornerstone of Bentham’s system. It was a *sine qua non* for utilitarianism to operate as a policy-making framework. In modern development parlance, policy is best formed in an open democratic framework with minimum corruption: or, in short, “good governance.”¹⁹

(f) Beware of the ipsedixitists

Bentham insisted that people’s own preferences²⁰ or happiness functions were the only ones that should count. Since the only criterion was happiness, it was impossible to say that some activities were better or more important than others (notoriously, “Pushpin is as good as poetry”). Bentham contrasted this view with that of the “ipsedixitists” who wished to impose more elevated preferences based upon self-evident rights. In particular he attacked the concept of the highest good (the *summum bonum*) based on deontological principles. Rights, supposed to have been established in an historical “original contract,” could only be a fiction as government does not follow naturally from a state of nature.

The ipsedixitist, according to Bentham, does not believe in the general happiness principle but instead pursues sentiment, “duty,” “justice,” or some such goal of his own. Unlike utilitarians, such people have no rational basis for making policy: “in a contest between two hot-blooded

19. Without good governance (or Bentham’s institutional liberty), individuals might have “well-being freedom” without having what Sen (1992) calls “agency-freedom.” Some of Bentham’s sources of pleasure or pain certainly imply some “agency,” for example,

Pleasures and pains of amity, derivable from goodwill, from free services: good opinion, good offices, help, aid, assistance, support, co-operation, vote.

Pleasures and pains of good or bad repute. Desire for goodwill. Fear of shame, disrepute, dishonour, disgrace.

Thus in Bentham’s system there would no difficulty in distinguishing the two cases put by Sen (1985a, 219) where A pushes B into the river and B is, or is not, drowned. Unless A is heartless, he will surely suffer Bentham’s “[f]ear of shame, disrepute, dishonour, [and] disgrace.”

20. Strictly these have to be “primitives” or crude, unlauded desires. But the happiness from a pleasure depended partly on its expected duration, so people’s desires could be informed, prudential desires. And they could be changed by education. However, when the chips were down, the primitives had to count.

[ipsedixitists] darkness dashed with coruscations is the result. Each rum-mages poetry and rhetoric for *strong things*. Victory is his who has let fly the stronger” (Bentham [1817] 1983, 35).

The strong implication of Bentham’s view is that individual preferences, like them or not, have to be taken neat:²¹ anything goes. The downside of this is that we may have to accept preferences that we do not very much like (say, for Coca-Cola rather than clean drinking water). There is no room for prudential preferences unless people actually have them. Nussbaum’s list is much more prescribed and organised than Bentham’s in that specific functionings are associated with virtuous action in a specific sphere, the virtues being courage, moderation, justice, generosity, expansive hospitality, greatness of soul, mildness of temper, truthfulness, easy grace, a kind of friendliness, proper judgement, the various intellectual virtues, and practical wisdom (Nussbaum and Sen 1993, 246). Human goodness (and well-being) consists in functioning in everyday life in ways consistent with the virtues. One can imagine Bentham wanting to preface each of these with *the pleasures of . . .* so as to subsume them within his happiness function. Failing that, Bentham would have to charge Nussbaum with ipsedixitism. Outsiders, he might say, should not impose their own preferences, whether they be nongovernmental organizations, the World Bank, or even distinguished academics.

(g) Concern yourselves with destitution but not necessarily with inequality

How does the relief of poverty or the reduction of inequality affect well-being? Bentham’s idiosyncratic definition of poverty is not helpful here as he classified the population (for this purpose) only into those who were destitute, those who lived by their labour, and those who did not need to work. All of those who had to live by their labour were defined by him as being in poverty. Bentham had no difficulty with the notion that one should provide help for the destitute (provided it was done economically). Their pain could be reduced with little, or even no, loss of aggregate pleasure. On the other hand, he was strongly against poverty reduction (on his definition): a fortiori, he would be against reductions in inequality. This might be thought to sit oddly with diminishing marginal utility which Bentham understood, albeit in a nontechnical fashion. He recognized that in principle, aggregate utility could be increased by transferring income from rich to poor:

21. *Neat* is used here to mean unmixed, undiluted, and undiminished (*Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*), as when whisky is taken “neat.”

