

Bentham – criticisms

General Criticisms of Hedonism.

In *The Rationale of Reward*, Bentham said

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few. The game of push-pin is always innocent: it were well could the same be always asserted of poetry.ⁱ

Bentham goes on to say that poetry is dangerous because it deals in fictions, stimulates our passions and excites our prejudices. Perhaps not surprisingly early hedonistic utilitarianism was criticized for being 'a doctrine worthy only of swine'. Mill, who either misquotes or paraphrases Benthamⁱⁱ, disagreed and, whilst remaining a hedonistic utilitarian argues that the **quantity** of pleasure is not the only thing that matters.

Later **Ideal Utilitarianism** and **Preference Satisfaction Utilitarianism** would reject the claim that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.



Do you agree that the "quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry"?

In 1974, **Robert Nozick** in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* put forward his 'Experience Machine' thought experiment. Rather than spend your life plugged into a machine that can give you any experience you want, Nozick argues that you would prefer

1. to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them,
2. to be a certain sort of person and not just "an indeterminate blob",
3. to have contact with a deeper reality,

If Nozick is right then happiness/pleasure cannot be the only thing that matters.



Do you agree that people would choose not to be plugged into the experience machine?

Even using the Hedonic Calculus it isn't possible to measure happiness.

It is easy to find examples where it isn't possible to assess which option will lead to the greater happiness but this isn't a problem for utilitarianism. It just means that in those cases there is no obligation to choose one option over the other. In practice we do make choices based on what we would prefer and Bentham's list seems to be the kinds of things we do take into account, e.g. when deciding to spend money now or to save it for a holiday sometime in the future.

Bentham's quasi-mathematical formula for calculating aggregate happiness does suggest a precision that might be unrealistic. This is particularly so when adding or comparing the pleasures experienced by different individuals. It may be plausible that, because pleasure is subjective, I can say that going out with my friends will give me more pleasure than staying in and watching television; it is less obvious that I can compare or totalize the pleasure I would feel with the pleasure somebody else would feel. This objection may have less force when considering big legislative issues. On utilitarian grounds Bentham was one of the earliest to campaign for a reform of the law discriminating against homosexuality and this was at a time when homosexuality was a hanging offence.

More problematic might be whether the future can be predicted with any kind of reliability which is why utilitarians will discuss whether it is actual, intended or reasonably foreseeable consequences that count when making moral or legal decisions.

What's so special about propinquity?

If all other things are equal (including certainty) it is not clear why a pleasure tomorrow should be better than a pleasure next week—next week's pleasure will soon be tomorrow's pleasure. Perhaps Bentham felt that the wait would always lead to a diminished amount of happiness.



Do you agree that pleasure today is better than pleasure next week?

It ignores justice

A standard criticism is that if an action such as bullying or theft gives more happiness to the perpetrators than the pain experienced by the victim then utilitarianism would say it was the right thing to do. Given what Bentham said about the wrongness of a starving person stealing a loaf of bread it is clear that Bentham would not agree. By invoking long-term consequences Bentham was able to defend a common-sense approach to such things. Indeed, later, Sidgwick specifically argued that utilitarianism supported common-sense morality.

The more difficult question is whether Bentham and others are entitled to use this get-out. The accusation may have more force if it is said that **if they were consistent and applied their system honestly** then it would lead to the problem of ignoring justice.



Can you think of any scenario where Bentham would have to admit that his utilitarianism leads to justice being ignored?

It is too time consuming.

Trying to apply Bentham's formula every time a decision had to be made would be impracticable and, perhaps, self-defeating – by the time the calculation had been done the moment will have passed and so doing the calculation would lead to decreased happiness. Bentham is aware of this and it is why he only requires the formula to be 'kept in mind'. Also, this is less of a problem when deliberating over legislative matters. Mill was later to argue that we should also use secondary principles, i.e. if we follow the accepted codes of conduct then we are most likely to be doing that which will maximize happiness. Mill's use of secondary principles needs to be carefully distinguished from Rule utilitarianism which we will be studying later.

Ignores Special relationships

The accusation is that it is unrealistic to ignore family relationships, etc.

Responses.

1. If the calculation is being used to establish the law then it probably should ignore special relationships. I should support a law that nobody should steal not that nobody except members of my family should steal! If there are situations where special relationships matter (inheritance, the right to make medical decisions, etc.) then these can be accounted for in the law and everyone with these relationships will have that right.
2. Sidgwick argued that since special relationships are very important to us as humans so, contrary to what the accusation says, utilitarianism would try to foster these and ignoring them would lead to an overall reduction of happiness.
3. It has been argued that since we know those close to us best we are in a much better position to make correct judgments about what will increase their happiness. If everyone focusses on those they know best then, it is likely, that overall happiness will be maximized.

ⁱ <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/bentham/rr/rr.b03.c01.html#c01p08>

ⁱⁱ In his essay on Bentham, Mill says, " He says, somewhere in his works, that, "quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry"; but this is only a paradoxical way of stating what he would equally have said of the things which he most valued and admired." Given what Bentham actually said this is a very generous interpretation. It is Mill's more pithy quote – "push-pin is as good as poetry" – that is usually attributed to Bentham.