

11 Sartre

1. Bentham's Hedonism: What Is Good?

Core claim (hedonism about value)

- Pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.
- Pain is the only thing intrinsically bad.
- Everything else (money, virtue, knowledge, friendship) is good only instrumentally, insofar as it produces pleasure or reduces pain.

No qualitative differences between pleasures

- All pleasures are the same kind of thing: a pleasant feeling.
- One pleasure is better than another only by being:
 - More intense (how strong the feeling is), and/or
 - Longer in duration (how long it lasts).
- So, in principle, an hour of playing video games and an hour of reading philosophy are equally good if the total intensity × duration of pleasure is the same.

(Note: Bentham did list more “dimensions” in his calculus, but for exam purposes: only intensity and duration matter to the intrinsic value of a pleasure.)

2. Bentham on What Motivates People (Psychological Hedonism)

Psychological theory of human motivation

- Human beings are always motivated by the pursuit of their own pleasure and the avoidance of their own pain.
- Every action can be explained, at bottom, by the agent’s expectation of:
 - Increasing their own pleasure, or
 - Decreasing their own pain.

Implication

- Even seemingly altruistic acts (charity, self-sacrifice) are ultimately driven by the agent’s own expected pleasure (e.g., satisfaction, relief from guilt, approval from others) or avoidance of their own pain.

3. Bentham on How We Ought to Act (Utilitarianism)

Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)

- Morally right action: the action that produces the greatest net balance of pleasure over pain for everyone affected.
- We must consider:
 - All people’s pleasures and pains equally (impartiality).
 - The overall total, not just our own.

So, morally:

- We ought to act so as to maximize overall happiness (total pleasure minus total pain), not just our own.
- We should be willing, when required, to sacrifice our own pleasure if that increases the total amount of pleasure in the world.

4. The Tension in Bentham's View: Motivation vs. Morality

The tension

- Descriptive claim (psychological hedonism):
- People are always motivated only by their own pleasure/pain.
- Normative claim (utilitarianism):
- People ought to act to maximize everyone's pleasure, impartially.

Why is this a problem?

1. Ought implies can

- If morality demands that we be motivated by the general happiness, but our psychology makes that impossible (we are motivated only by self-interest), then: - It seems we cannot do what morality requires.
- Moral requirements become unrealistic or incoherent.

2. Self-interest vs. impartiality

- Utilitarianism often requires:
 - Sacrificing your own significant pleasure for others' smaller benefits.
 - Taking on serious pain for the sake of strangers.
- But if our motives are always self-interested, why would we ever really do this?

Bentham's possible response (not fully resolving the tension)

- Use laws, social pressure, and education to align self-interest with the general happiness.
- Rewards and punishments make it in our self-interest to do what promotes overall happiness.
- Still, the deeper worry remains:
- Morality seems to demand genuine concern for everyone's happiness, while Bentham's psychology allows only self-concern.

5. Mill's Disagreement with Bentham: Higher vs. Lower Pleasures

Mill accepts Bentham's basic hedonism, but modifies it

- Mill agrees:
- Pleasure is the only intrinsic good.
- Pain is the only intrinsic bad.
- Disagrees with Bentham about relevant differences between pleasures.

Mill's key claim: qualitative differences matter

- Some pleasures are not just different in quantity (intensity/duration) but in quality.
- Higher pleasures: - Use our distinctively human capacities (reason, imagination, moral sentiment, aesthetic appreciation).
- Examples:
- Reading literature, doing philosophy, creating or appreciating art and music, deep friendship,

moral reflection.

- Lower pleasures: - More bodily or sensory pleasures, which we share with animals.
- Examples:
- Eating, drinking, sex, physical comfort, simple games.

Mill's slogan

- It is "better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."
- Indicates that the kind of pleasure matters, not just how much.

6. Mill's Argument that Higher Pleasures Are More Valuable

6.1 Structure of Mill's Argument (Competent Judges Test)

1. Only those who have experienced both kinds can judge
 - To say whether pleasure A is better than pleasure B, you must have:
 - Competent acquaintance with both A and B.
2. Competent judges have a stable, strong preference
 - Among those who:
 - Have experienced both higher and lower pleasures, and
 - Are capable of appreciating both,
 - If nearly all of them:
 - Strongly prefer one kind of pleasure, and
 - Would not give it up for any amount of the other,
 - Then that preferred pleasure is of higher quality and more valuable.
3. Empirical claim: competent judges strongly prefer higher pleasures
 - People who know both:
 - Intellectual, aesthetic, and moral pleasures, and
 - Bodily and simple amusements,
 - Tend to prefer the higher pleasures, even if:
 - They bring more dissatisfaction, or
 - Require more effort or risk of pain.
4. Conclusion
 - Therefore, higher pleasures are more valuable than lower pleasures,
 - Even holding intensity and duration fixed, because:
 - Competent judges would choose a smaller amount of a higher pleasure over a larger amount of a lower one.
 - So quality of pleasure matters, not just quantity.

6.2 How this fits Mill's hedonism

- Mill still says pleasure alone is the good, but he thinks:
 - The total value of a pleasure = a function of both:
 - * Quantity (intensity × duration), and
 - * Quality (its “higher” vs. “lower” status as revealed by competent judges’ preferences).

7. Objections to Mill’s Argument for Higher Pleasures

You only need one clear objection for the exam; here are two standard ones.

Objection 1: The “Non-Hedonic Values” Objection

Idea

- Mill claims the greater value of higher pleasures is still a matter of pleasure.
- But the competent judges’ preferences may be driven by factors other than pleasure:
 - They may value:
 - Dignity,
 - Moral worth,
 - Rational agency,
 - Meaning or nobility of life.
 - So when they say they would rather be “Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied,” this might show:
 - They care about dignity or rationality in addition to pleasure, not that the higher life is more pleasant.

Why this is a problem for Mill

- If higher activities are better partly because of dignity, rationality, or meaning independent of how pleasant they feel, then: - Mill is no longer a pure hedonist about value.
- He has smuggled in non-hedonic values (dignity, rational agency) as intrinsically good. - This undermines his claim that only pleasure is intrinsically good.

Objection 2: The “Circularity of Competent Judges” Objection

Idea

- Mill’s test seems circular:

1. He defines higher pleasures as those that competent judges prefer.
2. He defines competent judges as those who:
 - Have experienced both kinds of pleasure, and
 - Prefer the higher, more “refined” pleasures.

- Then, when he argues:
 - “Higher pleasures are more valuable because competent judges prefer them,”
 - It can seem like he is saying:
 - * “These pleasures are better because the people who think they’re better think they’re better.”

Why this is a problem

- The argument risks lacking an independent, non-question-begging reason to treat higher pleasures as more valuable.
 - It may just restate the preference of a certain group instead of giving a deeper justification.
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These notes cover:

- Bentham’s hedonism (pleasure as only good, intensity and duration).
- Bentham’s view of motivation and how we ought to act.
- The tension between his psychology and his ethics.
- Mill’s disagreement about qualitative differences in pleasures and the higher/lower distinction.
- Mill’s argument for the greater value of higher pleasures, and key objections.