Particles of wealth at the disposition of the legislator, say 10,000;—happiness of the most wealthy to that of the least wealthy, say . . . as 2 to 1; by giving to each one of 10,000 a particle of wealth, the legislator will produce 5,000 times the happiness he would produce giving the 10,000 particles to one person. (Quoted in Goldworth 1979, 8-9)²²

However, the qualification “at the disposition of the legislator” here is an important one, for Bentham believed that if substantial redistribution was attempted there would be strong “third-order” effects on labour supply, the “extinction” of labour²³ more than offsetting any gain in happiness due to inequality reduction.

Quite apart from this somewhat extreme view of the elasticity of effort with respect to tax, the stances taken by Bentham and by “modern” writers on inequality strikingly capture a fundamental difference in outlook. In Bentham’s system a reduction in inequality would only increase happiness if a substantial number of the non-poor had strong other-regarding sympathies.²⁴ If people had little or no aversion to inequality, *perceived* (and indeed measured; see Sen 1973) inequality would in effect be near zero. Bentham would have argued that to impose a policy of redistribution in such a society would be the act of an ipsedixitist.²⁵

(h) Count each for one and none for more than one

That each should count for one and none for more than one is the most famous and the most problematic of Bentham’s injunctions (though the phraseology is John Stuart Mill’s). In the calculus of happiness, no person (particularly a monarch or an aristocrat) should be given greater importance than another. Bentham was quite unambivalent about this: “each to count for one” was not merely a slogan: “The happiness of the worst man of the species forms as large a part of the happiness of the whole species as that of the best man” (Bentham [1834] 1983, 278).

22. Bentham’s numerical example assumed strongly diminishing marginal utility. If the richest was ten times as rich as the poorest, Bentham’s was a \log_{10} utility function.

23. This strong statement, which occurs in *The Philosophy of Economic Science* (Stark 1952), is essentially a version of the wages fund doctrine. Bentham goes on to state that equality requires the wages fund to be maximized.

24. There would then be the possibility of Pareto-optimal redistribution (Collard 1978, ch. 11).

25. Postema (1998), however, argues strongly that Bentham’s utilitarianism was equality sensitive: maybe, but it was even more incentive sensitive!

And the principle has to hold for women²⁶ as well as men:

On the grounds of the greatest happiness principle, the claim of this sex is . . . at least . . . as good as that of the other. The happiness and interest of a person of the female sex, constitutes as large a proportion of the universal happiness or interest, as does that of a person of the male sex. (Bentham [1830] 1983, Bowring ix 108)

Bentham himself came to recognise that when the size of the polity is given,²⁷ the greatest happiness of the greatest number is equivalent simply to the greatest happiness, *provided that all those whose interests are in question are included*. The “greatest number” is then simply a red herring.²⁸ This meant that questions of population size were definitely off Bentham’s legislative agenda²⁹ and should be left to individuals.

II. Bentham’s Quantitative Advice

It is important to remember that Bentham, comparing himself with Bacon, thought of his research program as “scientific” since it was based on observation.

For success, the utilitarian depends on correctness, especially on the estimate of pleasure or pain resulting from every action. . . . It is in his interest that correctness should be generally applied to every subject and that logical operations should be reached to perfection. (Bentham [1817] 1983, 51)

Suppose that some piece of legislation or act of policy is being considered. Bentham’s advice to the legislator was to

26. Ball (1973) argues that Bentham was not a feminist as he was prepared to allow husbands to represent their wives’ views. Though a philosophical radical in principle, he was, of course, a creature of his time in practice.

27. For Bentham’s purposes, population (of those whose interests are in question) has to be taken as given, since the polity is a construction based upon their consent, as discussed below.

