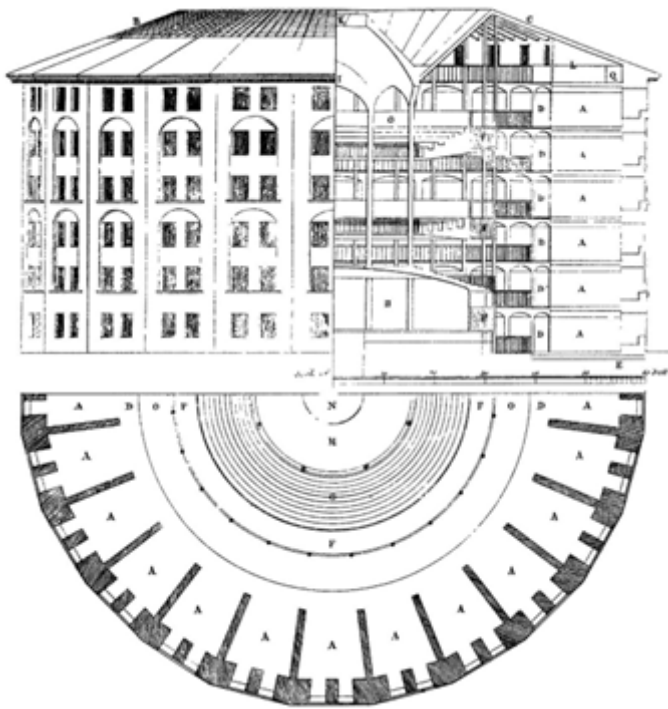


WHAT SHOULD YOU DO WITH A DEAD BODY?

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The philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) is today known as the founder of utilitarianism, the ethical theory that actions should be evaluated based on their outcomes and, specifically, the extent to which they promote happiness or reduce suffering. On its surface, utilitarianism promotes the maximum amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, but it also potentially leads to further ethical consequences. For instance, if a doctor has five patients in need of organ transplants, and one healthy individual can provide all of the necessary organs, then from a strict utilitarian perspective sacrificing the one healthy person to save the five patients would (theoretically) maximize overall happiness.

Bentham's emphasis on the "principle of utility"—the idea that the moral value of an action is determined by its ability to maximize pleasure and minimize pain for the greatest number of people—shaped his ideas across numerous domains beyond ethics. From ontology, logic, and political economy to education, religious beliefs, and government, no field was beyond his philosophical reach, including, most notably, the law. As he wrote in *Theory of Legislation* (1840: volume I, 96), "The more perfect enjoyment is in all these respects, the greater is the sum of social happiness: and especially of that happiness which depends upon the laws." Throughout his writings, Bentham returned again and again to law, whether it was legal reform, judicial administration, and international law or policing, punishment, and prison reform. The latter led to one his most famous—and even infamous—ideas: the "Panopticon", a cylindrical prison with a tower at its centre, which permitted the warden to observe the prisoners at all times. Later, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault came to view the Panopticon as something much worse: a "laboratory of power" and a symbol for the modern "society of surveillance" defined by its repressive and disciplinary regimes (1985: 208).



*“Plan of the Panopticon”
by Willey Reveley, public
domain, in Bentham
(1843 [1791]: vol IV, 172-
173). Source: Wikipedia
Commons.*

Today, you get to catch a glimpse of not only Bentham’s wide-ranging ideas, but also of Bentham himself, who died in 1832. His will contained peculiar instructions for his remains: “My body I give to my dear friend Doctor Southwood Smith ... He will take the requisite and appropriate measures for the disposal and preservation of the several parts of my bodily frame ... The skeleton he will cause to be put together in such a manner as that the whole figure may be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living.” His will even contained some winking suggestions for how to use his so-called “Auto-Icon” (or “self-image”):

If it should so happen that my personal friends and other disciples should be disposed to meet together on some day or days of the year for the purpose of commemorating the founder of the greatest happiness system of morals and legislation my executor will from time to time cause to be conveyed to the room in which they meet the said box or case with the contents therein to be stationed in such part of the room as to the assembled company shall seem meet (Bentham 1832)

Not all went to plan. Bentham’s head was preserved using a Māori mummification technique, but the process failed, rendering it unsuitable for display, and a wax head was substituted. The Auto-Icon is today located on the ground floor of University College London’s Student Centre in a cabinet with Bentham’s preserved skeleton, dressed in his own clothes, seated in his customary chair, and topped with the wax head (the real head, which had been kept in a wooden box first on top of the cabinet and then on a plinth over the door to the Cloisters leading to the

“Jeremy Bentham’s ‘Auto-Icon’ at University College London” (2003), photographer Michael Reeve, public domain: licensed by author under GNU Free Documentation License (CC BY-SA 3.0). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



eastern staircase, was prone to student pranks over the decades and is now stored safely at the Institute of Archaeology).

The Auto-Icon is both a tongue-in-cheek curiosity and an embodied testament to Bentham’s unique philosophy, one that challenged prevailing religious norms and showed the utilitarian value one could have, even in death, through public anatomy and medical donation.

While at the Student Centre ...

... also check out the great exhibits and events going on at the university at “[UCL Culture](#)”, including free art exhibitions, the Grant Museum of Zoology, and the Bloomsbury Theatre & Studio. And for more information, explore UCL’s entry on the [Auto-Icon](#) and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry on [Jeremy Bentham](#).

About the author

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