

Looking at Philosophy

*The Unbearable Heaviness of
Philosophy Made Lighter*

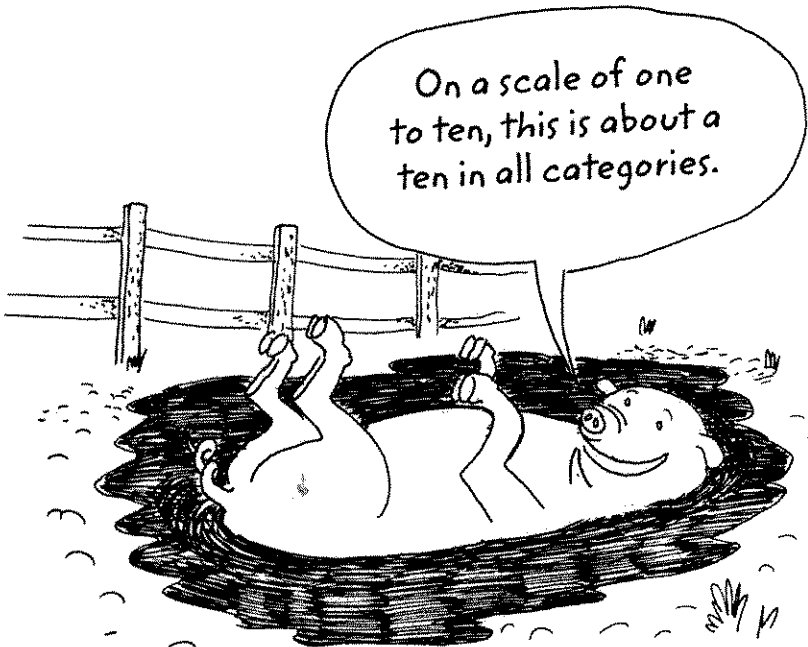
THIRD EDITION

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As we saw, Bentham believed that happiness could be defined in terms of pleasure, and he held that the study of pleasure could be refined to a science. Pleasures could be experienced in terms of seven categories. These categories could be articulated in terms of a set of seven questions:

1. Intensity (How intense is the pleasure?)
2. Duration (How long does the pleasure last?)
3. Certainty (How sure is the pleasure?)
4. Proximity (How soon will the pleasure be experienced?)
5. Fecundity (How many more pleasures will follow in the train of this pleasure?)
6. Purity (How free from pain is the pleasure?)
7. Extent (How many people will experience the pleasure?
[It is this category that makes Bentham's hedonism a social one.]])



When considering any act whatsoever, one should analyze it in terms of the pleasure it will produce in these seven categories, which Bentham called “the calculus of felicity.”

He thought that after some practice one could learn to apply this calculus rather intuitively, but until that point, one should actually work out the figures as often as possible. (Indeed, the story goes that Bentham himself used the calculus of felicity in choosing between remaining a bachelor or marrying. [He married!]) Try out the calculus on a decision such as that between studying for a chemistry midterm exam and going to the beach with some friends. Obviously, the beach party will be strong in some categories (1, 3, 4, 6), and weaker in others (2, 5). Studying will be weak in most categories but strong in a few (2 and 5, and 7 also, if other persons have an



Beach Guilt

interest in your succeeding in college). Are the assets of studying strong enough to overcome its deficits, in the face of the fun enticing you to the beach? (Of course, the guilt you would experience at the beach has to be taken into consideration too.) According to the "one person, one vote" principle, each person must decide for himself or herself.

Mill

John Stuart Mill, who was raised in strict adherence to Benthamite tenets, developed certain qualms about those views after suffering a nervous breakdown at twenty-one years of age. Among other concerns, he was worried about the beach/chemistry-type decision, or perhaps more about the six-pack of beer/Shakespearean sonnet-type decision. If the average person were given the choice between reading a Renaissance poem and guzzling beer while watching the 49ers on the tube . . . well, you can't force people to read poetry or watch football if they don't think it's fun. But in a democracy, under the "one person, one vote" principle, what if you gave people a choice of making public expenditures for the teaching of Shakespeare in universities or receiving a tax rebate? Mill feared the worst and thought it bode ill for the advancement of civilization. If we let ourselves be guided by the calculus of felicity, perhaps the pig would prove to be right; wallowing in the mud might rank higher than studying philosophy.