28. The reason for the italicized condition is that it might be possible to maximize total happiness by excluding some of those “whose interest is in question.” Bentham (on the principle that each should count for one) strictly insisted this should never be done. In my own view, this is the most fruitful way of interpreting the “greatest number” part of the utilitarian slogan, rather than trying to have it make a statement about population size.

29. Which would have enabled Bentham to sidestep Parfitt’s “repugnant conclusion” that utility could be maximized by having a large population at near subsistence level.

- (i) measure the effects of the policy on subjective³⁰ individual happiness.³¹
- (j) sum these effects across all relevant individuals, counting each individual equally.
- (k) legislate (or adopt the policy) if the net increase in happiness is positive.

There are well-known problems with these utilitarian injunctions, both philosophical and technical. Thus Sen (1985b, 1987)³² has identified for criticism *welfarism*, *sum ranking*, and *consequentialism*. Welfarism requires “that the goodness of a state of affairs be a function only of the utility information regarding that state”: it leaves out important other factors, notably agency, that might also affect well-being (Sen 1987, 39). Sum ranking requires “that utility information regarding any state be assessed by looking only at the sum-total of all the utilities in that state”: the distribution of well-being is therefore ignored (39). Consequentialism requires “that every choice . . . be ultimately determined by the goodness of the consequent state of affairs” (39).³³ On welfarism, Bentham (as we have already noticed) allowed a vast range of information to be considered, but it does, indeed, have to be filtered through the well-being function. On sum-ranking, Bentham allows the distribution of utilities to be admitted only in so far as it enters into individual well-being functions (i.e., it matters only if people think it matters). On consequentialism, Bentham would have been delighted to have accepted the criticism as it was absolutely central to his position.

We now consider the relevance of Bentham’s injunctions across a range of modern approaches, in terms of increasing distance from his own: from

30. It was important to Bentham that the measure must be subjective. It is arguable that one could devise objective measures of well-being, as in Kahneman’s research program (Kahneman 1999).

31. Some writers (e.g., Bonner 1995) have interpreted the richness of Bentham’s list as implying a multidimensional measure of utility. Thus, “the utility of each person is a function of a wide range of economic, political and social factors. The simplifications of the narrow economic sphere are left behind. The nature of the magnitude that predominates is multidimensional” (Bonner 1995, 35). Warke (2000) has gone further. He chooses to see Bentham’s rich description of the various sources of utility as a description of vectors and argues that to add these Bentham would have to weight them equally. Since he clearly does not do so, adding them can be no part of Bentham’s intention. It is difficult to accept this highly revisionist interpretation.

32. There is no mention of Bentham in Nussbaum and Sen (1993), and the references in Sen ([1980] 1982, 1985b) are perfunctory. However, there is a useful brief discussion of Bentham on rights in Sen (1987, 48).

33. Sen (2000) has more recently moderated this last criticism. He objects to consequentialism but not now to “consequential evaluation,” which should, of course, be done.

an explicitly utilitarian and hedonic emphasis (Layard 2003), through eclectic approaches to measuring happiness (see Frey and Stutzer 2002 for a survey), to anti-utilitarian and eudaemonic approaches (Sen 1987, *pass.*). Consider Bentham's method, the economists' method, the neo-Benthamite method, and the capabilities method.

Bentham

Suppose there is some legislative or policy change. It impacts upon elements in Bentham's long list of "primitives" (see appendix, tables 1 and 2) which include basic activities from eating, being warm, and having sex, through health to one's esteem and position in society. Such pleasures may be selfish, unselfish, or malevolent. The important thing is that they are the individual's own pleasures or pains, not those of anyone else. Nothing but utility information needs to be known: autonomy, equality, discrimination, etc., are relevant only in so far as they affect utility. To take anything else into account is, for Bentham, to be an "ipsedixitist."³⁴ Famously, pleasures are greater or less according to their intensity, duration, certainty, and propinquity (also fecundity and purity). These pleasures (and pains) constitute individual utility (which can in principle be measured in cardinal units), and the individual utilities added up. If total happiness (utility) is expected to increase, there is a presumption that the policy change should be carried through, unless an alternative policy would increase utility even more. Bentham did not actually do any of these calculations, of course. He did not have a technique for attempting to do so and in any case was much too busy with his prodigious writing and his pursuit of numerous projects. The obvious problems with Bentham's injunction are first that we cannot know the cardinal utilities of individuals (unless, as it were, they wear subjective utility meters on their faces), and second that to add such indices is, in any case, an arbitrary procedure since different individuals will use different scales with different gradations.

