

A Logical Absurdity: Jeremy Bentham and the Auto-Icon

Anna Brenton Brawley

How can you go on talking so quietly, head downwards?" Alice asked, as she dragged him out by the feet, and laid him in a heap on the bank.

The Knight looked surprised at the question. "What does it matter where my body happens to be?" he said. "My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head-downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things."¹

In Lewis Carroll's *White Knight* we see a blurring of the distinction between reason and absurdity: each of his "inventions" (the mouse-trap on the horse's back, the upside-down sandwich container, and the empty beehive) is the result of a peculiar logic, but even young Alice can spot the flaws. In history, too, we can find such absurdities—even in the period in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe known as the Age of Reason—and nothing embodies the irrational elements of the Enlightenment better than the body of Jeremy Bentham. Considered one of the last English philosophers of the Enlightenment tradition, Bentham was the central figure in utilitarian thought and wrote extensively on legal, social, and philosophical concerns of his time.² Along with these contributions to modern thought, however, Bentham left a more tangible legacy—himself. In accordance with the terms of Bentham's will,

Brawley is a Denison University ('06) graduate in history, with a focus on modern Europe and the First World War. She will attend the University of Chicago in the fall, seeking a master's degree in European history. Originally from Hilliard, Ohio, she also spent a semester abroad studying at the University of Oxford, St. Edmund Hall. It was then that the author had the pleasure of making Mr. Bentham's acquaintance; she hopes that this article will, in utilitarian spirit, contribute to increasing its readers; happiness.

after his death on 6 June 1832, Dr. Southwood Smith (his physician and close friend) delivered a public eulogy over the body, followed by its dissection and use as an anatomy lesson for gathered medical students.³ Dr. Smith then preserved the body of Bentham and prepared his skeleton, seated and clothed in “one of the suits of black occasionally worn by [him],” for display; referred to as the “Auto-Icon,” Bentham remains in a cabinet, with his walking stick named Dapple, at the South Cloisters of University College in London.⁴

As Harrison observes, “the situation [of the Auto-Icon] is shot through with different kinds of absurdities.”⁵ The Auto-Icon is more than an old philosopher’s whim, however; on the contrary, it is a logical (albeit bizarre) extension of utilitarianism from life into death. Bentham himself explained this connection in *Auto-Icon; Or, Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living*, an essay written shortly before his death and printed privately in 1842.⁶ Viewed in isolation, the text and the relic are mere curiosities, but when placed in the context of Bentham’s philosophy and the period in which he lived, the *Auto-Icon* takes a peculiar but appropriate place among his writings. It is consistent with his long-held views of the self and of utilitarianism, a product of the rationality and scientific thought which characterized the Enlightenment, and a critique of existing institutions (most notably religion) in British society. Through self-preservation Bentham has demonstrated that, even in the Age of Reason, human idiosyncrasies prevented a complete divorce between reason and absurdity.

The *Auto-Icon* is by no means a major work in Bentham’s impressive collection of writings and is probably lesser-known than the Auto-Icon itself, left as an uncompleted manuscript at his death and published (with related texts) only recently by James E. Crimmins. While acknowledging that the essay is somewhat of an oddity, Crimmins offers it in the context of Bentham’s life-long utilitarianism. Although Bentham did not use the term “Auto-Icon” until the third and final version of his will, at age twenty-one Bentham had made the decision to donate his body for the benefit of science, and the first specific directions for

its preservation appeared in 1824.⁷ While it seems that the full implications of his idea did not occur to him until years later, the *Auto-Icon* demonstrates that by the end of his life, he believed that his body could have greater benefits than for science alone. In the essay, Bentham delineated the potential uses of Auto-Icons which apparently inspired his thought on the subject, for “had these [uses] not presented themselves the subject never would have been broached.”⁸ Although the writing lacks the coherence of a finished work, and Bentham only elaborated on some of the eleven uses, his initial list indicates that he saw great potential in Auto-Icons: “moral, political, honorific, dehonoric, economical (money-saving), lucrative (money-making), commemorative, genealogical, architectural, theatrical, and phrenological.”⁹

