THE SPRINGS OF ACTION

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What Moves Us, and the Words We Use to Hide It

A Modern Treatment of Jeremy Bentham's

A Table of the Springs of Action (1817)

Adapted and reimagined for contemporary readers

1. The Central Insight

Two hundred years ago, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham published a strange and ambitious little pamphlet. It wasn't a work of grand philosophy. It was something more practical: a map of human motivation.

His insight was deceptively simple, and it remains as powerful today as it was in 1817:

> *Every human action is driven by the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. There are no exceptions. And the words we choose to describe these drives—whether we call someone "prudent" or "cowardly," "ambitious" or "greedy"—reveal far more about the speaker than about the person being described.*

This is a book about those words and those drives. It is about the invisible machinery behind every decision you make, every argument you have, and every judgment you pass on another person. Once you see this machinery, you cannot unsee it. And seeing it changes everything—how you lead, how you persuade, how you understand yourself, and how you extend grace to others.

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Bentham called the forces that move us "springs of action." The metaphor is mechanical and deliberate. A spring, once compressed, must release. It has no choice. And in Bentham's view, neither do we—not really. We are always moving toward something we believe will bring pleasure or away from something we believe will bring pain.

This isn't cynicism. It's engineering. If you want to understand why people do what they do—in boardrooms, in families, in politics, in art—you need to understand the springs. And if you want to change behavior—your own or anyone else's—you need to work with the springs, not against them.

The trouble is, we've built an enormous vocabulary designed to obscure these springs rather than illuminate them. That vocabulary is Bentham's second great subject, and it's where his work becomes truly dangerous—dangerous to anyone who profits from confusion about human motivation.

2. The Fourteen Springs

Bentham identified fourteen fundamental categories of pleasure and pain. Every human motive, he argued, traces back to one or more of these. The list is not meant to be elegant. It is meant to be complete.

Here they are, translated into modern language:

#	The Spring	What It Drives Us Toward (or Away From)
1	**Taste**	The pleasures of food, drink, and the palate. The simplest bodily enjoyment.
2	**Sex**	Sexual desire and its satisfactions. Among the most powerful and most condemned of all drives.
3	**The Senses**	Physical pleasures broadly—warmth, comfort, beauty perceived through sight, sound, touch.
4	**Wealth**	The pleasures of having, getting, and spending. Money as stored possibility.
5	**Power**	The pleasures of influence, authority, and the ability to shape outcomes.
6	**Curiosity**	The pleasure of learning, discovering, knowing. The itch to understand.
7	**Belonging**	The pleasures of friendship, connection, being liked and welcomed.
8	**Reputation**	The pleasures of being well-regarded. The pain of being thought badly of.
9	**Piety**	The pleasures and fears associated with the divine, with religious duty and cosmic judgment.
10	**Sympathy**	The pleasure of seeing others flourish. The pain of witnessing suffering.
11	**Antipathy**	The dark mirror of sympathy: the satisfaction of seeing an enemy suffer, or of punishing wrongdoing.
12	**Ease**	The avoidance of labor. The pull toward rest, comfort, and the path of least resistance.
13	**Self-Preservation**	The avoidance of physical harm, danger, and death.
14	**Self-Regard**	The general desire for one's own wellbeing, encompassing all the above.

Notice a few things about this list. First, it makes no moral judgments. The desire for power is listed alongside sympathy. The avoidance of effort sits next to the fear of death. Bentham isn't

telling you which springs are noble and which are base. He's telling you they all exist, in everyone, all the time.

Second, notice that most human actions involve several springs operating simultaneously. Love, for example, is never just Spring 2 (sex). It's a compound of desire, belonging, sympathy, reputation, and sometimes even power. The person who donates conspicuously to charity is moved by sympathy (Spring 10), but also by reputation (Spring 8), and possibly by the avoidance of guilt (Spring 9). This isn't hypocrisy. It's how humans work.

Third, notice that there is no spring called "evil." There is no spring called "virtue." Every spring, without exception, can produce actions we admire and actions we deplore. The same drive toward power that makes a tyrant also makes the founder who builds something that changes the world. The same drive toward ease that produces sloth also produces the elegant engineering solution that reduces unnecessary work for thousands.

The springs themselves are neutral. What matters is their consequences.

3. The Three Names for Everything

Here is where Bentham becomes truly revolutionary, and truly useful.