We have already noted that if we were able to measure people's hedonic states directly (as Bentham implied), there would apparently be no need to bother about the list of primitives. This would be true if one was not concerned with policy making: but the legislator needs to know, before implementing policy, how changes would impact upon utility if carried through. It is therefore important to know the happiness function, not just the happiness index.³⁵

34. The same would apply to Sen's related point that well-being is not the only thing that is valuable.

35. I am grateful to a referee for comments that have led me to clarify this point.

Figure 1 Bentham’s Method

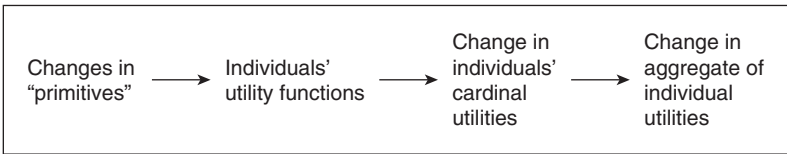
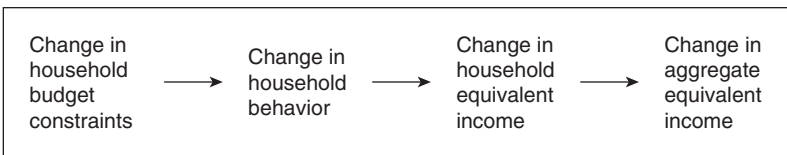


Figure 2 An Economist’s Method



Economist

For the economist a change does not impact upon the “primitives” directly but upon budget constraints: changes in these affect the choice of consumption and leisure under utility maximisation, which may be expressed in equivalent income terms and added over individuals. If equivalent income rises, the policy should be adopted (though the question of compensating the losers remains an issue). By implication the outcomes for different people are weighted by the inverse of the marginal utility of income.³⁶

Twentieth-century economics found that it had no need of a cardinal measure of utility³⁷ (except in a technical sense when dealing with uncertainty). It was sufficient to *order* bundles of goods and services in terms of preference, so there was no point in carrying out the difficult and unrewarding task of devising a cardinal scale. All the economist needs to

36. So if, as commonly assumed, marginal utility falls with income, the weights rise with income.

37. On the question of measurement, Bentham had noticed that where a person was indifferent between carrying out or not carrying out a transaction involving money, the value of the non-monetary component could be measured by the relevant amount of money. Bentham seemed to use totals, not margins, here, but his method is very suggestive of Marshall’s (“Archive,” UC xxvii; Stark 1952).

predict is the impact of the proposed change in budget constraints on actual choices: he has no need to unpack the black box of desire. Thus economists were able to obtain a cardinal measure of outcome (based on money) without resorting to Bentham's notion of cardinal individual utilities.³⁸ Their notion of welfare is extraordinarily "thin," however, compared with Bentham's rich list of primitives.

Neo-Benthamite

To a degree, recent approaches to measuring individual happiness follow in Bentham's footsteps as economists and other social scientists are now increasingly attempting to attach scores to happiness or unhappiness.³⁹ Much of this research concentrates on what Bentham would have called "ill-being" (brought about by unemployment, divorce, or other major "life events"). As in Bentham, a policy change impacts on a long list of primitives and affects indices of subjective well-being for individuals or households. These indices are essentially ordinal: measured on a scale from zero to 10, a score of 6 rather than 3 emphatically does not mean twice the amount of well-being. But it is possible to turn such an ordinal scale into an arbitrary cardinal measure by means of a simple trick. If all people reporting high scores (from, say, 7 to 10) are defined as being *satisfied*, statistical techniques may sometimes be used to calculate the *probability* of being satisfied given various "primitives." The probabilistic effect of any policy change on representative well-being may then be calculated for individuals or households with specified characteristics:⁴⁰ for example, the effect of unemployment on the probability that heads of poor households will feel satisfied. A difficulty is that the bald indices are not standardized across individuals or households (for example, some people may habitually

38. It is worth noticing that Bentham was aware of this possibility. He suggested (Stark 1952) that where an individual was indifferent between carrying out and not carrying out a monetary transaction, the gain or loss could be valued as the money value itself.

