The Semantics of Pleasure and Money

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Abstract

The utilitarian principle of maximizing pleasure is contrasted with the idea of increasing pleasure. Experiences of pleasures are compared with perceptions. Science is contrasted with technology. The aspect of money as a measure of a persons rights is contrasted with money as a measure of the capacity of a society to change its citizens and their environment such as to increase the pleasure of its citizens.

1. Common views of pleasure and money. A particular pleasure that actually is felt by a person has a duration and an intensity. By integrating the intensity over the duration one obtains the amount of pleasure felt. Viewed in this way pleasure becomes a quantity. However, from pleasure being a quantity in this sense it does not follow that one has to possess some empirical method by which one could measure the amount of pleasure.

Some think that pleasure is no quantity, however. Following Epicurus and Mill rather than Democritus and Bentham they do so because, as they argue, there are different and incommensurable kinds of pleasures that constitute complex pleasures, where the latter cannot be regarded as quantities. Nevertheless, this conception in itself does not exclude that each simple kind of pleasure within such a compound may still be regarded separately as a quantity in the way described above. A particular experience of a complex pleasure can then be regarded as multidimensional, such that the intensity and the duration of the pleasure in each dimension can be counted separately.

Some philosophers, like Moore (Moore, 1903), find the whole conception of intensity and duration of pleasures irrelevant or misleading in ethics and human conduct. This is so, because they seem to use a non-experiential and abstract concept of pleasure, an idea of pleasure rather than the experienced pleasure. It goes without saying that, in many places in philosophy where pleasure plays a crucial role, it is more accurate to regard the idea of pleasure rather than pleasure itself. In the motivation of an action the anticipation of pleasure often plays a more important role than the coming pleasure itself, where the latter is a spurious thing indeed that fate will often withdraw anyhow. Hence, also without regarding pleasure as a quantity with experienced intensity and duration these thinkers may very well use pleasure as the motivating factor for people’s actions.
and lives in the sense that people’s actions are determined by a their tendency or strive (inborn or acquired) to maximize their pleasure.

Hedonism as a particular attitude in life or as a particular ideology tends to become utilitarianism in the sense of a theory of human conduct, or of animal life in general, when factual experiences of pleasure is replaced by pleasure as a quantity that directs a person’s courses of actions (either by deliberate acts of will or by an inborn disposition).

Therefore, the quantity that is maximized in people’s actions and lives pleasure can be used without one having to consider pleasure as factual experiences of pleasure with certain intensities and durations. One can then recognize, without hesitation, also anticipations of pleasures that will never come through. Proceeding in this manner, the quantitative, and thus the one-dimensional, nature of the motivating and action determining pleasure will simply stem from the oneness of the individual and the one-dimensionality of time, viz the fact that each singular person must choose and realize exactly one of the mutually incompatible options he or she is confronted with at each singular point of time. These conceptual relationships leading to one-dimensionality simplify matters both in theory and in practice. They do it very much the same way and for the same reasons as money simplifies matters. As a (one-dimensional) monetary value can be ascribed to almost any kind of goods and services, pleasure as a one-dimensional quantity can be attached to any kind of actions, from the simplest to the most complex actions and from the instinctive ones to the deliberate ones.

However, what is left of pleasure as an experience if one uses pleasure in this broad sense as a motivating and directing factor? Why not simply talk of ‘the quantity that is maximized in human conduct’? someone could ask. There seems to be one good reason not to eliminate pleasure from one’s theories of human conduct. By using ‘pleasure’ or ‘happiness’ the internal, subjective and experiential or cognitive nature of the quantity becomes recognized and stressed, in clear opposition to behaviorist and operationalist approaches to actions. Money, on the other hand, quite clearly, directs people’s actions from outside.

1.1. Money and pleasure. Money measures people’s rights. The money a person can spend determines what the person can do (without being a criminal), where the person can live or go, what the person can eat, what the person can do with things (as owning a thing extends one’s rights to handle the thing), how the person can exert power and make others act in ways he or she wants. Money determines the set of possibilities from which one has the right to choose the option one wants to realize. The more money the larger the set of possibilities to choose from and thus the larger the set of rights to do things.

