

Introduction to Philosophy

The Nature of Morality: Hedonistic Utilitarianism

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- Jeremy Bentham, "The Principle of Utility".
- Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine".

Background

This passage from Jeremy Bentham argues that happiness alone has intrinsic value, and that our fundamental moral obligation is to produce as much happiness as we can. But here the focus is not just on one's own happiness; rather, in the famous utilitarian phrase, "everybody is to count for one and nobody for more than one". This view places priority on achieving the "greatest happiness for the greatest number", another utilitarian motto, and thus locates the virtue of beneficence at the heart of ethics. The selection from Robert Nozick, however, challenges the idea that happiness (at least when, following Bentham, happiness is equated solely with pleasure) is really the proper foundation for all morality.

Questions

1. How would you describe the "calculus" of pleasures that Jeremy Bentham lays out? Why is he concerned with pleasure? Bentham maintains that an action should be evaluated by the net pleasure of all involved, and not just by the amount of pleasure the person performing it receives. What argument could he have to reject egoism? Does this mean we must also care about animals, since they also experience pleasure and pain?
2. Robert Nozick claims that "we learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it". What is his argument to justify this claim? Do you believe it is true or would you rather use the machine? Why or why not?
3. Assuming that pleasure and pain are kinds of experiences (how could they not be?), then does Nozick's argument refute Bentham's claim that "it is from them alone to point out what we ought to do"? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?