24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life
Fall 2008

Pleasure and the Good Life

1. Instrumental and Intrinsic goods

What makes a life good? In particular, what makes a life good for the one who lives it?

Consider Jesse. Jesse could be a neurosurgeon, or a carpenter; she could be a nun, or an artist. Which life is better for her? How should she think about what makes a life better or worse?

It seems that some things are good in a life because they are a means to other goods, i.e., they are *instrumentally good*. Some things are good in themselves, or are *intrinsically good*. For example, vaccinations and diets are only instrumentally good.

Happiness, however, seems to be good, not for what it makes possible, but for its own sake. Some things are good both intrinsically or instrumentally. Knowledge is a possible example. Gaining knowledge is a means to other goods (such as fame or wealth or wisdom), but also seems to be good in itself.

There are a number of ways that a life can go wrong. One way is if we are misguided about what will enable us to achieve what is good. For example, Astral Annie may believe knowledge is good and undertake to gain knowledge, but mistakenly study astrology, thinking it is a means to knowledge. Another way that a life can go wrong is that it is organized around things that aren't intrinsically good, though perhaps seem so. Stamping Sam may devote his life to his stamp collection, mistakenly seeing the organization of his stamps as an end in itself.

However, is there a way to determine what *really* makes a life go better or worse? Is there an objective fact of the matter? Is it possible for there to be a "science" of the good life? Jeremy Bentham thought so.

## 2. Bentham and the hedonic calculus

Bentham maintained that pleasure is the only (intrinsic) good, pain the only (intrinsic) bad. (611). So there is a simple answer to what makes a life better or worse: the amount of pleasure and pain it contains. Bentham's claim that pleasure is the only (intrinsic) good is *not* the psychological claim that humans always pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The point is a *normative* thesis about what is valuable.   It may be that some people knowingly expose themselves to pain without believing that there is some pleasure to be gained. However, such choices, on Bentham's view, would be misguided and would lead to a worse life.

But pleasures and pains are of different sorts and come at different times. How can we determine what life is best, even if we recognize the value of pleasure? Bentham suggests what has come to be called the *hedonic calculus*. Here is a rough idea of how it is supposed to work. First, consider the different axes on which we might compare pleasures (609):
1. Intensity (i)
2. Duration (d)
3. Certainty (P)
4. Propinquity (remoteness in time) (r)
5. Fecundity: "the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind"
6. Purity: "the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind"
7. Extent: "the number of persons to whom it *extends;* or…who are affected by it."]
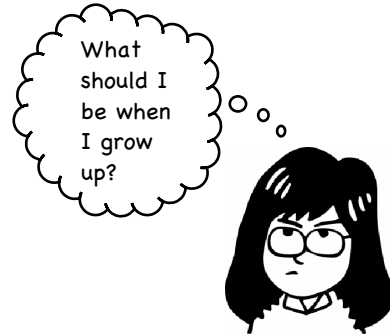
To simplify things, let's just consider dimensions (1-4) and with respect to a single individual.[1] How can we figure the hedonic value of a possible future such as this (boxes are pleasurable/painful experiences):
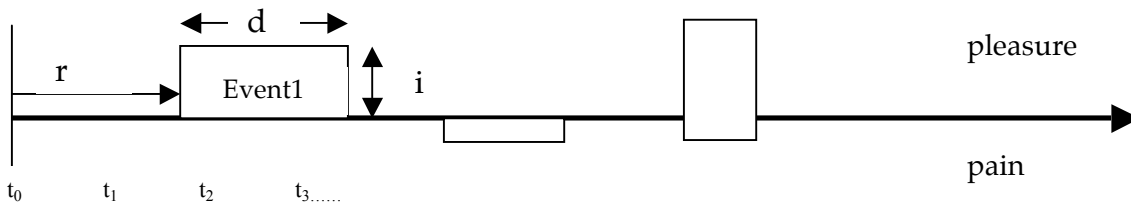
Begin with the hedonic value of a particular experience, say, e_1. Consider the *magnitude* of the pleasure to be the duration times the intensity:

> Magnitude = (d x i)

The magnitude, however, must be qualified by the probability of its occurring. The expected value of the experience is the magnitude times the probability:

> Expected value = (P(d x i))

The expected value, however, is further qualified by the remoteness of the experience. In general, we are more concerned with pleasures and pains that are in the near future, and less concerned with those that are distant in time. So immediate pleasures and pains should count for more. [Why? Is it that whatever pleasure we have reason to expect in the future, its magnitude is offset by the pain of having to wait or of exercising our willpower? Or is it that we only really care about immediate pleasure and we are only willing to wait for future pleasures because of the pleasure of anticipating them?]

In order to accommodate this, we need to specify a function that provides a weighting for remoteness. Some possibilities include[2]:

All my future pleasures and pains in the next month matter to me now, others matter not at all.

OR   f(r) =   1 if p < 1 month
                      0 if p > 1 month

Pleasures and pains matter to the degree that they are closer in time to me now.

OR   f(r) = 1/r

Are either of these plausible?

Using the latter (for the sake of argument), we can then define the adjusted expected value:
> Adjusted expected value (EV, r) = EV/r

So, compare the hedonic value of, say, *getting a massage (m) today,* and *getting a massage (m) one year from today* (perhaps you were given a gift certificate…).
Duration = 1 hour
Intensity = 8 (on a scale of 0-10)

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[1] Bentham was interested in calculating the broad consequences of my act for everyone, i.e., the goodness or badness of an act is a function of the total pleasure and pain it brings about. But we are only concerned here with the goodness or badness of a course of action *for the agent.*

[2] For an interesting exercise in defining such a function using a "future indifference curve", see
http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/calculus.html

Probability = 7 (for simplicity let's assume the probability of the pleasure will be the same for today and a year from today)

EV(m) = 7(1 x 8) = 56

Let's figure time in days, so having the massage today (assuming same EV) yields:

Adjusted EV (m, today) = 56/1.

Adjusted EV(m, today+1 year) = 56/365.

In order to calculate the hedonic value of a series of experiences, i.e., a particular future, we add the values of the experiences in that future.

Questions:
•	Is there a coherent and plausible way to discount for time? Is it rational of us to care more about the near future than the far?
•	What sense can be made of the *intensity* measure? Can pleasures really be measured along a single axis of intensity? Are different sorts of pleasures really comparable with respect to intensity?
•	How are we to figure in purity and fecundity?

3. Nozick and the Experience Machine

Bentham's hedonism is one instance of a broader class of theories that claim:

Whether things go well or badly for me is determined by the quality of my experiences.

Nozick argues that any such account is wrong about what is good in a life. His strategy is to consider any proposal about what sorts of qualitative experience are valuable, and then to imagine a machine that can simulate experiences of that quality.

Imagine a *great life:*

I fulfill my highest ambitions.
I love and am loved.
I both get and give everything I want.

Question: if you could be attached to a machine that could simulate the experiences of a great life, would you be willing to be wired up? Most of us will say NO!

So this suggests that a great feeling life is worse for me than a great life. There are things that matter to me more than the quality of my experiences. What are they?
1. *Doing stuff:* winning the Tour de France, writing a bestselling novel.
2. *Being a particular kind of person:* being a good mother, being a good scientist.
3. *Getting beyond a "artificial" reality:* accessing REALITY, not just illusion.
4. *Having satisfied desires:* having my son grow up happy, not just having the appearance (to me) of him growing up happy.
5. *Being in relationships:* loving someone, not just having the appearance (to me) of loving someone.

What *is* important in a good life?