

# As to the Term "Hedonic Calculus" or the "Calculus of Advantage"

Post by "Cassius" of February 27, 2022 at 7:26 AM

There have been several mentions of the term "hedonic calculus," and in doing some reading I of  
of pain from pleasure holds good. Upon this notion depends the so-called Calculus of Pleasure. This title is neither ancient nor precise; it is no more a calculus of pleasure than of pain and it might more rightly be called a calculus of advantage. The supporting text runs as follows: "The right way to judge all these pleasures and pains is by measuring them against each other and by scrutiny of the advantages and disadvantages." <sup>04</sup> Since it is postulated that continuous happiness is possible, it follows that the process is always subtraction. The pain is subtracted from the pleasure.

Cite is to the letter to Meneoceus, which Bailey has as:

[130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

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Post by "Don" of February 27, 2022 at 7:55 AM

Agreed. The term is definitely not ancient. It appears to have started with Bentham:

[Felicific calculus - Wikipedia](#)

The Epicureans seemed to have consistently used "choices and rejections" as the key phrase: αἵρεσιν καὶ φυγῆν (haireisin (kai "and") phugēn).

Here's my translation of 130, maybe a little more literal than Bailey:

### Quote from Epicurus in Letter to Menoikeus

[130] So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, not all are elected; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned. It is proper when judging these things to consider what is advantageous and what is not advantageous for you; in other words, what the consequences will be. We consult the consequences of our actions; because, on the one hand, pleasure over time can lead to pain; and on the other hand, pain can lead to pleasure.

Hedonic calculus also seems to be popular with positive psychology researchers, as well as hedonic treadmill. I think we can potentially learn a lot from this field of research as long as we don't get hung up on terms and approach with a critical eye.

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### Post by "Cassius" of February 27, 2022 at 8:46 AM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Hedonic calculus also seems to be popular with positive psychology researchers, as well as hedonic treadmill. I think we can potentially learn a lot from this field of research as long as we don't get hung up on terms and approach with a critical eye.

Also agreed. Unfortunately the associations those guys and most people attached to the word are almost uniformly negative. I remember when I was much younger some of the older people would call unruly children "[You little Hedon!](#)"

#### ABOUT ME



I was that kid at the first grade birthday party sitting happily at the table, having a moment with my chocolate cake, while all the other kids played outside like normal children.

"She's a little hedon," a family friend once observed of two-year-old me.

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### Post by "Don" of February 27, 2022 at 8:52 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

unruly children "You little Hedon!"

LOL! I always thought that was "little Heathens" 😄

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**Post by "Cassius" of February 27, 2022 at 8:55 AM**

I think BOTH and maybe you're right that I have heard "heathen" more than hedon - but I know I have heard "you little hedon" and googling produces other instances beyond what I posted.

We're going to have to find ways to rehabilitate the word -- maybe name some cats and dogs "Hedon" and post cute pictures of them across the internet 😊

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**Post by "Godfrey" of February 27, 2022 at 2:31 PM**

A problem that I have with the term "hedonic calculus" is that, to me, it implies a degree of mathematical precision in the consideration. Such precision generally doesn't exist, and tends to send people down a very mechanistic path of decision making when in fact there's a large intuitive component to these considerations.

It makes perfect sense that it started with Bentham!

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**Post by "Don" of February 27, 2022 at 3:04 PM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

implies a degree of mathematical precision

Wasn't it literally adding up the hedons and the dolors?

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## **Post by “Eikadistes” of February 27, 2022 at 3:52 PM**

he [Don](#) e

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of February 27, 2022 at 4:01 PM**

There are different levels of choices in life. There are simple everyday decisions that we can easily use our "gut" to decide, such as whether to cook beans or chicken for dinner. And many simple decisions don't cause much of a long-term impact.

But for big life decisions, it can require some decision making "calculus". And some big decisions can be very difficult to make when they are "hard choices" -- meaning that either one will greatly impact your life, but yet neither one seems better than the other (both are on par).

The only way through is to ask yourself "Who do I want to be?" -- to see that each choice will create something new in your life. Then you commit to get behind that choice to become that person. (These ideas come from Ruth Chang, professor of jurisprudence at the University of Oxford).

I still think there is something useful about the "hedonic calculus"... [Martin](#), you are really good with explaining "hedonic calculus" for big decisions, can you help out by adding in your explanation to this thread?

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## **Post by “Cassius” of February 27, 2022 at 4:05 PM**

The award in this thread for best answer goes to Nate!

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## **Post by “Godfrey” of February 27, 2022 at 4:49 PM**

For a thought experiment, how do you calculate who is the single poorest person in the world?

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## Post by “Cassius” of February 27, 2022 at 7:32 PM

I have no idea!

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## Post by “Joshua” of February 27, 2022 at 7:46 PM

Interesting question, Godfrey! Here are a few of the many potential answers I can think of;

"The poorest person in the world is the person with the..."

