

## Do we do everything we do to maximise our own utility?

Not everything we do is done to maximise our own utility.

To make my position clear, I must first define “utility”, as definitions of utility vary across the fields of economics, biology, psychology, and philosophy. Expected Utility Theory and Prospect Theory are frequently used within behavioural economics. The former assumes that rational decision-making is used to choose options that have the highest expected utility (Pettinger, 2018). In comparison, the latter takes into account the possibility of other goals being prioritised over utility (Pettinger, 2018). As these theories have already been thoroughly discussed, this essay will explore the question from a different angle, adopting a hedonic interpretation of utility as the desire to attain pleasure and avoid pain (Quinn, 2016). Through the application of Bentham’s utility theory, maximising utility will be considered as choosing actions that result in maximum pleasure and minimum pain (Joy 2020), though in this case for oneself rather than the ‘greatest number’.

Research into the biological origins of pleasure indicates that behaviour that seeks to maximise utility has evolved as it promotes survival (Sample, 2004). This essay proposes that, although we have evolved with an innate drive to maximise utility, there are psychological and socio-cultural factors which prevent everyone from always behaving in ways that maximise pleasure whilst minimising pain, meaning that not everything we do maximises personal utility.

From an evolutionary perspective, it appears that all behaviour is driven by an innate desire to maximise utility, which has evolved due to the survival advantage created. Darwinian theory suggests that emotions have an influence on the survival, as their role in discerning ‘good’ from ‘bad’ helps an organism seek beneficial stimuli as ‘rewards’, or avoid negative stimuli, thus escaping ‘punishment’ (Kováč, 2012). Emotions guide behaviour to maximise pleasure and minimise pain, enabling reinforcement contingencies to shape behaviour (Kováč, 2012). Through operant conditioning mechanisms – the shaping and maintenance of behaviour by its consequences (Flanagan et al, 2015) – we learn that certain behaviours are rewarded, and so their frequency is increased, indirectly encouraging behaviour that generates pleasure. Kováč (2008) suggests that, through an emotional evolution, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain increased survival chances and shaped humans as a hedonotropic species: i.e. one which tries to increase pleasurable experiences. Therefore, humans can be seen as having evolved with an innate, biological pre-disposition to maximise their own utility.

The process of “hedonic accommodation” means that, if a pleasant stimulus remains unchanged, the emotional response will decline as receptor sensitivity decreases. Therefore, the amount of pleasure generated by an action or experience will decline with each iteration, driving us to pursue new levels of stimulation to gain the same pleasure experience (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Brickman & Campbell’s hedonic treadmill theory suggests that life events have a temporary impact on happiness, but that we return quickly to baseline happiness (Diener et al, 2006), and so we will never reach a state of lasting happiness. This indicates that we will never transcend the quest for pleasure, and that pleasure-seeking is a continual driver of our behaviour.

There are ways in which humans can seek to maximise their own utility via indirect mechanisms such as altruism, which suggests that even when we behave in prosocial or selfless ways, we can still

maximise our own utility. Although we have an innate desire to seek pleasure for ourselves, humans are also a hyper-social and altruistic species, concerned with the emotions of others (Kovac, 2012). Given the value we attach to experiencing pleasure, we would expect some of our behaviour to be driven by wanting to generate pleasure for others. These acts may be genuinely altruistic, and not merely a way of maximising our own utility. Kin selection theory, which states that we can improve our chances of survival by providing aid to genetic relatives (Hamilton, 1964), can be used to understand how altruistic behaviour can be reconciled with the aim of maximising our own utility. This theory predicts that social behaviour evolves when decision-making takes cost, benefit, and relatedness into consideration (Bourke, 2014). In situations where altruism is chosen, direct fitness costs are surpassed by indirect fitness benefits to the individual. This illustrates that we can behave in ways that help others without making undue sacrifices ourselves. Application of these indirect mechanisms to utility suggests that we can enhance the utility of others whilst still also maximising our own utility.

