

BENTHAM AND THE ARTS

Hosted by the Bentham Project and Faculty of Laws, University College London and the University of the Arts, London

Sponsored by UCL Faculty of Laws; UCL Bentham Project; and the International Society for Utilitarian Studies (ISUS)

Co convenors: Anthony Julius (UCL); Malcolm Quinn (UAL); Philip Schofield (UCL)

All seminars take place on Tuesday evenings, at 6.00 pm, at UCL.

The seminars on 30 January, 20 February, 6 March, and 20 March 2018 will take place in G10 Lecture Theatre, Chandler House, 2 Wakefield Street, London WC1N 1PF.

The remaining seminars will take place in the Moot Court, Bentham House, Endsleigh Gardens, London WC1H 0EG.

The seminar series will consider the sceptical challenge presented by Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism to the existence of the aesthetic, as represented in the oft-quoted statement that, 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either.' This statement is one part of a complex set of arguments on culture, taste, and utility that Bentham pursued over his lifetime, in which sensations of pleasure and pain were opposed to aesthetic sensibility.

30 January 2018

BENTHAM SYMPOSIUM

BENTHAM'S CHALLENGE TO AESTHETICS

Philip Schofield (UCL)

The Physical Universe of Jeremy Bentham

Bentham appears to have adopted a materialist ontology and a sceptical attitude towards religion by the time when, aged 16, he was required to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England in order to take his degree at the University of Oxford. He later confessed himself to be 'an Epicurean'. As Michel Onfray (*A Hedonist Manifesto*) has pointed out, Bentham thereby positioned himself in opposition to the dominant intellectual tradition represented by Plato, Christianity, and Kant, which posited a dualism, whether of the material and the ideal, the body and the spirit, phenomena and noumena, or the descriptive and prescriptive. For Bentham there was the physical world and nothing more, at least nothing more that could be known, and all notions (ideals, concepts, angels, gods) that purported to refer to the non-physical world were so much nonsense. The same was true for statements about beauty and taste, insofar as they were made with reference to some metaphysical standard, while those making these statements were claiming not only aesthetic but political superiority over the bulk of the population who failed to appreciate the (non-existent) standard. In his typology of ethical theories, Bentham had distinguished adherents of the principle of utility from adherents of the principle of sympathy and antipathy. The latter

attempted to exercise power and influence by elevating their own opinions into standards that were binding on others. Hence proponents of ‘taste’ were in fact adherents of the principle of sympathy and antipathy.

Benjamin Bourcier (Catholic University of Lille)

Bentham’s private ethics in perspective: the relation between aesthetics and ethics in Bentham’s utilitarianism.

According to Bentham, claims about beauty, the sublime, and other aesthetic values can not be separated from the experience of pain and pleasure. Nevertheless, these judgments express something more than merely an aesthetic judgment. The fields of ethics and aesthetics unquestionably frame Bentham’s utilitarian thought. But, how should we understand this relation? How can Bentham’s utilitarianism justify the non-autonomy of ethics and aesthetics? What does this non-autonomy imply for Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy? Finally, I will assess whether such non-autonomy severely limits Bentham’s theory of private ethics.

Malcolm Quinn (University of the Arts, London)

Enlightenment Unrefined: How Bentham’s Challenge to Culture Can Change Our Attitude to the Arts

In 'The Rationale of Reward', Jeremy Bentham argues that a politician might be better occupied playing Solitaire “than if, with the Iliad in his hand he had stirred up within his heart the seeds of those ferocious passions which can only be gratified with tears and blood.” Here Bentham makes it possible to say that an enlightened choice between the Iliad and solitaire need not be a choice between good taste and bad taste. J.S Mill was later to argue that Bentham’s rejection of the distinction between good taste and bad taste in the name of an inclination towards pleasure was a rejection of the possibility of judgment. It can also be argued that in positing the notion of an ‘unrefined’ enlightenment, Bentham shows us an exit from the forms of cultural idealism that have defined our relationship to the arts. In this paper, I will show how Bentham’s opposition between good taste and democracy is relevant to an understanding of the arts in our own era, in which the the commercial idyll of middle-class taste has come apart at the seams.

