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## Jeremy Bentham

### 1. Bentham's Hedonism (What is the Good?)

Core thesis (hedonism):

- Pleasure is the only intrinsic good.
- Pain is the only intrinsic bad.
- Everything else (money, health, friendship, knowledge, etc.) is good or bad only instrumentally, depending on how much pleasure or pain it produces.

Quantitative view of pleasure: - All pleasures are the same kind of thing; they differ only in amount, not in kind. - For Bentham, the key dimensions of a pleasure are: - Intensity – how strong the pleasure is. - Duration – how long it lasts. - When deciding which pleasure is better, we look only at these quantitative features: - A more intense pleasure is better than a weaker one. - A longer-lasting pleasure is better than a shorter one. - No pleasure is inherently "higher" or "lower" in quality; any pleasure can be outweighed by enough of another.

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### 2. Bentham's View of Human Motivation (What Actually Moves Us?)

Psychological claim:

Humans are ruled by "two sovereign masters," pleasure and pain.

- Every action we perform is ultimately motivated by:
  - The prospect of obtaining pleasure, or
  - The prospect of avoiding pain.
- This is meant as a descriptive theory (how people in fact behave), not yet a moral claim.
- On this picture, people are fundamentally psychological hedonists:
  - Even seemingly self-sacrificial actions are, on closer inspection, done because they bring the agent some expected pleasure (e.g., pride, satisfaction) or avoid some pain (e.g., guilt, social disapproval).

### 3. Bentham's Moral Theory (How Ought We to Act?)

Principle of Utility / Greatest Happiness Principle:

- An action is morally right if and only if it maximizes total happiness (pleasure minus pain) for everyone affected.

- We should aim to produce:
  - “The greatest happiness for the greatest number.”
- Key features:
  - Impartiality: Each person’s pleasure and pain counts equally.
  - Consequentialism: Only the results (amount of pleasure/pain produced) matter for rightness, not motives or rules by themselves.
  - Act utilitarianism: For each possible act, we must ask which option produces the most overall happiness.

So Bentham accepts: - A hedonistic theory of value (only pleasure is good). - A utilitarian theory of right action (right acts maximize total pleasure).

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#### 4. The Tension in Bentham’s View

We now compare:

- Psychological hedonism (motivation):
 

People are always moved by what they think will bring their own pleasure or reduce their own pain.
- Utilitarianism (morality):
 

People ought to act so as to maximize overall happiness, giving equal weight to everyone’s pleasures and pains, not just their own.

Nature of the tension:

1. Self-regarding motivation vs. impartial morality
  - If we are in fact motivated only by our own expected pleasure/pain, morality’s demand to sacrifice our own happiness for others can look psychologically unrealistic.
  - Example:
    - Morality may require me to donate a large part of my income to the poor.
    - But if I am only ever motivated by my own pleasure, I will not choose that action when it significantly decreases my personal enjoyment.
2. “Ought implies can” problem
  - Many philosophers accept: if you ought to do something, then you can do it.
  - But if Bentham’s psychological theory says I cannot be motivated except by my own self-interested pleasure/pain, then:
    - How can I be morally obliged to act impartially for the greatest happiness of all, when this might significantly reduce my own happiness?
  - This creates a tension between:
    - The descriptive claim about what we can be motivated by, and
    - The normative claim about what we morally must do.
3. Bentham’s possible move (not fully resolving the tension)
  - He can say: legal punishment, social disapproval, and internal guilt are pains, and social praise and self-respect are pleasures.
  - These can align one’s self-interest with general happiness—acting for others may in fact bring the most pleasure to oneself.
  - But:

- This depends on circumstances.
  - It doesn't fully remove the basic conceptual tension between a self-focused psychology and an impartial moral standard.
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## John Stuart Mill

### 1. Agreement and Disagreement with Bentham

Mill broadly agrees with Bentham that:

- Happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain.
- Morally right actions are those that promote the greatest happiness overall.

So Mill accepts:

- A hedonistic theory of value, and
- A utilitarian theory of morality.

But he disagrees strongly with Bentham about the nature of pleasure.

Bentham:

- All pleasures are the same in kind; differ only in quantity (intensity, duration).

Mill:

- There are qualitatively different kinds of pleasure. - Some pleasures are “higher” and more valuable than others, even when they have the same intensity and duration.
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### 2. Mill's Higher and Lower Pleasures

Lower pleasures (“pleasures of the body”):

- Largely bodily or sensory:
  - Eating, drinking, sex, physical comfort, rest, pleasant bodily sensations.
- Mill does not say these are bad or unimportant; they are genuine pleasures and part of a good life.
- But he thinks they are of a lower quality.

