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Reality Check: On Bentham's Preclusion of Reality's Effect on the Value of Experience

In chapter four of *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham erroneously concludes that the value of happiness is the force of pleasure or pain. Bentham lists modifying factors which help one measure the force of a pleasure or pain, yet leaves out any consideration of reality. Reality adds value to our experiences, even though we cannot directly measure this value through pleasure or pain.

Let us consider an example. Suppose I take a trip to see the Mona Lisa. In the Louvre, I enjoy myself and derive all kinds of pleasure from seeing the painting. Suppose that in the past several months there have also been several high-level art heists in which the thieves replace the original works with indistinguishable copies. After my trip, world-wide news breaks that the Mona Lisa is missing and has been gone for several months, meaning that the painting I saw was a counterfeit piece. This news pains me. I feel sad, disappointed, or even cheated that the Mona Lisa I saw was not the real thing. I think about how much better it would have been if I had seen the real Mona Lisa. It seems that reality, or rather the lack thereof, altered the value of my experience.

Bentham's description of pain number twenty, the pain of regret, almost saves his position. This is the only pain or pleasure where Bentham flirts with the idea of reality as bearing

on our happiness. In chapter five he says that "[a pain of regret] is grounded on the idea of a pleasure, which was never actually enjoyed, . . . but which might have been enjoyed. . ." This can be thought of as the pain of an unfulfilled possible pleasure, like the what-if that accompanies a bad date: if only I were prettier, we might have kissed. If one thinks of a possible world where pleasure could have been enjoyed, and this world is not the one that happened, then this is painful. For Bentham, this is because one 'misses out' on a pleasure one could have had, i.e. the possibility of pleasure is a pain.

We could try to defend Bentham by explaining the fake Mona Lisa scenario in terms of the pain of unfulfilled possible pleasure. The disappointment I experienced from discovering the Mona Lisa's falsity might be me mourning the possible pleasure I *would have* derived from the real painting. But this explanation cannot account for this example. The pleasure I derived from seeing the false Mona Lisa is of the same quantity and quality as I would derive from the real Mona Lisa. After all, the imitation was an identical copy and I believed it to be real, so what I experienced appears to me the same as the authentic work. The replication was perceived as the original, so the experience of the two is the same.

Yet the fact that my false experience produced equal happiness to a real experience does not detract from my disappointment. My pleasure derived from the painting remains unaltered, but I am now aware that I have missed out on something. It is not the *happiness* derived from reality that I missed out on, but something else entirely. If Bentham's account does not suffice, then why am I pained at the fraudulence of the painting? Even though I experienced equal happiness as if the painting were real, I am sad at the inauthenticity of my experience because it lacks the added value of reality.

Another scenario proves the converse to be true: not only does the absence of reality detract from the value of my experience, but the presence of reality may also add to it. Suppose that, knowing about the recent art heists, I was skeptical of the authenticity of the Mona Lisa and, at the time of viewing, believed what I saw to be a forgery. If, afterwards, the gallery verifies its authenticity, I feel pleasantly surprised that it was indeed real. The painting's reality was an added benefit to the value of my experience, even though I enjoyed it the same as if it were actually fake.

Consider the additional value of reality in art generally. Monetary value sufficiently indicates the worth of things; original art costs significantly more than reproductions of the same works. But one might object that money is a confounding variable in our exploration of value, so we may strengthen the example and not consider money at all. If money were no object and you could only use the painting for personal enjoyment (you cannot profit money or status), given the choice between the original and a reproduction, which would you choose? Even though we would derive the same viewing pleasure from the real and the fake, we rationally choose the original.

Bentham would think that the original and the reproduction are of equal value because they produce equal happiness. If they were of equal value, then we would have no reason to choose one over the other. The choice between two equal options could be irrationally decided by a coin flip, but this is not the case and we understand that the choices are unequal, therefore choosing the more valuable option. Thus, the presence of rational choice further proves a differing value between the real and unreal.