20 February 2018

Anthony Julius (UCL)

Who was the greater champion of literature, Bentham or Mill?

According to the received view of Bentham and Mill in the matter of literature, Bentham was a philistine, and dismissive of poetry’s claims, while Mill was an ardent admirer of poetry, who gave it an honoured place in liberal thinking. This is a view promoted by Mill himself, with some accusatory pointing at a passage in Bentham's *Rationale of Reward*. Though the view is not wholly wrong so far as it goes, it is seriously misleading in two respects. **First**, it supports misjudgements of Bentham as a Platonic enemy of literature, with nothing of interest to say about it, or the fine arts in general; and complementary misjudgements of Mill as an advocate of literary free speech, with an interesting theory of poetry. Not one of these misjudgements withstands scrutiny. **Second**, it encourages complacency regarding the adequacy of liberal thinking about literature, and the adequacy of liberalism's response to contemporary threats to creative writers’ and artists’ freedom of expression. Call these complacencies ‘liberalism's literature problem’. If we seek a solution to this problem (and

one is urgently needed), we need to look beyond Mill—which means, among other things, looking behind him, to Bentham.

6 March 2018

Stella Sandford (Kingston)

**‘Envy accompanied with Antipathy’: Bentham and Freud on the Psychology of Sexual
*Ressentiment***

Readers of Bentham’s writings on sexuality (c.1812–1823) will be struck at numerous points by the parallels between them and Freud’s writings on sexuality, particularly the latter’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Like Freud, Bentham finds no moral distinction between same-sex and heterosexual sexuality. Understanding sexuality primarily in terms of pleasure (rather than reproductive teleology) and presupposing sexual orientation to be matter of taste, not morality, Bentham, like Freud, denies that same-sex desire is either pathological or unnatural and advocates for a measure of sexual freedom against its deleterious suppression by ‘civilization’. This means that, unlike the *psychopathia sexualis* of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries it is the pathology of the ferocious condemnation of homosexuality, not the seeker of same-sex pleasure, that Bentham’s analysis aims to understand.

This talk will explain how Bentham’s utilitarian defence of same-sex pleasure is grounded on a Humean conception of natural taste and thus excludes ‘natural antipathy’ as a justified basis for the condemnation of homosexuality. It will then investigate Bentham’s psychological explanation for the social antipathy towards same-sex sexuality, and its proximity to the psychology of ‘*ressentiment*’ that will later be familiar from the writings of both Nietzsche and Freud. Connecting this to Bentham’s principle of asceticism in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* and to his table of the ‘Springs of Action’ the talk will suggest that Bentham’s writings on sexuality reveal a more complicated picture of Bentham’s psychology than is generally known.

20 March 2018

Tim Milnes (Edinburgh)

**‘Is it true? ... What is the meaning of it?’: Bentham, Romanticism, and the Fictions of
Reason**

Assessments of the relationship between Benthamite utilitarianism and Romanticism were for a long time heavily influenced by John Stuart Mill’s characterisation of Bentham and Coleridge as the great counterweights of early nineteenth-century British thought. While for Mill the fundamental imperative of Bentham’s thought is epistemological and empirical, in Coleridge’s work, he claims, it is hermeneutic and aesthetic; accordingly, ‘[b]y Bentham [...] men have been led to ask [...], Is it true? and by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it?’ In this paper I suggest that this presents a misleading picture of both Bentham and his Romantic contemporaries. It is misleading because it overlooks the ways in which thinkers in this period respond to Hume’s arguments about the role of fictions of reason in thought. Bentham’s own incorporation of Hume’s theory of fictions led him to be more concerned with matters of meaning than with matters of ‘fact’. Conversely, the aestheticisation of ‘truth’ in Romantic essayists such as William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb signifies not the abandonment of an Enlightenment model of factual knowledge, but its elegiac idealisation.

