

# Thinking Around the Box: The Work of the Bentham Project

*Members of the Bentham Project at University College London describe their work to promote the study of a profoundly influential political thinker.*

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the philosopher and reformer (Figure 1), believed that the proper purpose of all human action was to promote utility – in other words, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. His so-called ‘felicific calculus’ is the inspiration for cost-benefit analysis which dominates the contemporary discipline of economics. In politics, he produced in 1789 the earliest utilitarian defence of political equality (advocating women’s suffrage before the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), and his work on Political Tactics was the first systematic treatise on the organisation of a political assembly. Bentham was never afraid to follow his ideas to what he regarded as their logical conclusion. In this, he is an inspiration to all who value the unimpeded pursuit of knowledge.

## *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*

The principal aim of the Bentham Project, part of the Faculty of Laws at University College London (UCL), is to prepare for publication the new, authoritative edition of *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham* (Figure 2), superseding the woefully inadequate edition published between 1838 and 1843 by John Bowring, Bentham’s literary executor. The *Collected Works* volumes, published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, are based on works published in Bentham’s lifetime, on 60,000 original manuscripts kept in UCL Library, and on a further 12,500 manuscripts in the British Library. The volumes are fully annotated, and contain an editorial introduction, and comprehensive subject and name indexes. The new Bentham edition is read by scholars across a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, law, economics, politics, and history.

In addition to Bentham’s works, the *Collected Works* includes all correspondence sent and received by Bentham. Twelve volumes of correspondence have so far been published.

## Recent and forthcoming volumes

Recently published volumes in the edition have included Bentham’s writings on codification, education and the law; political tactics; the poor laws; and rights, representation, and reform at the time of the French Revolution; and the penultimate volume of correspondence.

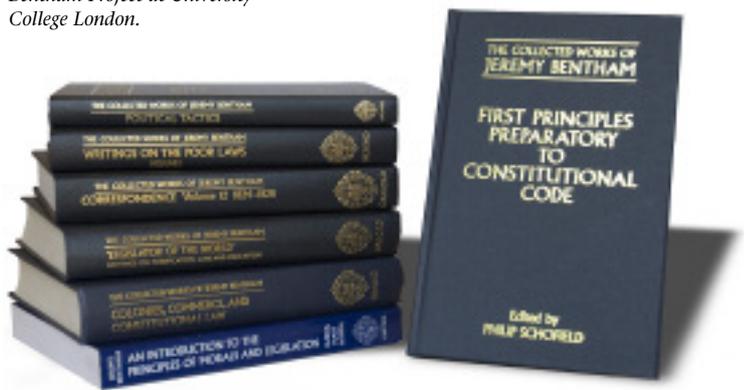
The next two years or so should see the publication of the second volume of writings on the poor laws; a volume on jurisprudence; and a work on political fallacies, by which Bentham meant the art of misleading rhetoric as practised in political debate.

Other forthcoming volumes include a work on the reform of the Church of England, which shows the correlation between Bentham’s views on organised religion and his political views, and for the publication of which in 1818 he risked prosecution for blasphemy; and a volume of writings on Spanish affairs in the turbulent period of the ‘liberal triennium’ of 1820–23, containing Bentham’s critique of a draft penal code, his comments on current legislation curtailing freedom of the press and public political meetings in Spain (see extract), and expressing his opposition to the introduction of an upper house in the Spanish parliament.