Value in reality is not unique to art– take diamonds, for another example. Synthetic and natural diamonds are chemically and optically identical. Engagement rings are almost

exclusively used for personal pleasure, to enjoy the sparkle on your finger and the symbol of your love. Having a lab-grown diamond on one hand and a mined diamond on the other would produce identical happiness. From your experience alone, ignorant of reality, you would value them the same because your happiness is the same. But once I told you which diamond was natural, you would likely, suddenly have a preference based on their authenticity alone. Armed with the knowledge of reality, you can differentiate the value of two seemingly identical experiences.

We do not value reality for the happiness it produces because, as shown, happiness derived from actuality is sometimes equal to the happiness derived from falsehood. If our happiness derived from falsehood and reality are equal, yet their values are different, then their values must not be equal to the happiness they produce. If happiness and value can be different, then the forces of pleasure and pain are not the only valuable factors of experience. The reality of our experiences, then, contribute to our experiences' value.

Here one might object that it is not reality itself that adds value, but instead our belief in reality: imagine that I saw the real Mona Lisa, but after my trip a skeptical friend convinced me that it was fake. This *belief* in the falsehood of the painting would produce the same sadness or disappointment as if it were actually fake, meaning that it is only my belief in reality or unreality that adds or subtracts value to my experience.

Similarly, if I saw a fake Mona Lisa but went my whole life believing it was real, I would not *experience* any difference. A persistent ignorance of reality could preserve my pleasure or pain as I experienced it, and therefore preserve the experience's value– 'what we don't know can't hurt us'.

Though seemingly formidable, these objections are easily overcome with the help of our sympathetic and omniscient friend, the impartial rational observer. A spectator watching a) me enjoying a real painting and b) me enjoying a fake painting understands that version a's experience is of a higher value, despite their equal pleasures. The spectator might even pity me in scenario b, certainly because I am being deceived, but fundamentally because I am oblivious to the actual value of my experience. I am missing out not on the pleasure of reality, but rather the value of it.

The Truman Show, directed by Peter Weir, might help us understand this response to the objection through the lens of the impartial rational observer. Truman, the main character of the movie, lives his entire life on a T.V. set. He is ignorant of this fact and believes his life to be real, despite the product placement and hired actors. Watching this movie produces a certain level of pity for Truman; sure, we feel sad for him because he is being lied to, but this sadness stems from the sheer fact that what he experiences is not real. Undeniably, there is something sad about a life that is entirely fabricated or manufactured. *Why* this is sad is the topic of a different paper, but merely the fact that a false life is less valuable than a real one is proof enough for our discussion.

Truman eventually discovers his predicament and escapes the set. Even if he never did, though, we (the impartial rational observers) would still pity Truman for the value of life he went without knowing. His persistent *belief* in reality would not make the value of his life equal to that of a real one. Truman's ignorance might be blissful enough for him, but it cannot change the fact that his contrived, false life is less valuable than a real one.

These objections, however, are only overcome by considering the objective. Bentham's empiricist account of pleasure and pain attempts to trap us in the subjective, but he cannot avoid

the objective entirely. Simply by discussing the pains produced by possible worlds (the pain of regret), Bentham concedes that the objective affects his subjective world; reality, or lack thereof, produces felt pleasures and pains, as seen in the Mona Lisa example. When we limit ourselves to the world as it *seems*, we prevent ourselves from considering the world as things *are*. Bentham's method cannot account for value added by reality because its worth exists independently of our experiences or beliefs. If and when our physical and perceived worlds differ, Bentham's position fails. We can easily, intuitively recognize the value of reality, but our imprisonment in our perceptions cloaks the inequality of experience and reality. But just because Bentham does not allow us to see reality's value does not mean it is not there; it is hidden behind the curtain of hedonism. Unfortunately for Bentham, pleasure is not the only measure of value.

Works Cited

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The Truman Show. Directed by Peter Weir. Paramount, 1999.