Higher pleasures (“pleasures of the mind”):

- Involve our higher faculties:
  - Intellectual activities: reading, learning, doing science or philosophy.
  - Imaginative activities: enjoying art, music, literature.
  - Moral and emotional pleasures: deep friendships, love, appreciation of beauty, acting from conscience and moral principle.
- These pleasures use and exercise capacities that distinguish humans from (most) non-human animals.

Key claim:

- Higher pleasures are more valuable than lower pleasures as pleasures themselves, even when we hold intensity and duration fixed.
- So two pleasures with equal intensity and duration can differ in quality, and the higher one is intrinsically better.

This is Mill's main disagreement with Bentham:

- For Bentham, a very intense, long-lasting bodily pleasure could equal or surpass any other pleasure.
  - For Mill, no amount of lower pleasures can compensate for losing certain higher pleasures, according to those best placed to judge.
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### 3. Mill's Argument for the Superiority of Higher Pleasures

Mill's argument can be set out in stages.

#### (a) Hedonistic starting point

- Mill accepts that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends.
- But he claims we can still recognize differences in quality between pleasures, not just differences in quantity.

#### (b) How can we tell which pleasures are better “as pleasures”?

He proposes a test:

- Suppose there are two kinds of pleasure, A and B.
- Ask those who:
  - Have experienced both A and B, and
  - Are competent judges—that is, capable of appreciating and enjoying both kinds.
- If:
  - All or almost all such people decisively prefer A over B,
  - And this preference is made independently of moral obligation (i.e., they simply find A more desirable as an experience),
- Then we can say that:
  - Pleasure A is of higher quality and therefore more valuable as a pleasure.

#### (c) Mill's empirical claim about actual preferences

Mill claims that, in fact:

- Those familiar with both higher and lower pleasures strongly prefer a life that exercises their higher faculties.
- They would:
  - Rather live as a human being with higher faculties, even if often dissatisfied,
  - Than as an unreflective creature who is fully content with only lower pleasures.
- Famous slogan:
  - “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

- If the pig or fool disagrees, Mill says, that is because they only know their own side of the question.

He also insists that:

- Many people who appear to prioritize lower pleasures have actually:
  - Lost the capacity for higher pleasures, due to neglect or circumstances,
  - Not calmly and knowingly chosen lower over higher while still fully capable of both.

#### (d) Conclusion

From this, Mill concludes:

1. Competent judges almost uniformly prefer pleasures involving higher faculties.
2. This preference would remain even if higher pleasures brought more discontent or more vulnerability to suffering.
3. Therefore, higher pleasures have a greater quality and worth than lower ones, as pleasures.
4. So in evaluating actions, we should not just count how much pleasure they produce, but also what kind of pleasure.

This upgrades utilitarianism from a purely quantitative hedonism (Bentham) to a qualitative hedonism (Mill).

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#### 4. Objection to Mill's Argument (from Lecture)

Objection: Mill's "competent judges" test may smuggle in non-hedonistic values and is empirically doubtful.

The lecture raised concerns along these lines:

1. Empirical worry: do people really prefer higher pleasures?
  - Mill claims that almost all who know both kinds prefer higher pleasures.
  - But in real life, many educated people who fully know both:
    - Often choose "lower" pleasures (e.g., mindless entertainment, casual bodily enjoyments),
    - Even when they have access to and capacity for higher pleasures.
  - This suggests Mill's empirical claim about the judgments of competent judges may be false or overstated.
2. Motivation of the preference: is it really just about pleasure?
  - Even when people do say they prefer higher activities (e.g., philosophy, art, moral action) to lower ones, their reasons often include:
    - Appeals to dignity, self-respect, nobility, or moral worth.
  - These seem to be values that are not simply about the felt pleasantness of the experience.
  - This leads to the charge that:
    - Mill is partly valuing the nobility or dignity of the activity itself, not just how pleasant it feels.
    - But then he is no longer a pure hedonist, since now something besides pleasure (e.g., dignity) is intrinsically valuable.

### 3. Why this is a problem for Mill's hedonism

- Mill wants to stay a hedonist: only pleasure is good as an end.
- His defense of higher pleasures relies on the idea that competent judges find them better "as pleasures".
- But if their preference is driven by non-hedonic considerations (like dignity, moral ideals, or social evaluation), then:
  - The preference does not show that higher pleasures are more pleasant, only that they are valued on other grounds.
- So the argument seems to:
  - Either undermine the purely hedonistic basis of utilitarianism, or
  - Fail to justify the claim that higher pleasures are intrinsically more valuable.

Summary of the objection:

- Mill's appeal to "competent judges" and to a "sense of dignity" looks like an attempt to rank pleasures using standards other than sheer pleasantness.
- This threatens the coherence of his view:
  - He claims to be a hedonist, but his argument for higher pleasures seems to rely on non-hedonistic values and perhaps on questionable empirical claims about what informed people actually prefer.