The Philosopher's Corpse: Crash Course Recess #2

Crash Course: Recess
https://youtube.com/watch?v=d5CIm7hJXbU
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/d5CIm7hJXbU

You probably think your options after death are basically just burial, or cremation.

But what if you, with your buddy John Stuart Mill, co-founded utilitarianism? And as a utilitarian you believe that when it comes to issues of morality, sentience – the ability to feel pleasure and pain – is really all that matters.

The only way to cause harm is to cause pain and since corpses can't feel pain, dead bodies aren't deserving of moral consideration. Now, you might think that, by that logic, your body can just get dumped in a ditch. Or, maybe somewhere a bit more sanitary.

It doesn't really matter - the dead don't deserve consideration because it's awful hard to harm them. But also, as a utilitarian, you want to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. And, for Jeremy Bentham, apparently the best way to do that after death was to have your dead body put in a glass cabinet at the University College London for, as of this recording, more than one hundred and eighty five years.

Just sticking his corpse into the ground would have been wasteful – of no help to anyone, except a lot of microbes. Reportedly, in the last decade or so of his life, Bentham became fixated on how to be as useful as possible, even in death. And so, he left meticulous instructions in his will, specifying that his body be given to a "dear friend of his" to see his plans through.

Bentham requested that his head be preserved according to a mummification process said to have been used by the Maori people of New Zealand. He asked that his body be dissected for educational purposes – a practice that was illegal at the time – so that others could learn from it. And once all possible use had been obtained from what he called his "soft parts," he asked that his bones and head be displayed as what he called an "Auto-Icon," a powerful reminder of the values he stood for in life.

This way, even though he wasn't able to continue spreading his beliefs through teaching in the classroom, generations of students would still learn about Bentham and what he believed from his public skeleton. In the end, Bentham got his wish, more or less. 185 years after his death, his corpse stands in his old black suit in that glass cabinet, creeping out visitors. The mummification of his head was something of a failure, leaving it in such a gruesome state that it wasn't returned to his body; instead, a wax replica was affixed to his neck.

But his head has nonetheless provided some useful lessons. Bentham's desiccated skull used to sit near his body. But it was repeatedly stolen by students who, in true utilitarian fashion, demanded ransom money, to be donated to a charity, for its safe return.

So now, Bentham's head is only available for viewing by special arrangement. In addition to spinning a wild and intriguing tale, Bentham's decision, and his friend's willingness to carry it out, show true dedication living and dying according to philosophical principles. Bentham cared little about social acceptability, but he cared a great deal about what he believed to be right.

Which is somewhat ironic as, legend has it, he is sometimes brought into university meetings where he is noted in the attendance records as "Jeremy Bentham, present, but not voting."