

Benthamian Utilitarianism and the Morality of Food Choices: Pleasure, Pain, Health and the Hedonic Calculus

Lateef Olanrewaju Shobowale¹

¹Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the ethical dimensions of pleasure-oriented food choices through the framework of Jeremy Bentham's hedonic calculus. In contemporary societies, where the pursuit of gustatory pleasure often eclipses considerations of long-term health, the moral legitimacy of indulgent consumption demands philosophical evaluation. Drawing on Bentham's utilitarian method of quantifying pleasure and pain, the study assesses whether the immediate satisfaction derived from consuming pleasurable but unhealthy foods can be morally justified in light of their potential health detriments. By systematically applying the parameters of the hedonic calculus which include: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. This analysis elucidates the moral trade-offs inherent in everyday acts of eating. The paper situates this inquiry within broader debates in moral philosophy concerning consequentialism, self-regarding ethics, and the rational pursuit of pleasure. The analysis further contrasts Bentham's outcome-oriented approach with alternative ethical frameworks, including deontological, virtue-based, natural law, and rights-based theories, arguing that these approaches lack the decision-making tools required for empirically driven, resource-constrained domains such as food systems and public health. It further argues that Bentham's utilitarian framework offers a coherent and enduringly relevant tool for evaluating the moral worth of actions motivated by sensory gratification. And also offers a pragmatically superior foundation for evaluating dietary practices, emphasizing restraint, long-term well-being, and collective welfare over immediate gratification. Ultimately, the paper contends that applying the hedonic calculus to dietary behavior exposes the ethical tensions between individual pleasure, collective well-being, and the moral limits of hedonistic reasoning.

Keywords: Utilitarianism, Hedonic Calculus, Food Ethics, Dietary Pleasure and Public Health Ethics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The moral status of pleasure has long occupied a central place in philosophical discourse, from the hedonism of Epicurus to the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham. Within this tradition, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are regarded as the fundamental motivations of human action. Yet in modern consumer societies, this principle manifests in complex and often ethically ambiguous ways—particularly in the realm of food. The consumption of foods engineered for maximal sensory gratification raises pressing moral questions: to what extent can the pursuit of gustatory pleasure be justified when it contributes to adverse health outcomes? Can the fleeting satisfaction derived from indulgence morally outweigh the potential pain of disease, discomfort, or societal health burdens? This paper explores these questions through the framework of Bentham's hedonic calculus, a systematic method for evaluating the moral worth of actions by measuring their consequences in terms of pleasure and pain (Bentham, 1907). Bentham's calculus, articulated in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and*

Legislation, proposes that moral agents can assess actions by considering factors such as intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent (Bentham, 1907). Applied to dietary behavior, this method invites a moral evaluation of food choices that extends beyond personal preference to consider long-term well-being and collective health (Nestle, 2018).

By contrast, many influential normative frameworks such as deontological ethics, virtue ethics, natural law theory, and rights-based approaches struggle to provide operational guidance in these contexts. Their emphasis on duties, character, natural purposes, or inviolable entitlements often sidelines outcome assessment and offers little basis for ranking competing harms or allocating scarce resources (Daniels, 2008). While philosophically robust, these approaches are structurally misaligned with the empirical and consequence-sensitive realities of food and health governance (Powers & Faden, 2006).

The argument developed here suites Bentham's utilitarianism within contemporary debates about moral responsibility, self-regarding ethics, and the ethics of consumption. By examining the moral implications of pleasure-driven eating, the paper seeks to illuminate the philosophical tension between individual autonomy and collective welfare, between short-term gratification and long-term suffering. Ultimately, this inquiry demonstrates that Bentham's hedonic calculus remains a powerful conceptual tool for navigating the ethical complexities of modern life, offering a framework through which the morality of everyday pleasures such as eating can be rationally appraised.

II. BENTHAM'S HEDONIC CALCULUS AND MORAL EVALUATION

At the heart of utilitarian moral philosophy lies the principle of utility, defined by Bentham as a principle which approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency it appears to have to enhance or reduce the happiness of the person(s) whose interest is in question (Bentham, 1907). Bentham asserts that Nature has placed a man under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure (Bentham, 1907). For Bentham, pleasure and pain are the fundamental moral currencies: what is morally right is that which produces the greatest aggregate pleasure (Bentham, 1907).

In order to put this normative claim into practice, Bentham introduces the hedonic calculus, criteria for measuring the moral value of actions by summing anticipated pleasures and pains. The calculus evaluates several dimensions: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent (Bentham, 1907; Griffin, 1986).

The first criterion is intensity. For Bentham, Intensity refers to the strength or magnitude of the pleasure or pain caused by an action. He asserts that individuals can differentiate between stronger and weaker experiences of pleasure and pain. Although he did not provide a precise metric, he treated intensity as a fundamental variable in moral calculation. For this criterion, Pleasures or pains of greater intensity carry proportionally greater moral significance than weaker sensations.