Figure 1. *Engraving of Jeremy Bentham, 1823, by James Thomson (1788–1850) after William Derby (1786–1847).*

Figure 2. *A new, authoritative edition of The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham is being produced by the Bentham Project at University College London.*



*These are the opening paragraphs of the first of a series of four Letters to the Spanish People, with the overall title 'On the Liberty of the Press, and Public Discussion'.*

*Bentham was prompted to write the Letters by proposed new legislation in Spain (brought in by the Cortes of the 'liberal triennium' 1820–3), which curbed press freedom, and the right of the public to assemble for the purpose of political debate. The Letters were written and sent in manuscript to Spain in autumn 1820; they were published in England in 1821.*

### SPANIARDS!

THE Madrid intelligence of the prosecution of a Newspaper Editor, for comments on the Madrid system of police, and of the introduction of the proposed law against political meetings, has just reached me. I am astounded! What? Is it come to this? So soon come to this? The men being men, of their disposition to do this, and more, there could not be any room for doubt. But, that this disposition should so soon ripen into act, this (I must confess) is more than I anticipated. Neither of the issue of the prosecution, nor of the fate of the proposed law, has the intelligence yet reached me. But, that any such prosecution should have been instituted – any such proposed law introduced – that the impatience of contradiction, not to say the thirst for arbitrary power, should so soon have ventured thus far; these, in my view, are of themselves, highly alarming symptoms.

By the prosecution, if successful, unless the alledged offence have features in it, such as I do not expect to find in it, I see the liberty of the press destroyed. By the proposed law, if established, I see the almost only remaining check to arbitrary power destroyed.

Taken together, they form a connected system – these two measures. By the authors of this system, you have, of course, been told, that it is indispensably necessary; necessary to order, to GOOD order, to tranquillity: and, perhaps, honorable gentlemen may have ventured so far into the region of particulars and intelligibles, as to say – to good government, and some other good things. Spaniards! It is neither necessary, nor conducive to, nor other than exclusive of, any of those good things. What says experience? In the Anglo-American United States, of the two parts of this system, neither the one nor the other will you see. No prosecution can there have place, for any thing written against the government, or any of its functionaries as such. No restriction, whatever, is there on public meetings; in public meetings, held for any such purpose as that of sitting in judgment, on the constitution, on any measures of the government, or on any part of the conduct of any of its functionaries. Yet, if there were a country in which these restraints, or either of them, would be necessary or conducive to good government, it would be *that*. For, in that country, the people are all armed. Armed, at all times, in much greater proportion than in any other country: armed, at any time they please, every one of them.

Work is well advanced on the new edition of *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*, which was originally published in 1827 under the editorship of John Stuart Mill. This is one of Bentham's longest works, running to five volumes, each containing some seven hundred pages. In this important work, Bentham provided an exhaustive examination of the different types of evidence used in civil and criminal justice, and the different methods of extracting it.

A recent grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has enabled work to begin on four volumes of Bentham's economic writings, which will consist of works composed between 1787 and 1804, most of which remained unpublished during Bentham's lifetime, and which were badly mangled in the Bowring edition. The absence of a properly authoritative edition prompted the Royal Economic Society to engage Werner Stark to edit these writings, and as a result of

his herculean labours, a three-volume edition was published in 1952–4. The new volumes will supersede the Stark edition, long regarded as inadequate, but which currently remains the standard source for scholars of Bentham's economic thought. The new edition will facilitate a proper assessment of Bentham's political economy – including his interpretation of, and reaction to, the thought of Adam Smith – which has been sorely neglected by scholars in comparison with that of David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus.

### Promoting the study of Bentham

The Bentham Project promotes the study of Bentham generally by providing help and advice to scholars and researchers. In the coming year, the Project will be host to a number of visiting academics, including a Newton Fellow, Dr Xiaobo Zhai of Peking University, Professor Douglas Long of the University of Western Ontario, Professor

Daisuke Arie of the University of Yokohama, and Dr Malik Bozzo-Rey from the Université de Paris X, who has been awarded a British Academy Visiting Fellowship. Dr Bozzo-Rey is also a member of the 'Centre Bentham' in Paris, with whom the Bentham Project has been engaged in a collaborative venture funded by the Alliance programme, administered by the British Council in Paris and the French Embassy in London, to develop a methodology to deal with the editing of Bentham's French language manuscripts.