1. Lowest net worth in U.S. dollars.
2. Lowest net worth and worst prospects for future wealth.
3. Largest negative cash flow relative to purchasing power.
4. Lowest net worth, living in a country with the worst score on the Human Development Index.
5. Least remaining time, and with the most troubles and the least blessings.
6. Most disagreeable personality, and who has spurned all friends, family, and loved ones.
7. Darkest secrets, and the most to fear from being found out.
8. The greatest degree imaginable of human suffering.

The pecuniary answers are the most obvious, but for many may turn out to be the least important.

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## Post by “Don” of February 27, 2022 at 8:36 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

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LOL! Well played, @Nate , well played! If you put it that way, what other philosophy \*could\* I have been attracted to! 😊

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## Post by “Godfrey” of February 27, 2022 at 8:45 PM

That was an out-of-left-field example of calculating something nebulous; I was thinking of it as an example of the issues that I have with "hedonic calculus". [Joshua](#) most ably listed the types of factors that I would consider. How can you calculate 6, 7, 8 or even 5? On the other hand, it's relatively straightforward to calculate highest net worth individual: just add up the dollars. To me, "hedonic calculus" implies a straightforwardness that is deceptive, and as per Joshua's list is a great example of the shortcomings of utilitarianism vs EP.

There are times when it's useful to make lists of pros and cons of various options that one is considering. One could even attempt to weight them to account for one's feelings and intuitions. There is information to be gleaned from this exercise, but often the conclusion reached by doing such an exercise is overridden by one's feelings and intuitions (at least in my experience!)

While there some situations where you can just add up hedons and dolors, often it's not that simple and almost always the "equation" needs confirmation from the Feelings. I gravitate toward the phrase "choices and rejections" as it seems to me to imply a more open-ended process than "hedonic calculus". At the same time it seems to me to be a more direct statement of the actual process. I guess the Epicureans were on to something!

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## Post by “Joshua” of February 27, 2022 at 9:12 PM

And not just summing the hedons and the dolors, but submitting the decision to the test of 7 other variables!

### Quote

To be included in this calculation are several variables (or vectors), which Bentham called "circumstances". These are:

- Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
- Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
- Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
- Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
- Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.

- Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
- Extent: How many people will be affected?

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## Post by “Martin” of February 28, 2022 at 10:59 AM

I keep using the term "hedonic calculus" because I do not know a better currently used term although I fully agree with Godfrey's comment #6.

The listed considerations in other comments of this thread are all useful. My description is meant to complement them:

We use our knowledge and experience to estimate whether it is likely that the considered action produces the desired outcome and that this outcome actually produces the expected pleasure. A severely adverse outcome needs to be expected to be very unlikely to take the risk.

We consider this for all feasible options we would consider and choose the one which appears to be the most efficient or which we simply like the most among several good options.

We should not worry too much about actually hitting the maximum pleasure. It is enough if the result provides considerable net pleasure which is worth the pain in preparations or consequences.

Here are some examples:

I occasionally go for a zipline adventure because before the first time I knew from other experiences that viewing nature from an elevated but close perspective and gravitational and inertial sliding are pleasurable, and I have only moderate fear of height, and I know from the first time that a zipline flight is indeed extremely pleasurable and because I expect the probability of a serious accident to be very low based on that I read about only 2 serious accidents (one high impact with bone fractures under circumstances which do not apply to me, one fatal impact which could have been mitigated by appropriate action of the victim, no falls from snapped lines or harness failures so far) and because the way the lines, break systems, harnesses and procedures are set up appears to be safe.

Already as a kid, I felt great pleasure from knowing stuff and noticed that learning was mostly pleasure but manual work was mostly unpleasant. I figured out that a university degree would facilitate finding a job which I mostly enjoy and which would pay enough to get me out of the somewhat adverse working-class environment in which I grew up. So I put in a lot of effort in

studying the subjects which I liked the most to a high degree for maximum choice although the long study would keep me poor for an extended period.

A case where math can actually contribute to the hedonic calculus is the consideration to buy a car: The total cost of acceptable alternatives for my transport needs is much lower than cost of ownership of a car. Other reasons against a car are the displeasure about its carbon foot print, feeling guilty if I cause an accident, the risk of injury from an accident, the worry about deterioration, theft and sabotage. For me, the greater flexibility in transport and the maybe only imagined facilitation of getting a girl-friend do not weigh up all these disadvantages. Therefore, I never owned a car and currently, I have no plan to ever buy one. Only unexpected changes in circumstances might change that.

I chose based on hedonic calculus to have no fridge, no TV, no washing-machine, no dish washer and no other expensive status symbols in the apartments where I stay alone. However, I am not a minimalist because my rooms are full of stuff which I bought or collected mostly for pleasure.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of February 28, 2022 at 11:51 AM

### [Quote from Martin](#)

We use our knowledge and experience to estimate whether it is likely that the considered action produces the desired outcome and that this outcome actually produces the expected pleasure. A severely adverse outcome needs to be expected to be very unlikely to take the risk.

