

## Two Foundations for Early Utilitarianism: Bentham and Paley

Henry R. West

*Professor of Philosophy at Macalester College*

Jeremy Bentham and William Paley, the two most prominent utilitarians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were near contemporaries. Paley was born in 1743, and his *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* was published in 1785. Bentham was born in 1748, and his *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* was printed in 1780 and published in 1789. (Bentham's publisher exhorted him in 1786 to publish his work without waiting, fearing that he would be charged with stealing from Paley.) There are similarities between the two systems. They both held a theory that happiness is the foundation for morals, and they both claim that happiness is to be calculated from pleasures and pains. As is well known to this audience, Bentham viewed happiness to consist of net pleasure (and unhappiness of net pain), with the dimensions of pleasure or pain intensity and duration. Paley also made that claim. "[P]leasures differ in nothing but continuance and intensity, from a just computation of which ... every question concerning human happiness must receive its decision."

In spite of these similarities, Bentham and Paley based their utilitarian theories on two quite distinct foundations. For Bentham the hedonistic value theory of pleasure as the only positive value and pain as the only negative value in life was the ultimate foundation on which he constructed his critique of law and morality. For Paley, however, there is a more ultimate foundation for his theory: the belief that God exists, and the goal of morality is obey the will of God. He argues that God is benevolent and wills the greatest happiness. Therefore "the method of coming at the will of God, concerning any action by the light of nature, is to inquire into the tendency of that action to promote or diminish the general happiness."

It is worth examining the differences in the ways that Paley and Bentham work out the details of their systems. Paley's religious foundation colors his analysis of pleasure and pain, of the role of rules in morality, and of the individual virtues. Also, extremely important, the theological foundation of Paley's system gives him a more authoritative source of motivation than Bentham's system. For Bentham, there is a religious motive, but it is contingent upon belief in "a superior invisible being," and Bentham regards it as weak in comparison with other sanctions. For Paley, "everlasting happiness" in life after death is the motive of human virtue.