39. Clark and Oswald (1994) used a cardinal scale for unhappiness in the United Kingdom (including inability to sleep, poor self-worth, and so on) and related it to unemployment. Winkleman and Winkleman (1998) used panel data from Germany to build an index of unhappiness and again to investigate the impact of unemployment. Much of this growing literature is extensively surveyed in Frey and Stutzer (2002); see also Easterlin (2002).

40. It is possible to go further than this, as Bentham himself recognized, and calculate the money equivalent of the subjective valuation of any change. An interesting recent application which combines the economic and neo-Benthamite methods is to be found in the measurement of the money value of the noise nuisance generated by a major international airport (van Praag and Baarsma 2005).

report high scores, and others low scores, in situations that seem to the outside observer not to be significantly different).

Bentham had some quite interesting things to say about this aspect of measurement. He recognised that both happiness and happiness functions vary across individuals, distinguishing, in the neglected chapter 6 of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Bentham [1780] 1970), between the causes of pleasure and pain (as outlined in the lists above) and the *circumstances affecting sensibility*. The direct causes of pleasure and pain, the *exciting* causes, are, as it were, filtered by sensibility. Bentham, ever exhaustive, cites 32 such circumstances.⁴¹ Many of them are what we would now expect to see in a list of “household characteristics” as variables in an ordered probit or logit statistical analysis:⁴² for example, religion, political attitude (“radical frame of mind”), sex, age, rank, education, and lineage (social class). Ideally the policy maker, in devising rewards and punishments, would want some measure of these different circumstances. Sometimes this is possible:

This is the case . . . with the primary circumstances of bodily imperfection, and insanity: with the secondary circumstance of sex: perhaps with that of age: at any rate with those of rank, of climate, of lineage, and of religious profession. (Bentham [1780] 1970, ch. 6, xlv)⁴³

Sometimes it is not. Throughout the discussion Bentham’s desire to measure and his willingness to admit proxies are obvious. For example, health

41. The complete list of such circumstances is health, strength, hardiness, bodily imperfection, quantity and quality of knowledge, strength of intellectual powers, firmness of mind, steadiness of mind, bent of inclination, moral sensibility, moral biases, religious sensibility, religious biases, sympathetic sensibility, sympathetic biases, antipathetic sensibility, antipathetic biases, insanity, habitual occupations, pecuniary circumstances, connexions [*sic*] in the way of sympathy, connections in the way of antipathy, radical frame of body, radical frame of mind, sex, age, rank, education, climate, lineage, government, and religious profession.

42. These methods are appropriate when the “right-hand” and/or the “left-hand” variables are of a zero-one type (for example, zero for being employed and one for being unemployed). If the left-hand variable is zero-one, it indicates the probability of the relevant state.

43. Bentham explicitly discusses “bodily imperfection” as a factor affecting sensibility:

By bodily imperfection may be understood that condition which a person is in, who either stands distinguished by any remarkable deformity, or wants any parts or faculties, which the ordinary run of persons of the same sex and age are furnished with: who, for instance, has a hare lip, is deaf, or has lost a hand. This circumstance, like that of ill-health, tends in general to diminish more or less the effect of any pleasurable circumstance, and to increase that of any afflictive one. (Bentham [1780] 1970, 55; my italics)

and strength may be measured by the weight a man can lift. Bentham, one feels, would have loved to have been able to get his hands on the data sets and computers available to modern researchers!