He defined these uses as being those “by which addition is to be made to human happiness” – a statement consistent with the goal of utilitarianism as described by Bentham, “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”¹⁰ Moreover, this system rejects the virtue of selfishness in the individualism which had become prominent in the thought of Adam Smith and other eighteenth-century philosophers – although utilitarianism requires that each person act as a free agent and is individually responsible for oneself, one’s duty to the well-being of the entire community may preclude one’s own happiness, and indeed the individual has no rights which may supersede those of any other member of the community.¹¹ This leaves the self in a curious utilitarian position, but illuminates some of the rationale of the *Auto-Icon*. The Auto-Icon may intuitively seem to be either extremely egocentric or disrespectful; among other uses, Bentham described a temple of Auto-Icons in which the great figures of the past could be admired, or alternatively that “if a country gentleman had rows of trees leading to his dwelling, the Auto-Icons of his family might alternate with the trees.”¹² In Bentham’s mind, however, it seemed only fitting that one should strive to be as of much use in death as one had been in life and no doubt his catalogue of such uses would have grown had he lived long enough to finish the *Auto-Icon*.

Bentham saw himself as being more than a philosopher,

however; he also took a great interest in science and invention, embarking on several projects with his enterprising brother, Samuel.¹³ The best-known of Bentham's inventions is the Panopticon, a prison designed for maximum efficiency and theoretically required no more than one guard to maintain order.¹⁴ He was also remembered by his friends for his enthusiasm for everyday inventions and improvements.¹⁵ Science pervaded his philosophical thought as well, from his common use of scientific language to his view of himself as a scientist promoting a "science of morals."¹⁶ In his study of political economy, for example, he saw the marriage of science and art which could foster a truly logical study of man.¹⁷ Influenced by what Waldron calls the "intellectual optimism" of the Enlightenment and the work of contemporary French scientists, Bentham sought to bring reason and objectivity to social as well as natural science.¹⁸ The Auto-Icon, then, was another of Bentham's "inventions," following the Enlightenment tradition described by Schaffer of using oneself as a subject, "the experimenter becom[ing] a puppet master over himself."¹⁹ Although the *Auto-Icon* and its uses for the dead are admittedly bizarre, they are one of many expressions of scientific thought in Bentham's works.

His "farther uses" are also another (if indirect) form of his criticism of natural law and social contract theory, the philosophy of the French Revolution, against which he wrote *Anarchical Fallacies* in 1791.²⁰ Although Bentham had an early interest in the Revolution for its potential to promote reform, he later called the rhetoric of natural law "nonsense upon stilts," rejecting the idea that one is born with any inherent freedom or privilege except in relation to others: "I know of no natural rights except what are created by general utility: and even in that sense it were much better the word were never heard of."²¹ The self, then, should not be preserved as a sacred and inviolable entity, but employed as an autonomous instrument with the potential and duty to promote happiness. Furthermore, the "principle of utility" invalidates any claim to a universal and inherent moral system apart from the greatest happiness, a claim deeply in contradiction with much existing thought and on the "novelty" of which Mill re-

marked enthusiastically in his *Autobiography*.²² Auto-Icons would, for example, “obviate danger to health from the accumulation of putrid bodies” and offer further opportunities of study for phrenologists, about whom Bentham seemed quite keen.²³ Although the Auto-Icon was certainly an idea which opposed many social and philosophical conventions of its day, Bentham was not simply committing an act of morbid egotism but offering a legitimate (and unusual) extension of utilitarian thought.

The *Auto Icon* was also a timely critique of what Bentham perceived as one of the greatest ills of British society, the church. A staunch materialist, Bentham not only rejected the idea of a spiritual aspect of man, but dismissed as “fictions” all things, including miracles, which were not real and tangible in the world.²⁴ In his ideal society, then, religion had no place – morality would be governed by legislation like any other branch of the law, the two being “on the same plane.”²⁵ Although he was cautious in denouncing the church too publicly during his life, Bentham was part of a larger movement of reform and secular thought in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, influenced by the anti-religious thought of the French Revolution.²⁶ The power of the Church of England had weakened due to internal conflict and Evangelical and secular voices gained strength in political and social discussion, calling for reform in the church as well as the state.²⁷ Crimmins asserts that Bentham, too, supported institutional reform of the church, but that he “came to believe that even if disestablished, religion would still be an enemy to human happiness, due to the doctrines and beliefs it expounded.”²⁸ This rejection of Christian morality put him in opposition with the church on many issues. He was particularly progressive in his views of sexuality, advocating social acceptance rather than condemnation of both hetero- and homosexual relations – they were a significant means of promoting happiness and “had no public consequences.”²⁹