We consider this for all feasible options we would consider and choose the one which appears to be the most efficient or which we simply like the most among several good options.

We should not worry too much about actually hitting the maximum pleasure. It is enough if the result provides considerable net pleasure which is worth the pain in preparations or consequences.

Thank you Martin 😊 And I think this looks like a mix of reason and intuition, which is helpful for me to see. With certain decisions we will want to take into account and consider our values regarding safety and economic costs -- which makes sense with big important decisions.

[Don](#) and [Joshua](#), hedons and dolors, and these Bentham variables are generally only in regard to bodily sensations? And I would propose that the phrase "hedonic calculus" is good for bodily

sensation, such as to decide if one would benefit from a second helping at dinnertime -- or how likely will a second helping cause one to feel unpleasantly full -- but then the shortcoming here is that one could still gain too much weight over time because the brain often delays the fullness signal (and it is a subjective decision about what weight is unhealthy). Over-eating makes one feel sleepy and lethargic. Extra pounds make exercise more difficult. You could argue regarding the "extent" -- everyone you know and who sees you will judge whether or not you are carrying extra pounds. You are what you eat in that sense. Also this shows how the variables aren't broad enough, because of extended time and personal values. There is a time component missing and a long-term happiness or long-term pain variable.

But when it comes to purely mental pleasures, then instead of the phrase "calculus of advantage" maybe the phrase "calculus of enjoyment"? -- Such as when deciding which hobbies to pursue, since we only have limited time.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of February 28, 2022 at 3:16 PM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

But when it comes to purely mental pleasures, then instead of the phrase "calculus of advantage" maybe the phrase "calculus of enjoyment"? -- Such as when deciding which hobbies to pursue, since we only have limited time.

Personally, I'd replace the word "calculus". "Consideration" maybe? Although "choices and rejections" per [Don](#) might be the most historically accurate, and it seems like the best phrase to me. It describes exactly what is being dealt with rather than trying to invent a term for the process. As per Epicurus, it should be immediately clear what our words mean.

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### **Post by “Don” of February 28, 2022 at 3:30 PM**

I'm currently listening to the book *The Knowledge Illusion*

#### [The Knowledge Illusion — Philip Fernbach](#)

I'm only on chapter 4, but they've been talking about the unique capacity of humans to engage in "causal reasoning"

[Causal reasoning - Wikipedia](#)

with an eye to the consequences/effects of one's actions or diagnosing the causes of one's current situation to determine future actions.

This whole thing struck me as linked to making choices and rejections.

Liked I said, just started the book but felt it's food for thought.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 28, 2022 at 3:44 PM**

[Quote from Martin](#)

no fridge,

Now THAT's where I personally draw the line for sure!

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of March 1, 2022 at 11:35 AM**

[Quote from Joshua](#)

"The poorest person in the world is the person with the..."

And now I am wondering about the happiest person?

The happiest person in the world is the person who:

1. Sleeps soundly and dreams good dreams at night
2. Wakes up feeling refreshed and enthusiastically leaps out of bed with a smile
3. Drinks a single cup of coffee with breakfast every morning and feels mentally sharp
4. Lives unknown yet surrounded by loving friends and family
5. Has an enjoyable work, craft, or hobby

6. Lives according to basic simple human needs (lives free from societal pressures for wealth, status, and fancy house and clothing)
7. Studies, or keeps in mind, the principles of a happy and pleasurable life together with like-minded friends and family
8. Every day does one or more pleasurable activities:
  - a. a meal shared with family/friends
  - b. an engaging discussion on wise philosophy
  - c. a conversation sharing of happy past memories
  - d. a conversation describing gratitude or savoring of a current good thing (a lovely view at the local park, beautiful flowers in bloom down at the street corner, the best cheese now available for purchase at the grocery store, etc.)
  - e. enjoying nature -- an enjoyable stroll either in delicious solitude, or as lively boisterous hike with friends
  - f. enjoyable sensations -- such as a bath or shower, and then the feeling of enjoyment of nice moisturizer or ointments for the body (even simply using coconut oil), a good stretch of the body, a nice cool glass of water on a hot day,....etc. etc. etc.
9. Feels at ease and content with life (is not troubled by stress, worries, fears, or feelings of being "too busy")
10. Has deep and supportive relationships with friends and family, which arise out of an agreeable disposition -- exhibiting kindness, friendliness, good-will, patience, curiosity, benevolence, honesty, trust-worthiness, and optimism, etc.

Is there anything else to add to this list?

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**Post by “Godfrey” of March 1, 2022 at 12:03 PM**

11. Has a deep and abiding sense of awe at the material universe and our place in it.