

The Greatest Good...

'The greatest happiness of the greatest number' or 'the greatest good for the greatest number' is one of the most famous slogans in all philosophy. The problem is that it doesn't accurately represent classical utilitarianism and was ultimately rejected by Bentham because it was misleading.

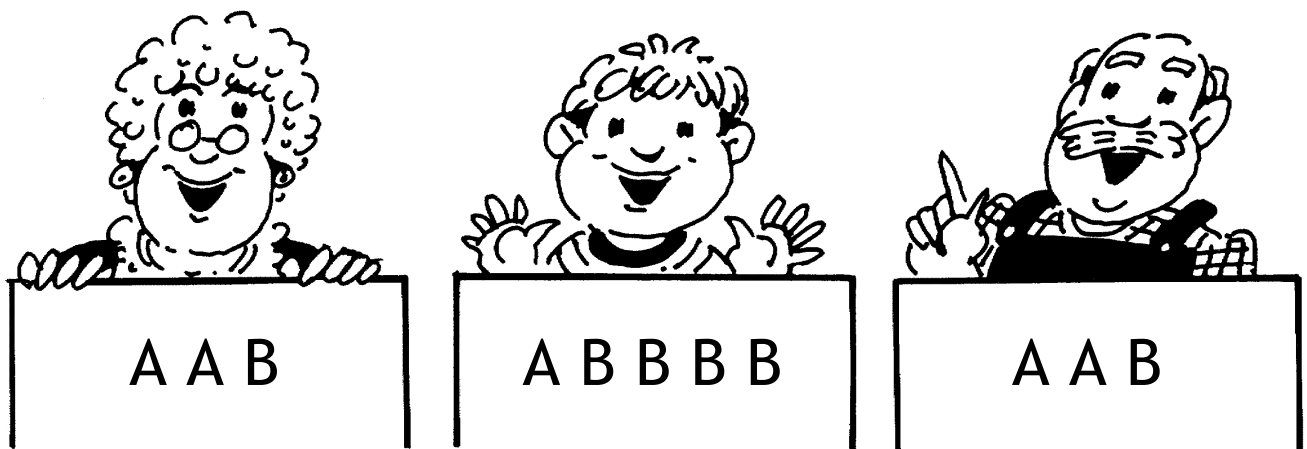
In an early work (*A Fragment on Government*, 1776) Bentham says, 'it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong' and he described this as a 'fundamental axiom'. However, the phrase then disappears from his writings. There is some academic debate as to why this is but it seems that Bentham was trying to formulate his fundamental axiom in a way that wouldn't cause problems.

In 1829 he wrote,

Greatest happiness of *the greatest number*. Some years have now elapsed since upon a closer scrutiny, reason, altogether incontestable was found for discarding this appendage.

Bentham rejected the wording because it might be thought to give licence to the majority to increase their happiness to the detriment of the minority. He gives as possible examples the Catholic minority in Great Britain and the Protestant minority in Ireland. The wording also leads to a conflict with the principle of maximising happiness.

The problem can be explained like this. Imagine there are three people and two possible courses of action, A & B. The amount of happiness that each course of action would produce is indicated by the number of As and Bs.



The greatest happiness for persons ONE and THREE is achieved by following the A course of action. The greatest happiness for person TWO is achieved by following the B course of action. So, the greatest happiness for the greatest number is achieved by following the A course of action. However, happiness is maximised by following the B course of action.

It is important to remember that Bentham was in favour of maximising happiness which isn't always going to be the same as making the majority happy.



What do you think Bentham would say if you had a society of 4001 people where 2001 successfully enslaved the other 2000?