Assuming that people have a tendency or strive to maximize their pleasures or happiness, then more money implies more pleasure or happiness. The conclusion holds, of course, provided that (i) the extension of the set of possibilities that more money provides brings more pleasurable options into the set and that
(ii) people’s capabilities to maximize their pleasures are not impaired by the extending of the set of possibilities. When i and ii are fulfilled a person can achieve more pleasure and happiness by increasing the amount of money he or she can spend.

Therefore, by taking money into account the maximization of pleasures will involve also implicit deliberation about how much effort a person ought to put on earning more money and thus on extending his or her rights to do things.

1.2. Utilitarianism and beyond. Let $U$ be the fundamental utilitarian principle(s): People act (or ought to act) such as to maximize their pleasure or happiness.

By the practical syllogism I shall mean the following entailment: $U \Rightarrow C_P$, i.e. to draw from the premise $U$ the conclusion $C_P$, where $C_P$ stands for the societal programme: The society and the culture in which the people live ought to be engineered such that it increases their pleasure and happiness.

The practical syllogism can be ethically backed up by an ethical syllogism, viz the following entailment: $U \Rightarrow C_E$, i.e. to draw from the premise $U$ the conclusion $C_E$, where $C_E$ stands for the following ethical tenet: For every person it is ethically virtuous and righteous to strive at increasing his or her pleasure and happiness.

Professional philosophers may disagree, when I say that so far in this paper I have followed the lead of mainstream thinking on these matters. Nonetheless I think that the man in the street in any Western city or countryside would be able to read the text without stumbling on any logical, conceptual or ethical obstacles in it. However, then comes the twist.

2. The Semantics of pleasure. The practical and the ethical syllogisms are odd from a conceptual and logical point of view. This is so, because the syllogisms make a strange conceptual leap from ‘maximizes, or ought to maximize, pleasure’ to ‘ought to increase and increases pleasure’. The former means seeking for and choosing the maximal pleasure, whereas the latter means changing the maximum to something bigger. From a logical, conceptual and scientific point of view the leap from the one to the other involves something unfamiliar and odd. Therefore, the syllogisms have to depend on some implicit and tacit presuppositions. It is the objective of this paper to extract these hidden presuppositions and to examine them critically.

2.1. Utilitarian pleasure. The oddity of the syllogisms strikes the eye immediately when one sees the premise, the utilitarian principle $U$, in its natural context of other causal laws that can be expressed using extremality principles. Such a principle determines the factual causal evolution of a system as the one of all possible evolutions that maximizes or minimizes a certain fundamental dynamical quantity. Mostly more exact formulations require that one restricts the set of possibilities of variation to minor variations of the factual evolution.
This restriction transforms the extremality principle into a *stationarity principle* for “local extremalization.” In physics the quantity that is stationary (or extremal) for a factual path is often called the *action* of the dynamical system. Therefore the principles are mostly known as *action principles*. In this perspective $U$ reveals itself as a causal principle by which human actions and human lives (such as they can be observed) can be explained. To conclude from this (assumed) facticity some ethical or practical tenet or rules of conduct like, $C_F$ or $C_P$, seems extremely awkward.

One could perhaps accept a “weaker” ethical syllogisms that made what people actually do automatically virtuous and righteous and a “weaker” practical syllogism that made what people actually do to the leading political idea for a society and culture. This would be to assent a version of Leibnizian optimism regarding the actual world as the best of all possible worlds.

The stronger syllogisms that actually are at issue here encompass much more, namely the idea of actively increasing (or striving to increase or being obliged to increase) the fundamental dynamic quantity in question, here the pleasure or happiness. If $C_F$ and/or $C_P$ are consequences of $U$, then they will destroy $U$ as a dynamical principle.

If $U$ is no longer a dynamic principle by which human actions can be explained, then what is it? Perhaps $U$ should be regarded simply as a support for ideological tenets of how people ideally or rightheously ought to behave. Even so it seems hard to accept the syllogisms from a conceptual and logical point of view. From a logical, conceptual and scientific point of view the leaps from $U$ to $C_P$ and $C_F$ involve something odd, something that seems equivalent to denying facts or disavowing established truths or fundamental hypotheses about reality. Therefore, the syllogisms fall short and one is left with the mere conclusions $C_P$ and $C_F$ as ideological tenets with no support in facts or in any (utilitarian) hypotheses $U$ of human nature.