The evolutionary perspective explored thus far suggests that we have evolved an innate desire to behave in ways that maximise utility due to the survival advantage created. As the entire population shares a similar genome (NIH, 2017), we would expect the biological mechanisms that drive pleasure seeking-behaviour to direct behaviour in a similar way in all humans. However, individual and cultural variations suggest that psychological and socio-cultural factors shape the nature and expression of pleasure-seeking behaviour. Therefore, to fully address the question, we must also consider how psychological and socio-cultural factors impact the extent to which we behave in ways that maximise our own utility.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions of indulgence-restraint, individualism-collectivist and orientation (Hofstede, 2011) can be used to categorise cultures to help understand how cultural norms can shape behaviour, and to identify cultures in which personal utility is not always maximised. Orientation can influence the timeframe over which behaviour intends to maximise utility. In cultures with a short-term orientation, people believe that some of the most important life events occur in the present, whereas those in long-term oriented cultures believe that the most important events will occur in the future (Hofstede, 2011). This suggests that decision-making in short-term oriented cultures is more likely to prioritise maximising instant utility: i.e. the utility experienced on a momentary basis (Read, 2004). In comparison, those in long-term oriented cultures are more likely to sacrifice instant utility in the hope of gaining pleasure in the long-term. This is congruent with Epicurean theory of pleasure, which advocates making decisions based on long-term self-interest, which may lead to behaviour that does not maximise utility in the short-term (O'Keefe, 2021). Overall, orientation supports the notion that everything we do aims to maximise our own utility but illustrates how culture can influence behaviour in terms of the time-frame over which utility is maximised.

In cultures of 'indulgence', behaviour that seeks to satisfy innate desires is broadly acceptable, and pleasure-seeking behaviour is broadly uncompromised. In comparison, satisfying these desires is repressed by strict social norms in cultures of 'restraint' (Hofstede, 2011), indicating that pleasure-seeking is regarded as negative, and thus less common. In individualist cultures, pleasure holds greater value (Wyer, Chui & Hong, 2009), as one's worth relies in part on personal enjoyment and experiencing positive emotions (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). In comparison, people in collectivist cultures are expected to control their hedonistic desires, and the importance of the 'group' means that other cultural values such as group harmony and self-transcendence are prioritised over pleasure (Joshnloo, 2014). Furthermore, the importance of 'in-group' goals (Triandis, 2002) suggests that accepted utility-maximising behaviours would be intended to maximise group rather than

individual utility. The diminished importance of the self and pleasure in collectivist cultures and cultures of restraint indicates that not all behaviour in all cultures is intended to maximise personal utility.

Even in cases where cultural norms allow utility maximisation, behaviour still may not always maximise utility due to psychological factors associated with the evaluation of pleasurable and painful experiences. Some argue that enduring pain is needed to enhance the enjoyment of pleasurable experiences. For example, Bastian (2017) found that participants derived greater enjoyment from eating a chocolate biscuit after immersing their hands in cold water (i.e. a painful experience). This shows that pain can help us feel pleasure (Bastian, 2017), suggesting that subsequent pleasure may be chosen over minimising pain, meaning not everything we do aims to maximise utility. To effectively make decisions that maximise utility, rational thinking is required. However, there are cognitive processes that prevent rational decision-making. Often, we make decisions on the basis of hedonic predictions using memories of past experiences (Kahneman et al, 1993). If all of our behaviour was intended to maximise utility, we would make decisions based on memories of experiences that generated maximum pleasure and minimum pain. Kahneman et al investigated this idea in their cold water experiment in which participants submerged their hands in ice-cold water, one group for 60 seconds, and the other for an additional 30 seconds, during which the water temperature increased by 1.1°C. Participants said they would prefer to repeat the second submersion, showing that the level of pain suffered at the end of an experience is perceived to be more significant than the duration of the painful experience. Consequently, participants made decisions that exposed them to greater pain overall (Read, 2004). This shows that cognitive biases can lead us to make decisions that lead to unnecessary pain, preventing utility maximisation.

Analysing the nature of human motivation in terms of pleasure and pain could be seen as taking a cynical view of human behaviour. Despite being a hedonotropic species (Quinn, 2016), some argue that humans are motivated by more than simply maximising utility. Higgins (2012) suggests that we have a fundamental desire to acquire value, control and truth, and have wider aims, such as to acquire skills, knowledge, and justice. We would expect the fulfilment of these more complex desires to generate pleasure, though their pursuit may not minimise pain, as knowing the truth, for example, may be painful (Higgins, 2012). This suggests that not everything we do results in maximum utility, as our behaviour is influenced by other factors in addition to pleasure.

In conclusion, through evolution by natural selection, humans have evolved with an innate biological drive to maximise pleasure and minimise pain for ourselves, and in some cases for others. However, the prevailing norms in a given culture, especially those associated with individualism-collectivism, indulgence-restraint, and long- versus short-term orientation, have a strong influence on whether maximising personal utility is deemed acceptable, and therefore the extent to which it directs behaviour. Furthermore, there are cognitive processes associated with the way we evaluate experience which mean that not all of our decisions minimise pain, thus interfering with our ability to always maximise our utility.