The Bentham Project also disseminates work through conferences and seminars. The International Society for Utilitarian Studies holds regular conferences: most recently at the University of California, Berkeley, in September 2008. Forthcoming conferences will be held at the University of Pisa in 2011, New York University in 2012, and Yokohama University in 2014 or 2015. At UCL, the



Figure 3. Mourning ring bequeathed to John Stuart Mill. According to his final will, dated 30 May 1832, Bentham left to friends twenty-six mourning rings made by John Field in 1822.

Project teaches the 'Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarian Tradition' course for the College's LLM and MA in Legal and Political Theory, and holds Bentham Seminars every year.

#### Bentham on the web

*Utilitas*, the Journal of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies, provides a forum for articles on Bentham and his thought, and there is an electronic journal on the Bentham Project website ([www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project)), the *Journal of Bentham Studies*, which includes some of the most recent research on Bentham. The website also includes a new database providing details of the Bentham manuscripts held by UCL ([www.benthampapers.ucl.ac.uk](http://www.benthampapers.ucl.ac.uk)).

The website is also the first point of contact with the outside world, containing a great deal of information aimed at the general public. It provides answers to questions about Bentham, and details of where Bentham texts can be found online. The website is topical –

announcing not only new publications, conferences, and seminars, but also discoveries of items associated with Bentham. The Project collects information about images: for example, two intaglio seals featuring Bentham's portrait have recently come to light, as has his dressing gown, and even a piece of his skin. All of these items can be seen on the website. Also illustrated is a Bentham mourning ring presented to John Stuart Mill, which a former UCL Laws student spotted in a shop in New Orleans, and kindly donated to UCL (Figure 3). More recently, the Project acquired the script of a radio play, written and broadcast in 1937, about Ford Abbey in Dorset, where Bentham stayed with James Mill and his family in the years 1814–1818. The Project produced a new recording of the play, which can be heard via a podcast on the website, and an engraving of the Abbey can be seen on the homepage.

Visitors to the Bentham Project homepage can now also join in a venture to contact the

wider world of scientists. Since November 2008, Bentham has contributed a blog to the London hub of Nature Network, the website of the journal *Nature*, among the most-visited science websites in the world. It is a professional networking site for scientists which disseminates information, and provides an interactive forum for the exchange of ideas. Nature Network London already had a blog written by Charles Darwin, and now Bentham has posted blogs on CCTV and ID cards, the telectroscope, food shortages, and the use of dead bodies for medical science (<http://network.nature.com/site/about>).

#### Iconic Bentham

Outside of cyberspace, the most frequent contact between Bentham and the general public is probably made via the Auto-Icon, Bentham's body, preserved in a wooden case which stands in the South Cloisters at UCL, and is open from 9 am to 5 pm Monday to



Figure 4. *The Auto-Icon. A wooden cabinet stands at the end of the South Cloisters of the main building of UCL and has been a source of curiosity and perplexity to visitors.*

Friday (Figure 4). By having his body preserved in this way, Bentham hoped, amongst other things, to attack religion by ridiculing belief in corporeal resurrection. He also hoped that people interested in the principle of utility and its founder would, by meeting by the Auto-Icon, remember him and his work. Visitors from all over the world can be seen on a daily basis peering into his box, and looking at the nearby displays on his life, works, and the work of the Bentham Project.

The Project has produced seven information leaflets about Bentham, each covering an aspect of his work. On the front, superimposed upon a handwritten manuscript, is a quotation from Bentham relating to the topic of the leaflet: on education, 'the common end of every person's education is happiness'; on religion, 'religion is an engine invented by corruptionists, at the command of tyrants, for the manufactory of dupes'; and on representative democracy, 'every individual in the country tells for one; no individual for more than one' (Figure 5). The leaflets are very popular: around 7,000 copies have been taken by the public in less than a year. The leaflets are also available electronically ([www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/info/leaflets.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/info/leaflets.htm)).