In general stationarity or action principles in the sciences explain and predict evolutions of courses of events by yielding the momenta, i.e. the pace and direction of the evolutions each point of time. A principle that lets a process evolve such that it increases and thereby changes the quantity that is used in explanations and predictions is stripped of its explanatory and predictive power. It makes the process become unexplainable and unpredictable. It remains unexplainable and unpredictable as long as there is no extended theory by which one could explain the process of increment internally as well as externally by including all the processes that are affected by the process of increasing the action. For the pleasure increasing human beings in their society such an extended theory ought the explain how the increasing of peoples pleasures and happiness affects themselves and their environment as well as how the very increment of pleasure comes into being.

Here a general comment is needed. Obviously a maximality principle like the ones in physics or the utilitarian principle of human conduct and society considered above cannot in practice be used for explanations and predictions of every phenomenon that falls within the scope of the principle. However, the very idea that such a principle governs physical phenomena and persons and their
society implies that one is justified in regarding external physical reality and persons, their society and culture, respectively, as sound, reliable, natural and comprehensible. By contrast, if one regards a society and a culture as governed by increasing of pleasure, then one is forced to regard the society and culture or one’s conceptions of them as defect, unreliable, unnatural and incomprehensible, as long as there is no extended theory of the kind described. The citizens and the social engineers of such a society do not understand by pleasure the concept that is central in utilitarianism.

The fallacy of increment: The implication \( I \): If \( a \) is the greatest among all in \( A \), then by making \( a \) even greater \( a \) is still greatest in \( A \). However, \( I \) holds if the increasing of \( a \) does not affect to rest of \( A \) nor the measure. The fallacy consists in assuming that these conditions are automatically satisfied. If they are not and the increment affects the rest of \( A \) or the measure, then \( a \) may not be the greatest among all in \( A \) after the increment.

2.2. Pleasure as a perception. One can do much more in pinpointing the oddity of the syllogisms, though. Living beings experience things, see, hear, taste, smell, feel something and among these things they also feel pleasure, happiness, pain and unhappiness, and anxiety. They do it in order to survive and procreate for their own benefit or for the benefit of the groups and the species they belong to. This life-supporting function of experiencing depends entirely on the experiences being correctly attuned to reality, of course. This state of affairs is well-known and unquestioned concerning the functioning of the (“five”) senses. However, it is seldom referred to when feelings are considered. Yet it is very hard to find reasons for why feelings, and among them feelings of pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness, would have to be exempted when it comes to the vital issue of experiences having to be accommodated to reality. This accommodation must rather be regarded as comprising the essence of the very meaning of all experiencing for all living beings.

Everyone agrees that seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling things in ways that is not correctly accommodated to how things are is hazardous or even fatal. A person who has such defects is considered ill and sometimes also as harmful to him- or herself or to others as to be held in custody. Why experiences that are not experiences by the senses, and among them experiences of pleasure and happiness ought to be treated differently in this respect seems unwarrantable. A person who is happy in situations where it would accord with reality to be unhappy has a defect that is likely to make the person harmful to him- or herself or to others, sometimes as harmful as to motivate custody for the person. Experiencing pleasure and happiness is like perceiving something that ought to attune a living being to reality and help it survive and procreate. An ideology that serves the end of increasing pleasure can hardly help persons survive and procreate but rather jeopardizes these basic functions in their lives. The citizens and the social engineers of such a society do not understand by pleasure a concept that has in its semantics serving the survival and the procreation of living organisms.
From a dynamical and biological (and thus also scientific) point of view experiences of pleasure and happiness cannot be the ethically good thing (in themselves) but at the very most only innate natural ways of experiencing the ethically good conducting. In this sense pleasure and happiness functions both as a rewards for good conducting and as a positive admonitions that directs actual or future conducting.

**The fallacy of feelings:** The idea that the function of feelings and emotions is quite different from the function of perceptions and that the former ones are exempted from the requirement that they ought to be accommodated to reality.