He noticed that for nearly every human motive, our language provides not one name but at least three—and the name you choose determines the verdict before the trial has even begun:

Eulogistic *(the praise word)*	**Neutral** *(the plain word)*	**Dyslogistic** *(the condemnation word)*
Prudent	Careful with money	Cheap
Ambitious	Driven	Power-hungry
Frugal	Economical	Miserly
Firm	Resolute	Stubborn
Generous	Free-spending	Wasteful
Passionate	Enthusiastic	Fanatical
Courageous	Risk-taking	Reckless
Devout	Religious	Superstitious
Compassionate	Sympathetic	Bleeding-heart
Discerning	Critical	Judgmental
Confident	Self-assured	Arrogant
Visionary	Imaginative	Delusional

In every row, the underlying behavior is identical. The only thing that changes is the word, and with it, the verdict.

Bentham called this the most dangerous weapon in the arsenal of rhetoric. He was right. When a politician calls tax cuts "fiscal responsibility" and an opponent calls them "giveaways to the wealthy," they are describing the same policy. They are simply choosing different columns. When a startup founder is "visionary" to investors and "delusional" to skeptics, the underlying behavior—an unusual conviction about the future—hasn't changed at all.

The most important observation Bentham made about these three columns is this: neutral words are almost always in short supply. Our language is overloaded with praise words and blame words, and desperately impoverished when it comes to simple, descriptive ones. This is not an accident. It reflects the fact that people rarely talk about motives without wanting to influence the listener's judgment about them.

The shortage of neutral language is itself a kind of argument. It makes it nearly impossible to discuss human motivation without taking sides.

4. The War of Words

Once you understand the three-column structure, you begin to see it everywhere. And you begin to see how it's weaponized.

Bentham identified a mechanism he called "interest-begotten prejudice." It works like this: whenever someone has a stake in the outcome of a judgment, that stake unconsciously distorts their choice of words. Not their facts. Their words. The facts may be perfectly accurate. But the column from which they select their vocabulary—eulogistic, neutral, or dyslogistic—will reliably serve their interests.

This happens in every domain of human life:

In politics: The same program is "investment in our future" or "reckless government spending." The same immigration stance is "compassionate" or "naive." The same trade policy is "protecting American workers" or "protectionism." Neither side is lying. They are choosing columns.

In business: Laying off workers is "right-sizing" or "gutting the workforce." Aggressive growth is "scaling" or "burning cash." A high price is "premium positioning" or "price gouging." The people who pick the words pick the outcome of the debate.

In personal life: Your friend's cautious nature is "sensible." Your own is "just being careful." Your rival's is "timid." Your partner's spending is "self-care" when you approve and "self-indulgence" when you don't. The behavior hasn't changed. The relationship has.

In the media: A protest is a "demonstration" or a "mob." A leader is "decisive" or "autocratic." A company is "disruptive" or "reckless." News coverage that appears objective often simply alternates between columns rather than stepping outside them.

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The deepest version of this trick is what Bentham called using words as "fig leaves"—finding a praiseworthy name for a motive that, under its plain name, would be embarrassing.

Consider "industry." The desire for money, described plainly, carries stigma. So we dress it up. We call the desire to accumulate wealth "industriousness." We praise the "work ethic." But as Bentham tartly observed, nobody actually desires labor for its own sake. What they desire is what labor produces: wealth, status, security. "Industry" is a euphemism—a eulogistic fig leaf draped over the desire for money.

This isn't a trivial point. It means that when we praise "hard work," we are often unconsciously praising the desire for wealth while simultaneously condemning that same desire when it shows

up undisguised. The CEO who “works 80-hour weeks” is admired. The one who “loves money” is suspect. They might be the same person, driven by the same spring.

5. No Motive Is Inherently Good or Bad

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable of Bentham's claims, and the most important.

We are in the habit of calling some motives virtuous and others sinful. Sympathy is good. Greed is bad. Compassion is noble. Self-interest is base. Bentham argued that this entire framework is confused and dangerous.

A motive is a spring. A spring is a force. A force is not moral or immoral. It simply pushes. What matters—the only thing that matters—is where the push leads. What are the consequences of the action that the motive produces?

Consider sympathy, which we reflexively call good. A parent's sympathy for their child can lead them to shield that child from every consequence, producing a person unable to function in the world. A voter's sympathy for a compelling story can lead them to support a policy that harms thousands. Sympathy, unguided by judgment, is not virtue. It is sentimentality with consequences.

Now consider self-interest, which we reflexively call suspect. The entrepreneur who builds a company to get rich may employ thousands, serve millions, and create wealth that funds hospitals and schools. The scientist who pursues a discovery for personal glory may save countless lives. Self-interest, channeled through institutions that align private benefit with public good, is not vice. It is the engine of civilization.

Bentham's point is not that motives don't matter. It is that motives are the wrong unit of moral analysis. The right unit is consequences. And the labels we attach to motives—"virtuous," "sinful," "noble," "base"—are not descriptions of reality. They are moves in a game of persuasion.

