

The Political Economy of Happiness: William Thompson's Social(ist) Utilitarianism

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William Thompson (1775-1833), best known as author of *An Inquiry into the Principles for the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness* and described by Bentham as a "disciple" at one point, is not much studied by utilitarian scholars. He is of interest in utilitarian studies, however, because he took Bentham's basic premises—the greatest happiness of the greatest number as well as the subsidiary principles of security, subsistence, abundance and equality—in very different direction. The difference arises, I argue, because Thompson conceptualizes happiness differently from Bentham. This demonstrates the flexibility of the principle of utility, and the range of possibilities for utilitarian theory: While Bentham is seen as one of the great contributors to liberal capitalist theory, Thompson is considered one of the founders of socialism. Reading Thompson provides a new perspective on the politics of utilitarianism, recognizing democracy as a principle of social interaction and emphasizing the important role social institutions play in shaping the conditions within which we seek our happiness. Of particular interest are Thompson's political economics, including his critiques of competition (which sets individuals against one another), capitalism (as a "system of insecurity" for workers) and subordination (in which one person's happiness is subordinated to another's), his argument against private property (the economic basis for competition, capitalism and subordination), and his promotion of cooperative communities as a model for social change.