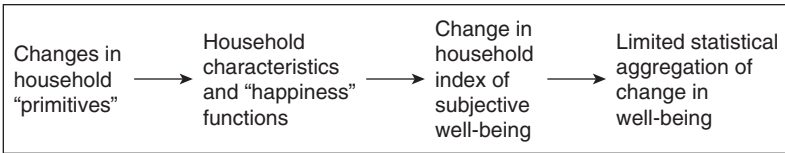
The subject is so difficult, and so new, that I think I shall have not ill succeeded, if, without pretending to exhaust it, I shall have been able to mark out the principal points of view, and to put the matter in such a method as may facilitate the researches of happier enquirers. (Bentham [1780] 1970, 53)

The main difference between Bentham and neo-Benthamite researchers on “happiness” is that modern researchers embrace large data sets and use modern statistical techniques. But, crucially and like Bentham, they *do* attempt to derive indices of subjective well-being (or utility or happiness) as functions of a list of primitives. One of the most interesting aspects of this research is that the correlation between income and happiness indices is much weaker than economists had expected.

It is estimated that for a person moving from the fourth to the fifth decile in the distribution of family income, subjective well-being rises by 0.11 (on a ten-point scale with 1 indicating the lowest and, and 10.0 the highest level of satisfaction). In contrast, moving from the ninth to the tenth decile increases subjective well-being by only 0.02. . . . Differences in income explain only a low proportion of the differences in happiness among persons. (Frey and Stutzer 2002, 409)

Bentham would surely not have been at all surprised by this: other than income there are many sources of pleasure and pain, and, as for income itself, his own hypothesis of strongly diminishing marginal utility seems to hold.

Bentham accepted, reluctantly, that some subjective factors, like strength of intellectual powers, hardiness, steadfastness, and moral or religious sensibility, could not be measured “*except in so far as a man’s sensibilities . . . may be indicated by the secondary circumstances of sex, age or rank*” (Bentham [1780] 1970, 59). Winkleman and Winkleman (1998) have made some inroads into this territory by attempting to measure what they call “individual specific fixed effects.” Essentially these are the effects of differing individual scale gradations referred to above and are similar to Bentham’s “sensibilities.” Respondents were asked the highly general subjective question “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?” on an index from zero to 10. The researchers then measured “an idiosyncratic fixed effect which accounts for inter-individual differences in scaling and anchoring of the responses, intrinsic differences in satisfaction and unobserved explanatory variables” (Winkleman and Winkleman 1998, 8). Significant impacts on satisfaction were confirmed for variables such

Figure 3 A Neo-Benthamite Assessment

as unemployment, even allowing for fixed effects. More recently, Clark et al. (2005) have discovered that such effects are significantly different not just on average but also at the margin. Thus the marginal effect of income changes upon well-being varies in systematic ways across different household types. The calculation of average and marginal “fixed effects” is an attempt to allow for such scaling differences between types of household.

Such work deflects the criticism of utilitarianism that it overstates the welfare of people who are “poor but happy.” If everyone’s satisfaction (rich and poor, married or single, optimist or pessimist) is measured on a common scale (say, zero to 10), the adjusted indices go some way to meet Bentham’s injunction that all people should be counted equally. Bentham’s each-for-one is consistent with a neo-Benthamite each-for-one only if a common scale is used and fixed effects can be allowed for satisfactorily. It is far from clear that this is yet the case. At the extreme, if individual utility scales could be “cleaned” for differences in sensibility and in household characteristics, then individual utility functions (though not, of course, well-beings) would essentially be identical.⁴⁴ There would be no differences left except for random variations across individuals or households.