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This has a radical practical implication. If no motive is inherently bad, then understanding someone's motive should not be the end of the analysis but the beginning. When you discover that someone acted out of self-interest, you have not yet discovered anything useful. You need to know: what did they do, and what happened as a result?

When a colleague advocates for a project that would increase their visibility, the fact that visibility is part of their motivation tells you nothing about whether the project is a good idea. When a politician supports a policy that happens to benefit their donors, the fact of the benefit tells you nothing about whether the policy is wise. You have to look at the consequences.

People who reflexively condemn motives are avoiding the harder work of evaluating outcomes. The word "selfish" does a lot of heavy lifting in our moral vocabulary—and most of that lifting is illegitimate.

6. Why We Have More Words for Blame Than for Description

Bentham noticed a striking asymmetry in the language. For almost every human motive, there are more dyslogistic words (blame words) than eulogistic words (praise words), and more of both than neutral words. Why?

His answer is characteristically unsentimental: people are more often motivated to condemn others than to praise them. Condemnation serves self-interest more frequently and more powerfully than praise does.

Think about when you reach for a blame word. You reach for it when someone else's behavior threatens your interests, contradicts your views, or competes with your goals. You reach for it when you want to rally others against a common enemy. You reach for it when you want to feel righteous, which is itself a pleasure (Spring 11: antipathy can be deeply satisfying).

Now think about when you reach for a praise word. You reach for it when you want something from someone, when you want to maintain an alliance, or when someone's behavior aligns with your interests. Praise is instrumental. It serves a purpose.

Neutral words serve no purpose at all—which is exactly why they're rare. A neutral description of someone's behavior neither rallies allies nor condemns enemies. It doesn't make the speaker feel righteous. It doesn't advance any agenda. It merely describes. And mere description, in a world of competing interests, is an orphan.

This is why the language of politics, business, media, and personal conflict is so heavily loaded with judgment. It's not a failure of communication. It's a feature. Language evolved to serve the interests of its users, and judgment serves interests far more effectively than description.

The person who can find the neutral word—who can describe a motive without praising or condemning it—has a genuine advantage. They can see more clearly, think more carefully, and persuade more honestly. But it requires constant effort, because the pull of the censorial vocabulary is enormous.

7. Compound Motives: How Springs Work Together

No one is ever moved by a single spring alone. Real human motivation is always a compound—a mixture of several springs, in varying proportions, producing a resultant force that pushes us toward action.

Bentham illustrated this with several examples that remain vivid today:

The pleasures of drinking are not simply about taste (Spring 1). They include the physical warmth of intoxication (Spring 3), the pleasure of companionship (Spring 7), and the sympathy and good feeling toward fellow drinkers (Spring 10). This is why drinking alone and drinking with friends are fundamentally different experiences, even if the wine is the same.

Love is never just sexual desire (Spring 2). It compounds desire with belonging (Spring 7), sympathy (Spring 10), the pleasure of being admired by the beloved (Spring 8), and sometimes even curiosity (Spring 6)—the desire to know another person completely. The reduction of love to mere sexuality is not just reductive; it's inaccurate as a description of the springs involved.

The love of justice is a compound of self-preservation (Spring 13—we want to live in a just society for our own safety), sympathy (Spring 10—we suffer when we see others treated unjustly), and antipathy (Spring 11—we feel satisfaction when wrongdoers are punished). Someone who fights for justice is simultaneously self-interested, compassionate, and punitive. All three springs are operating at once.

The love of liberty combines self-preservation (Spring 13—we want to be free from arbitrary power), sympathy (Spring 10—we care about the freedom of others), antipathy (Spring 11—we resent those who abuse power), and even the love of power itself (Spring 5—participating in governance is itself a form of influence).

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Understanding that motives are compounds rather than simples dissolves many of the most common moral arguments. When someone asks whether a philanthropist "really" acts from generosity or from the desire for reputation, the answer is: both. Always both. The question itself is confused, because it assumes that motives must be pure to be real.

Motives are never pure. And requiring purity is a weapon—a dyslogistic move designed to discredit an action by exposing one of its less flattering components. The person who says "he only donates for the tax break" has not made an argument. They've selected one spring from the compound and pretended it's the only one.

8. The Errors That Follow from Getting This Wrong

Bentham identified several systematic errors that arise from misunderstanding the springs of action. Every one of them is visible in public life today:

Error 1: Condemning the motive instead of evaluating the consequence. When we say someone acted "out of greed," we feel we have said something important. We haven't. We have named a spring. We have not yet examined what the spring produced. A surgeon who operates for money still saves lives. A volunteer who serves for the pleasure of feeling virtuous still feeds the hungry. The motive is relevant to character. It is not relevant to whether the action should have been taken.