In view of the semantics of experiencing, and in particular of the semantics of experiencing pleasure and happiness, the two syllogisms reveal themselves as not only empty or invalid but as dangerously deceptive. Because, the syllogisms provide their conclusions with seeming but non-existing facticity and furthermore the conclusions themselves encourage people to manipulate their experiences and reality, which certainly must endamage the accommodation of their experiences to reality. Because, from a scientific and philosophical point of view changing reality or changing experiences *such as to retain*, or, even better, *such as to improve*, the accommodation of experiences of pleasure, happiness, pain and unhappiness to reality is a question way too hard to be approached in a rational manner. Every attempt on the question is bound to get stuck in the morass of the mind-body problem and other fundamental problems in philosophy.

Consequently, it ought to be the ethos of every scientist and philosopher to crack down on anything that resembles what here has been named the practical and ethical syllogisms.

3. **Science and technology.** Considering what has been said so far about the two syllogisms, there are certainly persons who feel provoked and who would claim that there is plenty of evidence that the technological and economical developments in Western societies (a) have increased the amount of human pleasure and happiness and at same time the developments (b) have attuned human experiences better to reality. The former, a, they regard as as an established fact (e.g. based on empirical investigations using questionnaires) and the latter, b, they support by the fact that technology (and economy) is founded on solid science, where science quite obviously enhances our knowledge of reality. Thus the same persons may hold that, although the practical and ethical syllogisms may appear surprising or even false from a conceptual point of view, plain empirical facts provided by latter day history of mankind show that the syllogisms work and are valid, nonetheless.

Here one touches upon the issue of engineering a good society, which, by being regarded as political, knocks off and makes ineffective every logical and conceptual reasoning. Therefore, I shall restrict myself to considering the relationship between science and technology, and further I shall do it from a purely conceptual point of view.
Every scientific theory or scientific observation that is sufficiently reliable to
deserve the attribute is bound to be the result of first applying some strict and
thoroughgoing restrictions and abstractions on the phenomena studied. Not
only are many scientific observations made in laboratories where the phenom-
ena under observation are cut off from their natural surrounding but the very
corcepts used in the labs and in the theories are the result of systematic abstrac-
tions where many aspects of the real world situations are eliminated. Without
such restrictions and abstractions the observations and theories could not fall
within the scope of science.

However, when on the basis of scientific observations and theories a technol-
gy is constructed and subsequently used outside laboratories and then further,
in economically successful cases, distributed on the market for a full-scale us-
age, then all restrictions and abstractions that are characteristic of science have
to be violated more and more all along from research, production, distribution
to consumption. This is not so by any unlucky accident or flaws but by pure
conceptual necessity.

All the strong requirements regarding truth and falsity, certainty, reliability,
safety, etc that science has to comply with must violated and simply taken
off in the full-scale usage of technology, even when the technology is based on
good reliable science. There is essentially nothing scientific about the usage of
such a technology. Because, the usage violates the most fundamental scientific
principles and therefore falls outside the scope of science.

Any technological construction that is built using all relevant scientific knowl-
edge that is available may collapse or turn out to be harmful, not despite, but in
full accord with the scientific knowledge. Because, scientific knowledge always
has the form of an implication: if $A$ is true, then $B$ is true, which implicitly
entails that if $A$ is not true, then anything may happen from the point of view
of the theory. A scientist knows that $A$ may very well not be true outside lab-
atories and without the restrictions $A$ places on the conditions. This applies
not only to buildings and machines, but to products such as food and medical
drugs, to methods used in psychiatry and pedagogy, to health directives, etc.,
Genuine side effects and accidents always exist and they are simply deducible
logical possibilities to which one cannot assign any probabilities.

The fallacy in what was called “the fallacy of increment” above stemmed
from neglecting that in the real world, unlike in descriptions, theories, models
and labs, things or aspects of things that are manipulated cannot isolated from
other aspects and from their surroundings. Thus the fallacy of increment is
actually a specific instance of the following more general fallacy:

The fallacy of analytocity: The fallacy of carrying over to reality (in an uncritical
way) one’s capacity to analyze and manipulate language, theories, models and
things in laboratories.

