

Hedonism and Bentham's Utilitarianism:

Our understanding of hedonism is isolated to Bentham. In regards to pleasure and pain, he says:

'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.'

In this passage Bentham seems to endorse the following basic thesis about pleasure and pain, which we are calling hedonism:

Hedonism

Pleasure is the only basic good, and pain is the only basic bad. Other things are only good or bad derivatively, depending on whether they tend to bring about pleasure or pain.

Since pleasure is the only basic good, it would follow that for humans to live moral lives, we must focus on maximizing pleasure. Since pain is the only basic bad, it would follow that for humans to live moral lives, we must also focus on minimizing pain. This leads to the following maximization principle that undergirds utilitarianism.

Principle of Utility

We should always perform the action which will lead to the most goodness and the least badness.

Combining Hedonism with the Principle of Utility leads to Utilitarianism:

Utilitarianism

We should always perform the action which will lead to the most pleasure and the least pain.

*Notice that you could be a hedonist without being a utilitarian.

The last claim that Bentham endorses is not a claim about what we should do, but rather a claim about how we in fact do act:

Hedonistic psychological egoism

People always act to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their own pain.

Making a decision

So, having this understanding of Hedonism and Utilitarianism you may wonder how we decide on what is the correct moral action when in a circumstance. Sure, the hedonist is going to say it is the action which is most pleasurable - but how do we know which action that is? For

any action we may see as a possible action to take, Bentham tells us to weight the following seven factors.

Hedonic Calculus

1. Intensity
2. Duration
3. Certainty
4. Remoteness (i.e. how far into the future the pleasure is)
5. Fecundity (i.e. how likely it is that pleasure will generate other related pleasures)
6. Purity (i.e. if any pain will be felt alongside that pleasure)
7. Extent (i.e. how many people might be able to share in that pleasure)

So, when we employ this methodology we are supposed to be able to arrive at the action which will be the most pleasurable option available (see the example on page 16 that the book offers).

Nozick against utilitarianism (page 12):

The experience machine:

Nozick designs his example of the experience machine to show that egoism is false. Remember that Hedonism claims that one's life is good or bad in proportion to the amount of pleasure or pain it contains.

When we ask about well-being, we are asking what makes a good life. The hedonist gives a straightforward answer: more pleasure.

If this answer is correct, then one has a better life in the experience machine than outside it. Is this true? Some questions to ask yourself:

- Would you plug into the experience machine? Should you?
- Would you plug your child into the experience machine? Should you?
- Would you plug someone into the experience machine who begged you not to?

Suppose one answers 'no' to one or more of these questions. Does this show that hedonism about well-being is false? Also of interest are the objections listed from pages 17 - 19. Be familiar with:

- The Problem of Relevant Beings
- The Demandingness Objection
- The Tyranny of the Majority
- The Problem of Wrong Intentions
- The Problem of Partiality
- The Integrity Option