The second criterion is duration. This measures the length of time that a pleasure or pain persists. Bentham holds that moral evaluation must account for the temporal persistence of experiences. Longer-lasting pleasures contribute more to overall utility than transient ones, assuming comparable intensity. This criterion shows that actions that produce sustained well-being are morally preferable to those yielding brief gratification.

The third criterion is Certainty (or Uncertainty). Certainty is concerned with the probability that a given pleasure or pain will actually occur. Bentham recognized that moral reasoning operates under conditions of uncertainty. Expected utility must therefore be adjusted according to possibility, anticipating future changes in probabilistic and economic decision theory (Smart & Williams, 1973). It can

be deduced from this criterion, that a highly probable moderate benefit may morally outweigh an extreme but unlikely outcome.

The fourth one is Propinquity, which refers to how soon the pleasure or pain will occur. Bentham incorporated temporal proximity to reflect both psychological motivation and practical urgency. While he acknowledged human bias toward immediate outcomes, he treated propinquity as a rational evaluative factor. From this premises, it can be deduced that Immediate harms can outweigh delayed benefits unless the latter are substantially greater in scale or duration.

The fifth criterion measures the tendency of a pleasure to generate further pleasures, or a pain to generate further pains and that is what Bentham refers to as Fecundity. This criterion captures the causal propagation of consequences. Some actions initiate chains of benefit or harm that extend far beyond the initial outcome. However, actions with positive downstream effects are morally superior to isolated or self-limiting outcomes.

The sixth criterion is Purity, this criterion is to evaluate the degree to which a pleasure is free from accompanying or subsequent pain, and vice versa. He rejected the evaluation of pleasures in isolation. Many pleasures are "mixed," producing foreseeable negative consequences that must be factored into moral judgment. For him, unmixed pleasures are morally preferable to those predictably followed by harm.

The seventh criterion is the Extent, which refers to the number of persons affected by a pleasure or pain. Extent introduces the social and impartial dimension of utilitarianism. Moral value increases as the number of beneficiaries increases, reinforcing Bentham's commitment to egalitarian moral consideration. In other words, Benefits distributed across large populations may outweigh significant benefits to a small group, depending on other variables.

These criteria permit moral agents to evaluate and consider immediate benefits against long-term harms and to contemplate on the influence of actions on both individual and collective well-being (Singer, 2011; Lang & Heasman, 2015). Some strengths of this framework include its systematic approach to evaluating pleasure and pain, its capacity to highlight trade-offs between short-term gratification and long-term consequences, and its emphasis on the number of persons affected. Nevertheless, the calculus has limitations, such as difficulties in quantifying pleasure, neglecting qualitative aspects of human experience, and underemphasizing structural factors influencing choice (Mill, 1863; Rozin, 2007). Despite these challenges, Bentham's method remains valuable as a tool for moral deliberation, particularly in assessing pleasure-driven behaviors such as dietary choices.

III. ALTERNATIVE ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR LIMITED APPLICABILITY TO FOOD AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

This section is critically examined to check adequacy of some normative ethical frameworks when applied to food systems and public health policy. And to also set the stage for questioning whether these frameworks can meaningfully guide policy, or whether outcome-oriented approaches offer a more operationally viable foundation.

While deontological ethics, virtue ethics, natural law theory, and rights-based approaches each carry historical authority and moral intuition, they were not designed for domains driven by measurable outcomes and large-scale trade-offs. Food and health policy are fundamentally consequence-sensitive, operating under constraints of scarcity, risk, and population-level impact.

For Deontological ethics, it evaluates actions based on adherence to moral duties or universal rules, irrespective of outcomes (Kant, 1785/1993). Moral worth is derived from intention and rule-following, not consequences. However, Food and health policy is outcome-intensive-measured in morbidity, mortality, and nutritional adequacy. Also, deontology provides no principled way to compare competing harms or to justify trade-offs when all options involve some rights violation (Daniels, 2008).

However, Virtue ethics centers on moral character and the cultivation of virtues such as temperance and practical wisdom rather than action-guiding rules (Aristotle, 2009). However, virtue ethics faces the challenges of lacks decision procedures for institutional and policy-level problems. Food systems and public health operate at scale, requiring quantitative prioritization that virtue ethics does not supply (Hursthouse, 2013).

Another theory is Natural law. This theory grounds morality in objective purposes derived from human nature or divine order (Aquinas, trans. 1981). Moral judgments hinge on conformity to what is deemed natural. Its relevance to food and health consequences is weak. Modern food and health systems are explicitly artificial supplementation, vaccination-linked nutrition programs, genetic crop modification, and industrial food processing. These interventions demonstrably improve health outcomes while violating naturalistic assumptions. Natural law reasoning resists empirical override and therefore cannot respond flexibly to evidenced based health improvements (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2007).

