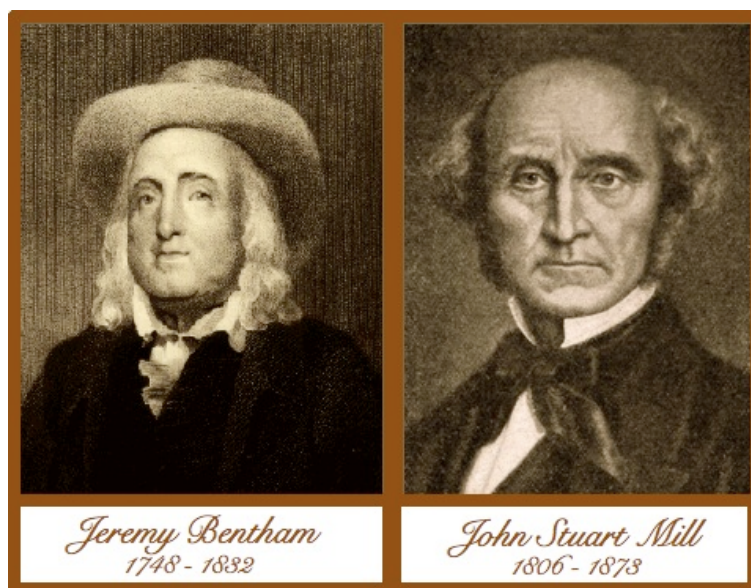


Utilitarianism – introduction



Jeremy Bentham
1748 - 1832

John Stuart Mill
1806 - 1873

In this course you will be studying classical utilitarianism. There are three main thinkers associated with classical utilitarianism – [Bentham](#), [Mill](#) and Sedgwick. You will learn about the first two of these. You will also learn about some later twentieth century developments when utilitarians distinguished between something that came to be called [act utilitarianism](#) and a slightly different approach called [rule utilitarianism](#).

Studying utilitarianism is different to studying Kantian ethics. With Kantian ethics you are learning about the views of one thinker albeit a very influential thinker; with utilitarianism there are lots of different thinkers and their views vary. Utilitarianism is still a popular ethical theory but its modern variant is often very different to that of Bentham and Mill. As you will find out, even Bentham and Mill didn't have exactly the same approach.

One way in which utilitarians differ among themselves is on whether happiness/pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good. This was the view of both Bentham and Mill but whereas Bentham focussed on [quantity](#), Mill said it was also important to consider the [quality](#) of the pleasure. Later utilitarians said things other than happiness were also independently important. This approach is sometimes called 'objective list utilitarianism' or 'ideal utilitarianism'. Probably the most popular approach today is to scrap the idea of any kind of list and just say it is about satisfying preferences.

The classical utilitarians thought it was important to maximise happiness but many utilitarians today will consider the distribution of happiness just as important.

In some ways it is best to think of utilitarianism as a general approach rather than a single theory. Sometimes people might prefer to call themselves 'consequentialists' and keep the word 'utilitarian' to refer to the classical utilitarians; others might refer to themselves as utilitarians simply because they are consequentialists.

There are two things to remember. Firstly, don't panic! It can get confusing but you are not expected to know everything. You are expected to know and understand some key teachings of Bentham and Mill and act and rule utilitarianism. But more importantly, it is important to remember that when we consider some criticisms of utilitarianism there is a very good chance they will be criticisms that many utilitarians will agree with. A criticism of utilitarianism might not be a good reason for rejecting utilitarianism. It might be a reason for adapting the theory and finding a better form of utilitarianism.