Error 2: Assuming that "good" motives produce good outcomes. Sympathy without judgment is how well-meaning policies destroy communities. Piety without humility is how religious movements become oppressive. The road to ruin is paved with motives that would look wonderful in a eulogy.

Error 3: Discrediting an argument by attacking the arguer's motive. This is the most common rhetorical move in public discourse, and it is almost always illegitimate. If a pharmaceutical company argues that a regulation will harm patients, the fact that the company profits from the regulation's absence does not make the argument wrong. The argument stands or falls on its own merits. Motive-questioning is a substitute for thinking.

Error 4: Believing that a name is an argument. When someone calls a policy "socialist" or "fascist," they have applied a dyslogistic label. They have not made an argument. When someone calls a practice "innovative" or "best-in-class," they have applied a eulogistic label. They have not made an argument. The label is a substitute for the analysis, and it's designed to make the analysis seem unnecessary.

Error 5: The purity test. Demanding that people's motives be unmixed before their actions can be approved. This is perhaps the most corrosive error, because it guarantees that no one can ever pass the test. Since motives are always compound, requiring pure motives means every action can be discredited by identifying its least flattering component.

9. What You Can Do With This

The springs of action are not merely an intellectual framework. They are a set of practical tools. Here is how to use them:

When you want to understand someone: Ask which springs are operating, and in what combination. Don't stop at the first spring you identify. The executive who blocks your proposal may be acting from self-interest (Spring 4 or 5), but also from genuine concern about risk (Spring 13), loyalty to their team (Spring 7 or 10), or a dozen other springs. The compound matters more than any single ingredient.

When you want to persuade someone: Work with their springs, not against them. If you need someone to support a new initiative, don't ask them to suppress their self-interest. Show them how the initiative serves it. Don't ask them to be less concerned about reputation. Show them how supporting the initiative enhances theirs. Effective persuasion is not the suppression of motives. It is the alignment of them.

When you want to evaluate an argument: Listen for the column. Is the speaker using eulogistic, neutral, or dyslogistic words? When you hear "reckless," mentally substitute the neutral term and see if the argument still holds. When you hear "visionary," do the same. If the argument depends on the loaded word and collapses without it, the argument was never an argument. It was an epithet.

When you want to be honest with yourself: Name your springs. When you feel strongly about something—a decision, a person, a policy—ask yourself which springs are pushing you. Are you resisting a change because it's genuinely bad (consequences), or because it threatens your status (Spring 5 or 8)? Are you advocating for something because it's right, or because it feels good to be on the right side (Spring 10 or 8)? The honest answer is usually: both. And that's fine. But seeing both clearly is better than seeing only the flattering one.

When you want to design a system: Accept the springs as they are and build around them. Don't build organizations that require people to be selfless. Build organizations where self-interest and collective benefit point in the same direction. Don't write policies that assume people will ignore their springs. Write policies that harness them. The best systems are not those that demand the suppression of human nature. They are those that channel it.

10. The Deepest Lesson

Bentham wrote his pamphlet two centuries ago, in prose so dense that almost no one reads it today. But the core insight has only grown more relevant.

We live in an age of extraordinary rhetorical sophistication and extraordinary rhetorical manipulation. The words people choose—in news, in politics, in marketing, in everyday conversation—are doing more work than ever, and more of that work is hidden. Every headline is a column selection. Every product description is a column selection. Every performance review, every political speech, every social media post is an exercise in choosing whether to present a motive eulogistically, dyslogistically, or neutrally.

And almost no one chooses neutrally.

The person who learns to see the springs—who can look at any human action and identify the pleasures being sought and the pains being avoided—gains a kind of X-ray vision for human affairs. Not cynicism: clarity. There is an enormous difference between saying "everyone is selfish" (a dyslogistic move) and saying "everyone is moved by pleasures and pains" (a neutral description). The first is reductive and dismissive. The second is the beginning of understanding.

And the person who learns to hear the columns—who can detect when a word is doing the work that an argument should be doing—becomes very nearly immune to the most common forms of manipulation. You cannot be swayed by a dyslogistic label if you can translate it into its neutral equivalent. You cannot be seduced by a eulogistic one if you can see the plain behavior underneath.

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Bentham imagined a world in which people discussed motives the way scientists discuss forces—with precision, without judgment, and with attention to results rather than labels. That world has not arrived. But the tools to build it have been available for two hundred years. They are sitting in a pamphlet that almost no one reads, written in prose that almost no one can follow.

The springs are always pushing. The words are always spinning. The only question is whether you see it.

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Based on A Table of the Springs of Action by Jeremy Bentham, first published in London, 1817.