Also, the frameworks of Rights-based ethics which prioritize the protection of individual entitlements such as autonomy, liberty, and bodily integrity-according to Dworkin-are constraint-oriented rather than outcome-oriented. They can prohibit certain actions but cannot rank competing claims when rights conflict or when resources are scarce. Food insecurity and public health nutrition require prioritization—who benefits first, how much benefit is produced, and at what cost—questions rights-based ethics is structurally unequipped to answer (Powers & Faden, 2006).

However, Food systems and health policy are empirically driven, resource-constrained, and consequence-heavy domains. Ethical frameworks that deprioritize outcomes may retain philosophical coherence, but they fail to deliver actionable guidance. In practice, relevance follows results: theories unable to evaluate aggregate harm, benefit distribution, and trade-offs are structurally misaligned with food and health governance.

IV. PLEASURE AND HEALTH CONSEQUENCES THROUGH HEDONIC CALCULUS

➤ *Intensity and Duration:*

The pleasure of eating is immediate and intense, but often fleeting, whereas negative health outcomes—such as obesity and cardiovascular disease—are long-lasting (Rozin, 2007; Moss, 2013). However, the intense relief from serious illness morally outweighs the mild pleasure derived from leisure activities (Driver, 2014). And Long-term benefits of well being gained by refraining from food that causes obesity, outweigh short-term pleasure from such good.

➤ *Certainty and Propinquity:*

World health organization has carried out a research that established strong causal links between dietary habits and disease, highlighting the predictability of harm and its temporal relevance (WHO, 2020). The results of moderation in dietary habits is preferable to the variability of the side effects, in which the probability of having a less harmful disease-out of critical ones that may that happen- is undetermined. A meal served immediately in front of you generates stronger satisfaction than the same dish scheduled for next week; regardless of equal or greater quality, the time delay weakens its influence on your choice.

➤ *Fecundity and Purity:*

Fecundity is about whether one good meal leads to more meals. A hearty, well-balanced lunch that keeps you energized, improves your mood, and motivates you to cook again tonight scores high on fecundity. It generates a chain of further pleasures. Whereas Purity is about whether that meal comes without unpleasant aftereffects. A dish that tastes great but leaves you bloated or sick is low in purity because the pleasure is contaminated by pain that follows. In other word fecundity asks whether pizza create more pleasure down the line and purity asks whether it avoid causing regret afterward.

➤ *Extent:*

Dietary choices affect not only individuals but also society, through healthcare costs and public health burdens (Lang & Heasman, 2015; Singer, 2011). When one individual regularly consumes sugary drinks for instance, the immediate effect is personal enjoyment and, over time, increased health risks such as diabetes. When this consumption pattern is repeated across millions of people, the consequences scale beyond the individual. Higher rates of chronic illness drive up healthcare spending, overwhelm clinics and hospitals, increase insurance premiums, and divert public funds away from other social priorities.

V. LIMITATIONS OF BENTHAM IN CONTEMPORARY FOOD ETHICS

Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism occupies a foundational position in modern food ethics, particularly in discussions of animal welfare and the moral permissibility of consuming animal products. But despite its historical importance, his utilitarian framework faces substantial theoretical and practical limitations in the hand of animal welfare when applied to contemporary food systems. According to Bentham's calculus, the suffering of a minority can be morally outweighed by relatively minor pleasures experienced by a majority. But in food ethics, this aggregate enables the moral justification of large-scale animal suffering for marginal human benefits such as lower prices or dietary convenience (Singer, 1975).

Also, Bentham's calculus in food ethics put little attention to the fact that it is not all pleasures are commensurable; food may involve cultural, aesthetic, and social dimensions beyond numerical assessment (Mill, 1863; Griffin, 1986). However, despite these limitations, Bentham's calculus provides a valuable heuristic for weighing the moral consequences of pleasure-driven eating.

VI. CONCLUSION

Bentham's hedonic calculus illuminates the ethical evaluation of pleasure-driven dietary behaviors, highlighting the tension between immediate gratification and long-term harm. The fleeting intensity of food pleasure, combined with predictable chronic consequences and collective costs, suggests that indulgent eating often fails to maximize overall well-being. Although Bentham's framework has limitations particularly regarding qualitative pleasures, cultural context, and structural determinants. Nevertheless, it remains a robust tool for reflective moral deliberation. Applying the calculus demonstrates that food pleasure is morally significant, requiring careful evaluation of its consequences for both individual and societal well-being. The utilitarian perspective thus encourages restraint and moral reflection, affirming that the ethical pursuit of happiness involves balancing desire with the avoidance of harm.

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