

Benthamite Motivation and the Limits of Egoism

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According to many interpreters, Bentham endorsed an egoist anthropology. However, a strictly egoist practical rationality may be puzzling for any form of Utilitarianism, since in many cases no sanctions at all could outweigh personal interests. On the other hand, a limited amount of egoist inclinations would ensure a safe ground for Utilitarian legislation and policies, based on legal and political sanctions. Accordingly, Utilitarianism requires a theory about the scope of egoism. The main aim of this paper is to show that Bentham was aware of this, and that his commitment to egoism was carefully qualified. Bentham ascribed human beings with a *limited* egoism, and in this way are to be interpreted his numerous statements concerning the prevalence of self interest among human motivations.

Some passages in Bentham's *Introduction* (mainly in cap. X) and *Table of the Springs of Action* will be analysed, which show that Bentham's hedonist view of human motivation was the key to a complex anthropology where self-interest worked as the prevailing motive without thereby ruling out other-regarding motives. In Bentham's view, the fact that an agent experiences as pleasant a given mental state, and not the fact that this mental state is an idea of a future pleasure to be obtained, is what moves to action. Moreover, Bentham claims that even ideas and impressions not dealing with a future pleasure for the agent may be pleasant, and therefore they can be motives of action. This ensures a limited egoist anthropology, with some room for other-regarding pleasures and actions.