



## STUDENTS BECOME YOUNG POLITICIANS

Utilitarianism and Ethics: Familiarising with the philosophical work of  
Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill

<b>Learning Objectives</b>	This lesson plan offers basic knowledge of the philosophical theory of Utilitarianism and Ethics. Students will learn the basics of the main political systems: Democracy, Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism, Monarchy, Oligarchy, Theocracy and Anarchy.
<b>Subjects</b>	History, Politics, Social Sciences
<b>Recommended Age (10-12 or 12-14)</b>	10-12, 12-14 years old
<b>Number of students involved</b>	Maximum of 25 students, divided into groups.
<b>Duration</b>	90 minutes
<b>Skills Developed</b>	problem-solving, cooperation, critical thinking
<b>Material Needed</b>	flipcharts, pens, markers, notepads
<b>Inclusion Best Practices</b>	-



## Instructions for implementing the lesson plan

This lesson plan aims to introduce students to the philosophical theory of Utilitarianism and the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is suggested to use this lesson plan in a social science or history class.

As part of this lesson plan, students will be introduced to the philosophy of utilitarianism and then they will learn about different political systems, such as democracy.

### Step 1: Introduction to the philosophical topic (15 minutes)

Utilitarianism is a philosophical theory that falls under ethics. The founders of this theory are the English Philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill ([Britannica, 2023](#)).

Utilitarianism is a theory that aims to help people distinguish between a good and bad action. Based on this theory, an action is considered to be morally good and right, if it results in happiness and pleasure not only for one person but for all the people that could be affected by this action. Utilitarianists tend to classify an action as right or wrong based on the action's consequences. In addition, utilitarianists tend to be concerned with people as a whole and not with the self-interest of an individual (ibid.).

Bentham used utilitarianism to explain what he considered as the main objective of all legislation which is to bring the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' ([Britannica, 2023](#)).

Mill, although sharing a similar view with Bentham, he made a distinction between the **lower pleasures** and the **higher pleasures**. According to Mill, a moral action should ideally aim for the greatest number of higher pleasures ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016](#)). Higher pleasures are referring to the more intellectual pleasures such as emotions, cultural awareness and personal development (ibid.). Lower pleasures, on the other hand, are all the pleasures that aim to satisfy a temporary need, such as eating a chocolate bar or buying a new bag.

For a better understanding of the philosophical work of Bentham and Mill, students can use the Little Philosophers E-book 'Becoming Utilitarianists for a day – Ethics: Bentham and Mill'.

Link to the e-book: <https://littlephilosophers.eu/r2-e-books-and-augmented-reality-books/>.

### Step 2: Learning the basics of the main political systems (30 minutes)



Once you have explained Utilitarianism to your students, you should move on to discussing the main political systems. First, give a short definition for each political system ([Britannica Kids, n.d.](#)):

**Democracy:** A political system where all the people living within a community take part in the decision-making processes.

**Authoritarianism:** In this political system, the majority of the power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader (or a group of leaders).

**Totalitarianism:** This is an extreme form of authoritarianism exercising control over society, including politics, culture and political freedoms.

**Monarchy:** A political system in which one individual serves as the head of the state.

**Oligarchy:** In this political system, a small elite is ruling the community exercising powers that relate with the control of the wealth, the military and the political freedoms of the community.

**Theocracy:** This is a political system where religious authorities hold a primary role in the government.

**Anarchy:** This is a political system in which there is an absence of central power.

Then, it is suggested to initiate a group discussion with the whole class of students about the pros and cons of each political system. The group discussion should last for approx. 15 minutes. Some questions that could guide this group discussion are:

- Why do societies need a political system?
- Can you think of any examples of political systems from history?
- What are the main characteristics of a democratic society?
- What are the impacts of a political system on individual rights?

### Step 3: Hosting a debate on political systems (30 minutes)

At this step, students should explore the different political systems independently and organise short political debates.

To help your students in this process, divide them into smaller groups (3 to 4 students per group) and give them some imaginative stories, on which they should base their debates.

One example is introducing a fictional country, occupied by different kinds of animals. In the upcoming elections, the two main representatives are the King of the Lions and a Black Bear.

The King of the Lions is a strong male character, who promises to protect the country from external threats and ensure the safety of all the residents.



The Black Bear is a very brave female, who is advocating domestic affairs and cooperation between all animals for all future policy-making decisions.

Using this story as a starting point, the students should decide what political systems each candidate is representing (choosing two political systems from the seven that were introduced in the previous step). In addition, students can create additional fictional characters to debate about more political systems.

To make this activity more challenging for your students, you could present various challenges to their fictional countries, such as natural disasters, resource scarcity, conflicts or moral dilemmas.

Each group should then discuss and decide how their government system would respond to these challenges, taking into account the interests of their citizens and the principles of their political system.

This could foster more decision-making competencies and pose a challenge to the students' task.

You should give your students approx. 15 minutes to prepare for their debates and then another 15 for the implementation process, where students will debate with each other acting as the fictional characters of the stories they created.

#### **Step 4: Group reflection (15 minutes)**

At the final stage of this lesson plan, all students should come back together and reflect upon their experiences during the political debate simulation.

At this step, students can discuss about the emotions they felt throughout the lesson plan and express their opinions on which political system they believe maximises overall well-being and happiness. Some questions for your students are:

- Did they remain calm during the debate?
- Was it easy to argue for different viewpoints?
- Which political system did they find more useful for the prosperity of a society?
- How did they feel when they had to support an opinion during the simulation with which they might disagree?



## References:

Britannica. (2023). Jeremy Bentham. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jeremy-Bentham>.

Britannica. (2023). Utilitarianism. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/utilitarianism-philosophy>.

Britannica Kids. (n.d.). Political System. <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/political-system/605579>.

Little Philosophers EU project, <https://littlephilosophers.eu>.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2016). John Stuart Mill. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/>.