Equally controversial was Bentham’s irreverence (from a Christian point of view) to the dead, apparent in his speculation on their uses in the *Auto-Icon*. In writing the essay, he intended not only to discard the spiritual aspects of death – the idea that

the spirit lives on independently of the body or that the body would one day be resurrected—but to demonstrate the “irrelevance of religion” to society.³⁰ He did so using a number of religious terms and concepts in the essay, but as Crimmins argues,

His aim was not to placate a religious need or to redirect religious sentiments to secular objects; he refused to recognize that man was anything more than a complex physiological being. The auto-icons [sic], therefore, serve a useful function entirely divorced from any spiritual or mystical considerations . . . Men lived on only through their achievements and their presence as ideas in the minds of the men who came after them.³¹

Indeed, Bentham believed that ultimately “religion is silent” on the actual validity of the rites of death, arguing instead that the “priestcraft” survives by the extortion of fees for supposedly necessary interment and blessing by the church.³² He even went so far as mockery, to some degree,³³ of the veneration of religious figures:

Out of Auto-Icons, a selection might be made for a Temple of Fame—not in miniature—a temple filled with a population of illustrious Auto-Icons. . . . Public opinion changes: public opinion is enlightened by experience, by knowledge, by philosophy. If injury had been done to the reputation of an Auto-Icon placed in the temple of dishonour, public opinion might redress the wrong—might correct its own mistakes—might transfer the sufferer to the temple of honour; and, perhaps, some Auto-Icons, whom the interests and prejudices of our age had transferred to the temple of honour, might, when those interests and prejudices had passed away, be placed prominently in

the temple of dishonour. How instructive would be the vibrations of Auto-Icons between the two temples!³⁴

Auto-Icons would even serve to promote moral behavior during the person's life, although Crimmins remains skeptical on this point:

Bentham did not explain why a person's concern for reputation would be enhanced by the prospect of auto-iconisation; he seems to have assumed that imagining the spectacle of our physical auto-iconised selves after death would reinforce our desire to do good while alive, though why this should be so is not entirely clear.³⁵

Although the language of the *Auto-Icon* seems to reinforce rather than ridicule conventional religious practices, suggesting the creation of what could be called a cult of Auto-Icons, Bentham, as Crimmins emphasizes, intended to find material, not spiritual, uses for the dead.

Even more timely than this critique of religion, however, was the *Auto-Icon's* role as a political statement, favoring the voluntary donation of one's body for anatomical dissection. Not only did Bentham will his body to become an Auto-Icon to reinforce his secular beliefs, but also because he wished to set an example to the public to aid medical science.

In this aspect he relied heavily on the support of his friend, physician, and preserver, Dr. Southwood Smith. Both men were committed to legalizing a scheme of supplying corpses for dissection to British medical schools.³⁷ A matter of intense debate in the early nineteenth century, existing British law severely limited (if not forbade) the means by which medical schools could obtain bodies for anatomical study, while universities mandated that such study was necessary to become a physician; in the absence of legal procurement, then, schools were forced to rely on the illegal activity of "body-snatchers" and "grave-robbers," a par-

ticularly reprehensible act in the eyes of society then as well as now.³⁸

Dr. Smith wrote a pamphlet in 1824 called *Use of the Dead to the Living* addressing this problem, to which Bentham later referred in the *Auto-Icon* and from which its subtitle was taken.³⁹ While Smith embarked on the more questionable endeavor of uniting two utilitarian causes in the work—legalizing dissection and poor relief—by suggesting that the bodies of those without relatives who die in hospitals, prisons, or workhouses should be used because they would otherwise be a further cost to the government, he supported the utilitarian idea that even the dead have a right to be mourned but a duty to help the living.⁴⁰ In his eulogy over Bentham's body, Smith praised his deceased friend for wanting to be as useful as possible, then promptly carried out the stipulations of his will by performing a dissection for those present (including several medical students).⁴¹ An obituary quoted in *The Times* on 12 June 1832 contains a fitting conclusion to an unorthodox memorial service:

And thus, gentlemen, did the last act of this illustrious man's existence accord with that leading principle of his well-spent life—the desire to promote the universal happiness and welfare of mankind.⁴²

Bentham had not only acted from a desire to promote universal happiness, but in order to establish a precedent that others might do the same.

