

Objection to Utilitarianism: Pleasure is not the only good

One key objection to Utilitarianism is that pleasure is not the only good. In Jeremy Bentham's version of Utilitarianism we are told that moral decisions should be made on the basis of weighing up the pleasure and pain – that it is possible to calculate the intensity, duration and effects of pleasure and pain together with the number of people involved and arrive at a moral decision. There are various problems that this approach may have. One Philosopher, Robert Nozick, has questioned the whole approach. He thinks that the idea that pleasure is the only good is mistaken.

Nozick's pleasure machine

Robert Nozick asks us to imagine being plugged into a virtual reality machine. It is incredibly realistic and will simulate any life we choose. If you want to be famous, you will get it. If you want a successful relationship and career, the machine will feed this information into your brain. But it won't be real...

Nozick argues that if we were offered the opportunity to plug in to such a machine, the vast majority of us would not choose to do so. The reason for this is that we do actually value real life with its ups and downs and its real relationships and achievements more than the sensations of pleasure. This shows that pleasure is not the only good.

GOING FURTHER: Preference Utilitarianism

It might be suggested that the issue Nozick raises is only an issue in hedonistic versions of Utilitarianism and can be avoided by Preference Utilitarians such as Singer. If Nozick is right, it is because our preference is to be in touch with reality and it is not enough to be merely in a machine thinking that our preferences are being satisfied.

Preference Utilitarianism might also explain Mill's higher and lower pleasures. Perhaps these aren't actually different types of pleasure but instead when we talk about higher pleasures we are just saying that these are the types of things that most people prefer/have a preference for.

Preference Utilitarianism is also more focused on the removal of pain and unpleasantness as this is often more important to people's overall desires. eg) their desire to be healthy or in good relationships is more about the avoidance of pain.