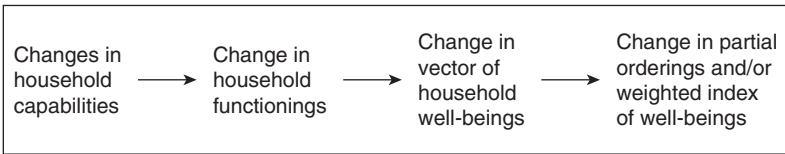
Capabilities

Here the change impacts upon the capabilities of individuals or households: this affects their functionings in specific areas of life, and limited indices of well-being may be derived. Again, measurement is key: thus, for Sen, the exercise “must take the form of valuing the functioning vectors reflecting . . . ‘doings’ and ‘beings’” (Sen 1985b, 28).⁴⁵

Aggregate indices of well-being *may* be derived but with the important proviso that the weights attached to different individuals or functionings are made explicit and can therefore be debated. Often an overall ordering of these

44. I am not arguing that this should be attempted or even that it is desirable.

45. In commenting on the difficulty of getting all the information that the utilitarian needs, Sen allows that “other moral approaches are [also] constrained by the availability of information” (Sen 1985a, 174).

Figure 4 A Capabilities Assessment

multidimensional aspects of well-being will be neither possible nor necessary. It may be sufficient for many purposes to derive a partial ordering only.⁴⁶

Both Benthamites and capabilities researchers work from lists. The lists are generated very differently, however. Bentham's is an exhaustive listing of things that cause pleasure or pain: we have already noticed that his list is extremely "rich," contrasting with the economist's rather thin list. Capabilities theorists, on the other hand, start from the notion that people are not merely utility-machines but human beings wishing to lead good lives in the communities where they live: they need the capability to carry out the functionings necessary for well-being. Relationships are at least as important as things. There is a conceptual chasm between these visions that remains deep, though perhaps less so in practice the wider and richer Bentham's list.

Three pieces of advice from Bentham seem to be relevant here. The first ([f], above) is "beware of the ipse-dixitists": take people's interests and responses as expressed, and do not impose the researchers' values upon them. The researcher is not obliged to follow Bentham's advice, particularly if respondents are thought to be short-sighted or irrational in their preferences. Many respondents are nonprudential and express a desire for things that development experts know will be bad for them. But Bentham's injunction is surely a useful starting point. It is always relevant to know what people's actual concerns are even when they do not coincide with what the researcher believes they are or ought to be (Clark 2002).

The second piece of advice—see (a) and (i), above—is to attempt a measure of the individual's overall well-being, not just some aspect of it. It is possible to learn a great deal about well-being from specific indices of physical size, consumption, housing, participation in the political process, and so on. But one may go further than this, linking indices of specific aspects of well-being to more general indices of well-being or satisfaction (see Camfield and Skevington 2002 for a review). Indeed the range of summary indicators currently used is almost overwhelming: for example, the Quality of Life index (the QoL), the World Health Organization Quality of Life

46. A substantial literature has developed around the partial ordering of functionings and/or capabilities (see, for example, Saith and Harris-White 1998).

index (the WHOQoL), the Subjective Well-Being index (the SWB), the PGI (the Person Generated index), and so on. All attempt some sort of summary (as opposed to partial) measurement of the individual's well-being. When this is done, it is usually implied, however, that ultimately a "trade-off" between the components of well-being is possible. For the neo-Benthamite, the degree of substitutability (between, say, goods and agency) is an empirical matter (if it is there, it will come out in the statistics): for the capability theorist, committed to an irreducible plurality, it is not.

Bentham's third piece of advice—see (h) and (j), above—is that one should attempt to aggregate the individual indices to obtain an overall measure of well-being for the whole of the polity. Here Bentham is on his own. There is agreement between the capability theorist and the neo-Benthamite that only partial measures are possible. Thus measures such as the Human Development Index are based upon arbitrary weightings of components such as infant mortality, adult literacy, and per capita GDP. Neo-Benthamites aggregate across individuals but recognize that measures of the effects of policy on satisfaction or well-being are specific to groups with certain characteristics. Thus a relatively objective measure of the change in subjective satisfaction may be derived for subsections of society with specified characteristics: any aggregate measure may be made only for households with "representative" characteristics.

Conclusions

Bentham's advice to the modern researcher on well-being has been divided, somewhat arbitrarily for the purpose of this paper, into the qualitative and the quantitative.