Whether he inspired others to donate their bodies for dissection is unclear, but it is hardly surprising that Jeremy Bentham's *Auto-Icon* remains a singularity. Even so, this curious philosopher and his essay should not be viewed in isolation; placed in the proper historical and philosophical context, the *Auto-Icon* and the *Auto-Icon* itself follow an odd sort of logic. Benthamite utilitarianism insists on actions which promote "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," implying that one has no duty or responsibility to oneself above any other member

or members of the community and suggesting the possibility that one may have a use even after death. The prominence of science and reason during the Enlightenment influenced Bentham's view of himself and of his philosophy, and his willingness to donate his body for scientific study (and preserve it for posterity) was a self-directed manifestation of his penchant for invention and science. He also wrote the *Auto-Icon* as a statement against the influence of the church in society and politics, arguing not only that the religious belief in life after death was false and irrelevant, but also that there were better uses for the dead, from medicine to moral instruction. As is evident from the earliest version of his will to his final work, the *Auto-Icon* was the logical conclusion to a long, utilitarian life.

Despite its having an appropriate place in his thought, however, Bentham's *Auto-Icon* is still unequivocally absurd, a concession which even Bentham made in his essay. Indeed, Bentham himself was somewhat of a character. Although, as Long observes, "[he] could see no intrinsic value in the freely expressed solitary dissent of the eccentric or idiosyncratic individual," he has been remembered for having a "sacred teapot" called Dick, a walking stick named Dapple, and a writing-desk known as "the Caroccio."⁴³ He was also deeply egocentric, having good-natured faith in the supremacy of his ideas and cheerfully assuming in the *Auto-Icon* that his own body would chair the Bentham Club which would certainly congregate after his death.⁴⁴ His curious affinity for religious language is also apparent in the *Auto-Icon* from his (and others') references to his acolytes and disciples to the unmistakable similarity of *Auto-Icons* to sacred relics of a new utilitarian religion.⁴⁵ Even before consideration of these ironies, however, the idea that a corpse may be used for instruction, entertainment, or decoration appears to be, at the very least, logic misled.

Perhaps the *Auto-Icon* of Jeremy Bentham is the best, but not only, illustration of the fact that although the great philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that they had founded a new way of thinking based entirely on rationality, they didn't always get it right. Still, if we are to read the essay and view the

and a must-see for visitors, the Auto-Icon has not failed to confuse and amuse many generations after Bentham's death.⁴⁶ While the author will most likely not answer Bentham's call for others to join him as Auto-Icons, I will whole-heartedly attest to the fact that to one life, at least, Jeremy Bentham continues to bring great happiness.



Auto-Icon, photo by the author in March 2005.

Notes

1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Signet Classics, 1960), 213.
2. James E. Crimmins, Introduction in James E. Crimmins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), xii.
3. Ross Harrison, *Bentham* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 1-2.
4. Preservation of the head – done, according to Bentham's wish, "after the New Zealand manner" – was less successful, and although it was on display at the Auto-Icon's feet for several years, it now remains in storage. A wax head fashioned in Bentham's likeness is used in its place, and the clothing and skeleton are original. Earlier photographs of the Auto-Icon give the viewer the impression that the head was removed for aesthetic reasons, but Crimmins offers an alternative explanation: "It seems that the head frequently went missing, on one occasion being kidnapped and held to ransom by students from King's College, and on another turning up in a luggage locker at Aberdeen Station. Understandably, thereafter the head was moved to the security of the College vaults." The rest of Bentham remains seated in the Cloisters, greatly revitalized after undergoing restoration in 2002. The author, having the good fortune in March 2005 to visit Mr. Bentham's cabinet, is happy to report that he is looking very well indeed.
Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xlix.
Harrison, 22.
J.R. Dinwiddy, *Bentham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18.
Jeremy Bentham, "Last Will and Testament" (1832) in James E. Crimmins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 9.
5. Harrison, 22.
6. James E. Crimmins, "Bentham on Religion" (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 47:1), 105.
7. A true utilitarian, Bentham's plans for his death also gave him great pleasure in life. Harrison notes that among his other eccentricities in old age was "his habit of bringing out the glass eyes that were to be used [in his preserved head] to show his friends."
Harrison, 23.
Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xi.
Jeremy Bentham, "Codicil to Bentham's Will" (1824) in James E. Crim-

mins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 6.

8. Jeremy Bentham, "Auto-Icon; Or, Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living" in James E. Crimmins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 3a.

9. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 3a.

10. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 3a.

Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Dinwiddy, 26.

11. Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1950), 131.

Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 405.

Mary Peter Mack, *Jeremy Bentham* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 121.

12. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," AI 3b.

13. Harrison, 131.

Dinwiddy, 6.

14. The British government, though initially interested in the project, never realized Bentham's vision; he was, however, later compensated for his work on the project with a comfortable pension.