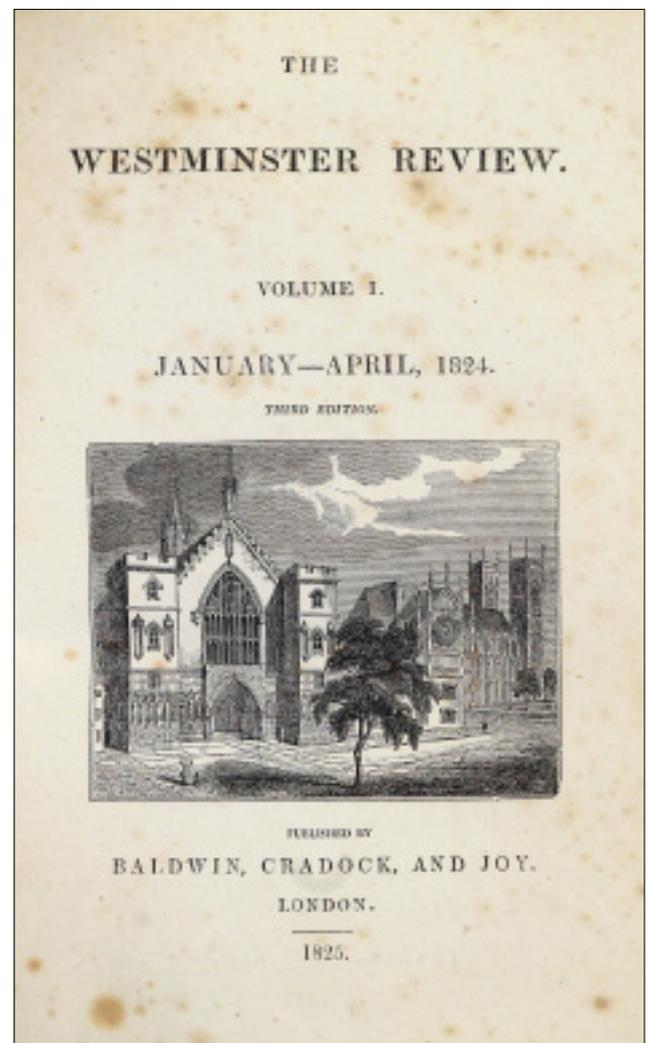


Figure 5. *This illustration of the Westminster Review is taken from the Project's leaflet on Bentham and democracy. Bentham regarded himself as the founder of the 'Radical Party', in opposition to both Whigs and Tories, and in 1824 established the Westminster Review as the mouthpiece of the party, with the aim of promoting democracy.*

Members of the Project often give interviews and information to the media. Philip Schofield, the Director of the Project, was one of the experts in Channel Four's series *Tony Robinson's Crime and Punishment*, in which he discussed Bentham's ideas on representative democracy. Professor Schofield has also recently published two books on Bentham, namely *Utility and Democracy: the political thought of Jeremy Bentham*, which won the W.J.M. Mackenzie Book Prize for 2006, awarded by the Political Studies Association for the best book published in political studies in that year, and *Bentham: A Guide for the Perplexed*, which appeared in April 2009.

The latter is intended as an introduction to Bentham's life and thought.

Thus the Bentham Project is a vibrant research community, undertaking an enormous task which is quite unparalleled in the UK in scope and significance, namely the making available previously unknown works of a major philosopher.

---

The Bentham Project is one of 50 longstanding endeavours that bear the title 'British Academy Research Project'. The Director is Professor Philip Schofield.

---



---

The huge undertaking of the *Collected Works* began with the formation of the Bentham Committee in 1959, and the projected date of completion of the edition is 2030, by which time some 65 to 70 volumes will have been published. It is hoped that by the end of 2012, 35 volumes will have appeared. To carry out this work, the Bentham Project has in recent years received grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Wellcome Trust, and the British Academy.

---