This fallacy is well expressed by Wittgenstein: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache
bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt” (Wittgenstein, 1922), when the passage
is not regarded solely as a declaration of a solipsistic metaphysics but as a
normative or evaluative promulgation of potency and possession: “What I can
do in and with my language I can do in and with reality and hence I can regard reality as *my* world."

The scientific community can in practice take no responsibility for the possible technologies it makes conceivable in a society where scientific knowledge is available to everybody and free enterprise prevails. It is tempting to call a technological culture of the Western kind a scientific culture. However, within such a culture the scientific community and its functions and objectives are very different from the ones within the technological and economical communities and firms, in many respect they are even opposite.

Obviously, the support of point b stated above about human experiences having become better attuned to reality in technologically developed societies does not hold. Point b itself seems rather shaky in the perspective of ecologists for which b is just one of their major issues of research.

Thus we are left with point a: the technological and economical developments in Western societies have increased the amount of human pleasure and happiness. Some seventy years ago, with half of Western societies ruined, no one found such a general claim very plausible. However, right now this sort of society seems victorious and it appeals to most people that are free to choose the kind of society they live in. One can thus conclude, most people want to increase their pleasure and happiness, some simply by spending the money they already got others by first becoming richer.

4. The semantics of money. We already noted that on a personal level money is a measure of a persons’ rights. If a person basically is a pleasure maximizing creature, then more money for a person means extending the person’s rights, or (legal) possibilities, among which he or she may choose the maximally pleasurable option. Some boundary conditions have to be satisfied, though, in order for the extension to have a real effect on the maximization: (i) the extended set of possibilities that more money provides brings more pleasurable options into the set and (ii) the person’s capability to maximize his or her pleasure is not impaired by the extending of the set of possibilities. This conception of money is compatible with utilitarianism (Mill, 1861) and libertarianism (Nozick, 1974).

However, if according to the practical and ethical syllogisms the pleasure maximizing creature actually ought to be regarded as a pleasure increasing creature, then more money for a person *ought to mean(!) not only extending the person’s rights but changing the person and/or reality (in the person’s environment) such as to increase the person’s pleasure and happiness. This additional aspect of the semantics of money can be identified as the motor in a society to create and and to use technologies that change persons and their environments such as to increase their pleasure and happiness. Money as a means to interchange, in a righteous way, services and goods and as a measure of a person’s righteous capacity to do this becomes in this way a means to change persons and the world such as to increase people’s pleasure and happiness and thus also a measure of a society’s capacity to do this. The worlds of the utilitarians and
libertarians is scattered.

The grammatical verb form 'ought to mean' above refers to a desideratum or a requirement \((M)\) that money ought to comply maximally (in a directive way) with the behavior of persons in a society, i.e. it ought to comply in such a way that persons pay and are paid for as many of their doings as possible. Consequently, money for the pleasure increasing creature and its society must also serve and measure the capacity of technologically producing an increase of pleasure in the society.

The aspect of the meaning and functioning of money in a modern society that has been focused on here sheds an unfavorable light on libertarianism. Because, the individuals in a modern society cannot be regarded as the untouchable sacred entities that are able to form their lives and the society they live in, in the way the libertarians wished they were.

5. The pleasure increasing creature and its society. The pleasure increasing creature and its society cannot be regarded as utilitarian, as it often tends to be described from the perspective of history of ideas and economics. A utilitarian creature and system of such creatures would on abstract level, at least, be something familiar and natural from a scientific point of view. By contrast, the pleasure increasing creature and its society are not following an extremality principle but they behave from a scientific and conceptual point of view in odd and unnatural manner. Therefore, the pleasure increasing creature and its society cannot be regarded as being rational and in accordance with science and laws of nature, as they are often described when one applies a perspective of history of ideas and sees them as off-springs of the Enlightenment. As we have observed, here, there are scientific and also purely conceptual reasons to think that the creature is systematically cutting off its original innate adaptation to reality. Therefore, there are reasons to regard the pleasure increasing creatures as not only irrational but as constituting an unsuccessful species and to regard their society as unsuccessful, too. This paper argues that the reasons for the unsuccessful consist of some fallacious leading ideas that direct the conduct of the society and its citizens.

References