## **Bibliography**

Bastian, B. (2017). In Pursuit of Happiness: Why Pain Helps Us Feel Pleasure. *Psychology Today*. [online]. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-other-side/201706/inpursuit-happiness-why-pain-helps-us-feel-pleasure>. [accessed 23/06/21]

Bourke, A.G.F.(2014). Hamilton's rule and the causes of social evolution. *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences.* 369(1642): 20130362. Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1098%2Frstb.2013.0362>

Brickman, P. & Campbell, D.T. (1971). Hedonic relativism and planning the good society. "Adaptation level theory: A symposium". 287-301.

Diener, E., Lucas, R.E., Scollon, C.N. (2006). Beyond the hedonic treadmill: revising the adaptation theory of well-being. *American psychologist* 61(4) 305-314. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.61.4.305>

Flanagan, C., Berry, D., Jarvis, M. & Liddle, R. (2015). *AQA Psychology for A level.* 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Cheltnam: Illuminate Publishing Ltd.

Hamilton, W.D.(1963). *The Genetic Evolution of Social Behaviour.* *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 1- 16. [online]. Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1059.832&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. [accessed 29/06/21]

Higgins, E.T. (2012). *Beyond Pleasure and Pain: How Motivation Works.* Oxford Scholarship Online. Doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199765829.001.0001

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, Unit 2.* [online]. Available at: [http://mchmielecki.pbworks.com/w/file/64591689/hofstede\\_dobre.pdf](http://mchmielecki.pbworks.com/w/file/64591689/hofstede_dobre.pdf). [accessed 21/06/21]

Joshanloo, M. (2014). Eastern conceptualizations of happiness: Fundamental differences with western views. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15(2), 475-493. Doi: 10.1007/s10902-013-9431-1

Joy, A. (2020). *Would Bentham's Theory Of Utilitarianism Be Stronger If It Were To Define Interesting Perceptions?.* [PDF]. University of Exeter

Kahneman, D., Fredrickson, B., Schreiber, C., & Redelmeier, D.(1993).When More Pain Is Preferred to Less: Adding a Better End. *Psychological Science.* 4(6): 401-405. [online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062570>. [accessed 09/06/21]

Kitayama, S., & Markus, H.R. (2000). The pursuit of happiness and the realization of sympathy: cultural patterns of self, social relations, and well-being. In E.Deine & E.M. Suh (Eds.) *Culture and subjective well-being.* 113-161. MIT Press.

Kováč L. (2008) 'Finitics'. A plea for biological realism. *EMBO Rep.* 9: 703–708. Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1038%2Fembor.2008.138>

Kováč, L. (2012). The biology of happiness; Chasing pleasure and human destiny. *EMBO Rep.* 13(4):297-302. Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1038%2Fembor.2012.26>

NIH. (2017). *Studying genes.* National Institute of General Medical Sciences.[PDF][online]. Available at: [https://www.nigms.nih.gov/education/Documents/Studying\\_genes\\_final.pdf](https://www.nigms.nih.gov/education/Documents/Studying_genes_final.pdf). [accessed 14/06/21]

Olds, J. & Milner, P. (1954). Positive reinforcement produced by electrical stimulation of septal area and other regions of rat brain. *Journal of comparative and physiological psychology* 47: 419-427.

O'Keefe, T. (2021) Epicurus. *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.* [online]. Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur/#SH5b>. [accessed 11/06/21]

Pettinger, T (2018) Prospect Theory. *Economicshelp*. [online]. Available at: <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/glossary/prospect-theory/>. [accessed 28/06/21] Quinn, M. (2016).

Jeremy Bentham, 'The Psychology of Economic Man', and Behavioural Economics. *Psychology and Economics in Historical Perspective*. 3-32. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/oeconomia.2249>.

Read, D. (2004). Utility theory from Jeremy Bentham to Daniel Kahneman. Dpt Operational Research LSE. [online]. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/22750/1/04064.pdf>. [accessed 06/06/21]

Sample, I.(2004). The new pleasure seekers. *The Guardian*. [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2004/dec/16/research.science>. [accessed 18/06/21]

Shizgal, P. (1997). Neural basis of utility estimation. *Curr Opin Neurobiol* 7(2):198-208. Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0959-4388\(97\)80008-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0959-4388(97)80008-6)

Triandis, H.C.(2002). Individualism-Collectivism and Personality. *Journal of Personality* 69(6): 907- 924. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.696169>

Wyer, R.S., Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. (2009) *Understanding Culture: Theory, Research and Application*. Psychology Press. [online]. Available at: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Q\\_Xg3m\\_SmpcC&dq=Culture+matters:+National+value+cultu](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Q_Xg3m_SmpcC&dq=Culture+matters:+National+value+cultu)