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“How Politicians Mislead Us; Or, Jeremy Bentham on Political Fallacies”

by Philip Schofield

Abstract

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the utilitarian philosopher, became concerned about the lack of progress in implementing beneficial measures of reform, particularly in the legal and political institutions of the country. He wondered how it was possible for good measures to be effectively opposed by bad arguments—by fallacies. He defined a fallacy as a discourse intended to produce a false opinion in another person, and undertook a classification of the fallacies deployed by Members of Parliament. He went on to argue that the best way to counter fallacious arguments was to expose them—and he did this by showing that their characteristic feature was irrelevancy. The question arises as to whether Bentham’s classification of fallacies remains of any value. Do our politicians today use fallacious arguments of the type which Bentham identified?