1 May 2018
Frances Ferguson (Chicago)
Bentham, Modernity, and the Arts
Jeremy Bentham's Expansive Aesthetics: Pushpin Too

When John Stuart Mill characterized Bentham as relentless in his pursuit of facts, Mill could not have known that literary scholars would later defend the value of poetry in part by pointing to—and protesting—Bentham’s observation that pushpin might, like poetry, yield pleasure. This defense of poetry—and disparagement of pushpin—has often narrowed the discussion of aesthetics by framing it largely through the question of taste. In ‘Jeremy Bentham’s Expansive Aesthetics’, I’ll be tracking discussions of the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and testimony about aesthetic pleasure as Kant identified it in his remarks on taste in the *Critique of Judgment*.

22 May 2018
Emmanuelle de Champs (Cergy-Pointoise)
Bentham and Dumont on Taste and Literature

In 1797, while he was working on Bentham’s French manuscripts, Etienne Dumont remarked: “In his treaty on *Rewards*, B. severely attacks literary critics, and especially Addison. ... If this observation was founded, if evil truly was caused, one would have to abandon all literary criticism, one could not point out the flaws of any work of imagination for fear of hurting authors and diminishing the pleasure of those who admire them.” Starting from this quote, we will first explore the sources of Dumont’s opinion about Bentham’s ideas on taste. It will be shown that before *On Sexual Morality* and *Not Paul but Jesus: Part III*, many of his ideas had been put forward and tested in still little-known French manuscripts. Then, we will look at how Dumont dealt with these ideas, especially those he disagreed with, in his French versions of Bentham’s texts published from 1802 to 1826. Finally, we will place Dumont’s reaction in the context of early French Romanticism, and compare it with that of one of the most influential literary critics of the time, Germaine de Staël.

5 June 2018
Fran Cottell (University of the Arts London) and Marianne Mueller (Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design)
Pentagon Petal: from Pain to Pleasure

In 1799 Jeremy Bentham purchased a site at Millbank to erect his experimental panopticon prison. This plan was abandoned and in 1813 construction began for yet another panopticon:

the Millbank Penitentiary. The talk uses this recently completed art and architecture project at Millbank to reflect on forms of discipline, pain and pleasure and architecture's power to orchestrate social modes. 'Pentagon Petal' reinterpreted the Bentham influenced floor plan of Millbank prison into a flower shaped bench to adjust its impact from facilitating social control / pain to informal and voluntary uses / pleasure.

19 June 2018
Carolyn Shapiro (Falmouth)
The Image of Bentham

Bentham's own Auto-Icon, and his written treatise for the greater good which would come if we all were to auto-iconise ourselves, materialise his ongoing interest in the physical body, an interest which persists and pushes throughout his voluminous textual corpus, both thematically and on the level of the figurative language which he applies. For Bentham, the notion of "image" is supplemented and suffused by the notion of "body." This seminar will first establish, through close reading, the fundamental physicality which comes through so much of Bentham's writing, including but certainly not exclusive to *Of Sexual Irregularities, and Other Writings on Sexual Morality* and "Not Paul, But Jesus." As just mentioned, this fundamental physicality happens on the levels of both content and textual strategy. We can then try to figure out the relation between physical pleasure and the aesthetic principle as Bentham presents this relation, reading any slips which come through, for example, in the footnotes and editorial insertions, which might bely Bentham's repressions and denials of his own pleasures in aesthetics as a Utilitarian. I am particularly interested in exploring the analogies that can be drawn between Bentham's written corpus and his actual body, both of which required intervention by a fashioning hand in order to achieve a presentable, finished, perhaps even artistic, finished product, for the greater good. Other curious questions come up upon close reading of Bentham's writings on Sexual Irregularities. Why does Bentham foreground male homosexuality quite so much? What is the relation he makes between aesthetics and homosexuality and how does the pleasure he takes in his own writing map onto the sexuality devised in his adamant Paul/Jesus axis? These questions and more will be explored.

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