His more qualitative advice is as follows. Make sure you include, in your list of factors affecting well-being, everything to which your respondents attach importance: this is to be established by observation and by "bottom-up" information.⁴⁷ Do not neglect sheer physical bodily ill-being. Be clear as to the boundaries of the polity within which you are measuring well-being: the village, the country etc. Count everyone equally: this means everyone within the polity, including people with disabilities, youngest daughters, or whatever. Argue and debate policies and measurement in an open society in the context of "good governance."⁴⁸ Beware of the ipse Dixitists: don't allow a few people

47. For example, Clark (2003) found that people in his South African survey put the strongest emphasis on practical survival, on mental functioning, and on recreation.

48. Where there is bad governance the government cannot be expected to be maximizing the "greatest happiness;" but when outsiders supply aid directly (say, through NGOs) it is important that they try to increase the "well-being" of those affected rather than acting as what Bentham would call ipse Dixitists.

(even important people) to dictate what is to be included or excluded. These are nontrivial pieces of advice and still pertinent.

Strictly speaking, Bentham's more quantitative advice is impossible to follow. We do not have individual utility meters, and, even if we had, to add utilities across individuals would be an arbitrary procedure. However, the body of literature which I have labelled *neo-Benthamite* is Benthamite in spirit. It is quantitative, it includes or excludes items on the basis of their statistical significance, it treats substitutability as an empirical matter, and, if handled carefully it enables "scientific" statements to be made about policy. One feels that Bentham, the would-be quantitative scientific legislator, would have been reasonably happy with it.

So, on both counts, Bentham's advice is pertinent. His qualitative advice is relevant across the various approaches to the measurement of well-being considered here, while his quantitative advice has, to a degree, been incorporated into the work of modern neo-Benthamites.

Appendix

Table 1
Pleasures and Pains

Pleasures	Pains
Sense: taste or appetites, intoxication, smelling, touching, the ear, the eye, sex, health, novelty	Privation (include unsatisfied desire, disappointment, and regret)
Wealth: acquisition and possession of enjoyable articles	The senses: hunger and thirst, disagreeable tastes, smell, touch, hearing, sight, excessive heat or cold, disease and indisposition, intense exertion of body or mind
Skill (e.g., playing a musical instrument)	Awkwardness
Amity (being on good terms with others)	Enmity
Good name (repute, esteem, honour)	Ill-repute
Power (e.g., to command the services of others)	Piety or religion
Piety or religion	Malevolence or ill-will
Benevolence (goodwill, sympathy)	Memory
Malevolence	Imagination
Memory or recollection	Expectation
Imagination (contemplation)	Association
Expectation (belief in future pleasures)	
Association (e.g., from games)	
Relief of pain	

Source: Bentham ([1780] 1970, ch. 3).

Table 2
The Springs of Action

Pleasures and Pains Of:

The taste—the palate—the alimentary canal—of intoxication.
Hunger, need of food, want of food, desire of food, thirst, drought, inanition.

The sexual appetite. Sexual desire.

The senses, collectively considered. Physical want, need exigency.

Wealth. Possession, fruition, acquisition, affluence, opulence,
privation, loss, poverty, indigence.

Power, influence, dominion, governance, command, rule, sway. Ambition,
aspiringness, promotion, preferment, advancement . . . of rising in the world.

Curiosity, inquisitiveness, love of novelty, love of experiment, desire for information.

Amity, derivable from goodwill, from free services: good opinion, good offices,
help, aid, assistance, support, co-operation, vote.

Good or bad repute. Desire for goodwill. Fear of shame, disrepute, dishonour, disgrace.

The religious sanction. Religious zeal, fervour, ardour. Fear or love of God.

Sympathy. Fellow feeling, good-will, friendship. Domestically, for the political
world at large, for the world at large.

Antipathy or ill-will. Dislike, aversion, resentment.

Labour, toil, fatigue. Love of ease. Fear of toil or over exertion.

The body and death. Self-preservation, security. Love of life. Fear of pain or death.

Source: Bentham ([1817] 1983, ch. 1).

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