Elie Halévy, Mary Morris (trans), *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 153.

15. Mack, 137.

16. Mack, 4.

Douglas G. Long, *Bentham on Liberty* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 3, 25.

17. Halévy, 107.

Long, 210.

18. Jeremy Waldron (ed), *Nonsense upon Stilts* (London: Methuen, 1987), 29.

Frank O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 242.

Harrison, 10.

19. Simon Schaffer, "Self Evidence" (*Critical Inquiry* 18:2), 360.

20. Jeremy Bentham, "Anarchical Fallacies" in Jeremy Waldron (ed), *Nonsense upon Stilts* (London: Methuen, 1987), 50.

21. Dinwiddy 7, 38.

Mack, 409.

Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Waldron, 38.

Bentham, "Anarchical Fallacies," 72.

Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London: Routledge, 2003), 248.

22. It is important to note that Mill did not remain a disciple of Bentham all his life, however; not only did he modify the utilitarianism of his father's generation, but he also chose to be remembered by an autobiography rather than an Auto-Icon.

John Stuart Mill, John M. Robson (ed), *Autobiography* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 67.

23. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 7b.

24. Harrison, 62.

James E. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 245.

25. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism* 18, 66.

Stephen, 270.

26. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism*, 2.

Crimmins, "Bentham on Religion" 98, 100.

27. O'Gorman, 294.

R.W. Harris, *A Short History of Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: New American Library, 1963) 12, 226.

28. Crimmins, "Bentham on Religion," 105.

29. While Bentham's utilitarian morality seems ahead of its time in regard to social freedom, Dinwiddy reminds us that his philosophy condoned other behaviors, such as (in some cases) infanticide and torture, "which will seem as offensive to many people today as they would have done to his contemporaries."

Dinwiddy 109, 111.

Mack, 212.

30. Crimmins, *Auto-Icon* xxvii, lxi.

Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism*, 296.

31. Crimmins, "Bentham on Religion," 108-109.

32. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 16a-17a.

33. He may also have been strictly serious, however; given the topic of the essay, it is somewhat difficult to tell.

34. Bentham, "Auto-Icon" 4b, 6a.

35. Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, liii.

36. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism*, 297.

Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xxviii.

37. Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xxiv.

38. Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xxxiv.

Crimmins, "Bentham on Religion," 107.

-
-
- Dr. Southwood Smith, "Use of the Dead to the Living" in James E. Crimmins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002) 38, 42.
39. Smith, "Use of the Dead," 1.
40. Smith, "Use of the Dead" 31, 49, 52.
Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xl.
Stephen, 87.
41. Crimmins, *Auto-Icon*, xlv.
42. *The Times*, "Anatomical Lecture on the Body of Mr. Bentham" (12 June 1832) in James E. Crimmins (ed), *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 37.
43. Long, 199.
Stephen, 230-231.
Mack, 7-8.
44. Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 5b.
45. Mack, 338.
Harrison, 1.
Bentham, "Auto-Icon," 2.
46. Andrew Noble Sodroski, et al. (eds), *Let's Go London* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 12.

Works Cited

- Crimmins, James E. (ed). *Bentham's Auto-Icon and Related Writings*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002.
- Crimmins, James E. "Bentham on Religion: Atheism and the Secular Society" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47:1 (1986), 95-110.
- Crimmins, James E. "Bentham on Religion: Atheism and the Secular Society" in *Secular Utilitarianism: Social Science and the Critique of Religion in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Dinwiddy, J. R. *Bentham*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Halévy, Elie. Morris, Mary (trans). *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*. London: Faber & Faber, 1949.
- Harris, R. W. *A Short History of Eighteenth-Century England*. New York: New American Library, 1963.
- Harrison, Ross. *Bentham*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

-
-
- Long, Douglas G. *Bentham on Liberty: Jeremy Bentham's Idea of Liberty in Relation to His Utilitarianism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.
- Mack, Mary Peter. *Jeremy Bentham: an Odyssey of Ideas*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.
- Mill, John Stuart. Robson, John M. (ed). *Autobiography*. London: Penguin Books, 1989.
- O'Gorman, Frank. *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688-1832*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1997.
- Rosen, Frederick. *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Schaffer, Simon. "Self-Evidence" in *Critical Inquiry* 18:2 1992:337-362.
- Schneedwind, Jerome B. *The Invention of Autonomy: a History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Stephen, Leslie. *The English Utilitarians*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1950.
- Waldron, Jeremy (ed). *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*. London: Methuen, 1987.