



Australia
2005 Fulbright – Hays Seminar Abroad
University Curriculum Unit

**Tall Poppy Syndrome:
Bentham's Utilitarianism in Australia**

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Summary

An Australian student studying at our U.S. university used the term “tall poppy syndrome” in a conversational reference to a professor of his. Intrigued by the phrase and what might lie behind it, I began an investigation which led to Australian values in general and their basis in moral and political philosophy.

This curriculum unit, *The Tall Poppy Syndrome* (Bentham’s Utilitarianism in Australia) will examine how, with or without consciously knowing it, Australia functions morally and politically on three specific values which are derived from Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).

It is reasonable to believe that Eighteenth Century British Philosophy traveled across the high seas to Australia (as well as to North America). In January, 1788, the period of Enlightenment dropped anchor and stepped on the shores of a *terra nullius* to later be named Australia. This philosophical movement, pioneered by British lawyer and philosopher Jeremy Bentham, gave to this young country a revolutionary and new idea about reason, power and authority. Utilitarianism, as a philosophy came to be known, suggested that people should do whatever produces the most good for the most people. As a social reformer, Bentham championed democracy, prison reform, humane punishment and women’s rights to vote since these policies would produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

Bentham’s social and political philosophical influence is apparent in the Australian “tall poppy syndrome.” This particular image is but a colorful expression of the three Australian values/virtues of egalitarianism, mateship, and fair go.

Most often, introductory courses in philosophy focus on the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill and how his brand of utilitarianism is demonstrable in the United States. By studying utilitarianism from Australia’s perspective, the student will be able to see how a theoretical philosophical movement is concretely adapted and exercised in another country in a different way.

Finally, I had the pleasure of meeting and talking with Elaine Thompson, retired Professor of Political Science at the University of New South Wales about these very ideas. She concurred with my hypothesis about Bentham’s Utilitarianism in Australia and gave me encouragement to pursue this project. Her book, [Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia](#) was a valuable resource.



Course

Course: Introduction to Philosophy (Phil 101)
Unit: Utilitarianism (traditional ethical theory, political philosophy)
Philosopher: Jeremy Bentham
Principles: Utility, egalitarianism, mateship and fair go
Application: Australia, 1788 - present

Course Appropriateness

The content of this curriculum unit is appropriate for advanced high school students and for university students in philosophy, political science, or history courses.

In philosophy, this unit would coincide with a discussion on utilitarianism or social/political philosophy. This material would also work well for a syllabus which dealt with the human virtues or with the philosophy of the human person. It would also be appropriate for any discussion of applied philosophy or traditional ethical theories. Similarly, this discussion fits with a framework of the distribution of resources.

Two to three class periods (based on a fifty-minute class period) will be needed to cover this material for didactic and discussion purposes.

Some Essential Questions

- Who is British philosopher Jeremy Bentham?
- What is utilitarianism?
- How did Bentham's brand of utilitarianism take root in Australia?
- What is "the tall poppy syndrome"?
- What are egalitarianism, mateship, and fair go?
- How does one determine the greatest good for the greatest number?

Learning Objectives

1. Students will become familiar with Jeremy Bentham, founder of utilitarianism.
2. Students will understand Bentham's views of human nature, moral and political philosophy.
3. Students will discover the environment of Australia from its beginnings in 1788 which led it to adopt Bentham's brand of utilitarianism as founding principles.
4. Students will be able to define egalitarianism, mateship and fair go.
5. Students will be able to make use of the expression, "tall poppy syndrome."
6. Students will learn supporting terms: skepticism, natural rights, hedonism, and egoism.
7. Students will have enough knowledge of Bentham to contrast him with his disciple, J. S. Mill.

Materials

Students will have access to a textbook¹, Internet, and class handouts (on Bentham² from the Internet Encyclopedia and Tall Poppy Syndrome³ from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Two works will be placed on Reference in the university library^{4, 5}.

Useful Internet resources, found later in a separate bibliography, will be given to the students by way of “Blackboard,” course documents.



¹ Does the Center Hold? An Introduction to Western Philosophy, 3rd edition. Donald Palmer. McGraw-Hill, 2002, pp. 260-279.

² www.iep.utm.edu/b/bentham.htm

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tall.poppy.syndrome>.

⁴ Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia. James Franklin. Sydney: Macleay Press, 2003.

⁵ Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia. Elaine Thompson. University of New South Wales Press. 1994.

Syllabus Components¹

(Two to three 50-minute class periods)

1. Introduce teleological (or consequentialist) theories of ethics (e.g., egoism, hedonism, utilitarianism) which obliges one to do what is good and valuable.
2. Introduce Jeremy Bentham using text and student handout.
(<http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/bentham.htm>)
3. History of Australia using <http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/histsite.html> or other resource. Focus on its founding as a penal colony, its settlement by compulsion, not idealism, and the skepticism and cynicism derived from the human plight of the first settlers who arrived in bondage. There is no room in Australia for pretensions (the “tall poppy syndrome”).
4. 18th and 19th century philosophical principles based on Bentham’s principle of utility, not on natural rights or entitlements.
5. Settlements radiated from Sydney. Eventually the country is utilitarian and a nation which is characterized by its egalitarianism (see Thompson, pp. viii-xii), mateship (Thompson, pp. 132-154) and fair go for all (greatest good, pleasure over pain).
6. Australia is a country which is more community than nation. Application of this utilitarian principle may be found in Australia’s educational system, health care, social welfare, employment, compulsory voting, and housing.
7. It is important to complete this study with the history of exclusion of the aboriginal people and, for many decades, non-whites. They were not part of the utilitarian calculus of the greatest good for the populace.

¹ What follows are merely suggestions for a division of the material into a logical progression. It is important that students are actively engaged in this study and therefore may wish to present various parts of the sections which make up this syllabus after their own investigation.

Outcome Assessments¹

1. Reflection paper: “The Tall Poppy Syndrome”
2. Term paper topic: Bentham’s Utilitarianism in Australia
3. Exam questions in short essay form:
 - a. Describe Bentham’s influence on Australia.
 - b. Discuss the meaning of egalitarianism, mateship and fair go.
 - c. How would Bentham define the “tall poppy syndrome?”



¹ Assessments vary with instructors and student intellectual abilities. These are merely suggestions.

References – Useful Websites

History of Australia:

<http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/histsite.html>

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/history.html>

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/australia/>

Philosophy Resources:

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/philinks.htm>

<http://noesis.evansville.edu>

<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~worc0337/phil-index.html>

Utilitarianism:

<http://www.hedweb.com/hedabuti.html>

http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/moral_philosophy/utilitarianism.html

<http://www.bltc.net/ethics/utility.htm>

Jeremy Bentham:

<http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/Bentham.htm>

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/bentham.htm>

<http://blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Philosophy/Bentham.htm>

<http://tqd.advanced.org/3376/Benth.htm>

Egalitarianism:

Elaine Thompson – the Barton Lectures, Part 9

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/sunspec/stories/s274042.htm>

Mateship:

<http://www.australianbeers.com/culture/mateship.htm>

Fair Go:

<http://www.boomerangmagazine.com.au/india/article71.htm>

Tall Poppy Syndrome:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall_poppy_syndrome

Communitarian Philosophy:

<http://www.civsoc.com/links.html>

<http://www.polisci.com/books/books/philosophy.htm>