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Pleasure Theory

An introduction to *PMPO*

The following (DRAFT SLIGHTLY CORRECTED ON 28/APR/2008, FAR FROM BEING A PRINTABLE VERSION) is an outline of my decision theory². The name of this theory is due to the fact that this theory mainly consists in a precise definition of the pleasure. Any suggestion or criticism is appreciated. However, the use of original ideas contained in this material has to be referenced to the present paper.

Coherently with my philosophical context, I will introduce my *Pleasure Theory* by the following:

Derivation by construction

Let's conventionally set 1 to be the greatest value of happiness we've ever experienced³.

At this point, a completely-trustworthy god appears and imposes you a decision: you must choose between experiencing happiness 0.1 or happiness 1 for the whole future⁴.

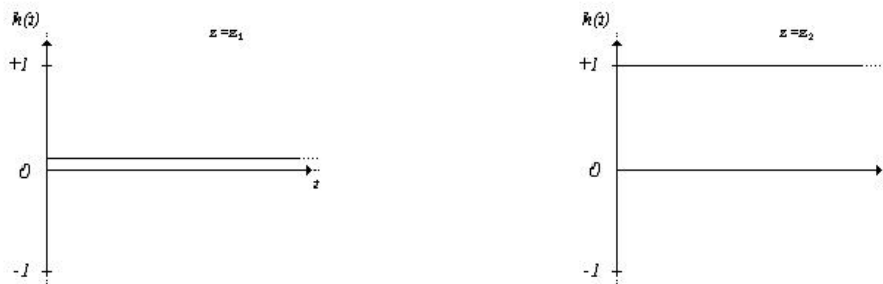


Figure 1

Then you choose the latter option.

If you really believe to be eternally happier about the second option (despite what your morality is⁵) then, necessarily, you prefer the second option more than the first one. I'm sorry for all of you who have objections, but you can't "not be happy" about the choice of the latter option, otherwise you would contradict yourself: about z_2 , you're not

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²I devised it independently in the summer 1999, before I had any knowledge of philosophy and economics (about utilitarianistic-like theories) or quantum theory (about formalisms of the expectation value).

³For example, this contemplates the possibility of a future in which we can experience a higher happiness than what we've ever experienced. This instance happened several times since we were born.

⁴Or you will be condemned to experience eternal infinite pain if you don't choose.

⁵That is to say, *according* to and *in agreement* with whatever morality you may have. Therefore choosing the happiest option couldn't be immoral, because, by hypothesis, it is the subjective happiness according to one's own moral values.

just happy, but the happiest about all choices you can do; being the happiest seems to me rather in contradiction⁶ with not being happy.

Let's suppose now a slightly different case. The god imposes you a different decision: you'll always have happiness 1 except for a finite interval of time in which you must choose between happiness 1 with probability⁷ 0.1 and happiness 0 with probability 0.9 or happiness 1 with probability 0.1 and happiness 0.5 with probability 0.9.

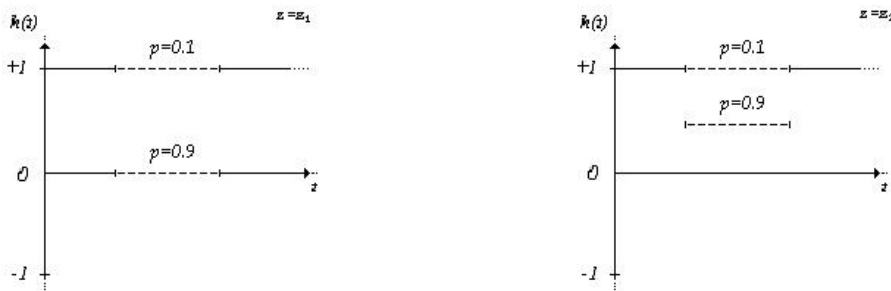


Figure 2

You choose the latter.

Another slightly different case. The god imposes you a different decision: you'll always have happiness 1 except for a finite interval of time in which you must choose between happiness 1 with probability 0.1 and happiness 0.5 with probability 0.9 or happiness 1 with probability 0.9 and happiness 0.1 with probability 0.1.

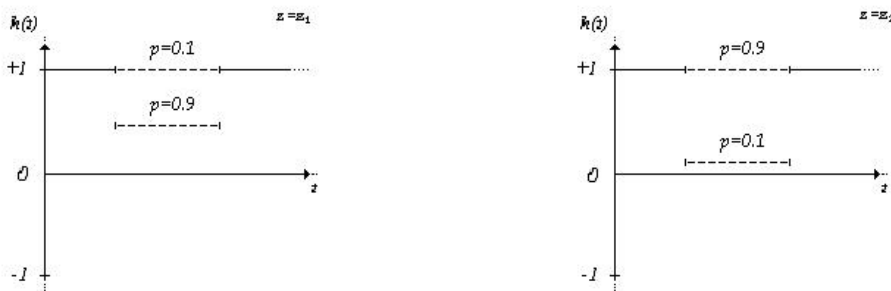


Figure 3

You choose the latter.

Another case. You must choose between always happiness 1 except for a finite interval of time of happiness 1 with probability 0.9

⁶1)I do what I prefer [strong position of the self, unconsciously too: if not, I do what I don't prefer, against my will, therefore I don't do it - contradiction]
 2)What I prefer is what I like most [or what gives me the most pleasure: redefinitions]
 3)I do what I like most [or what gives me the most pleasure: substitution]

⁷The god explains to you that the probability is determined in exactly the same way Tyche (in *Explaining a Simple Physical World*) does by spinning a wheel of fortune.

and happiness 0.1 with probability 0.1 or always happiness 1 except for a tenth-long interval of time of happiness 1 with probability 0.1 and happiness 0.5 with probability 0.9 like in the following Figure 4.

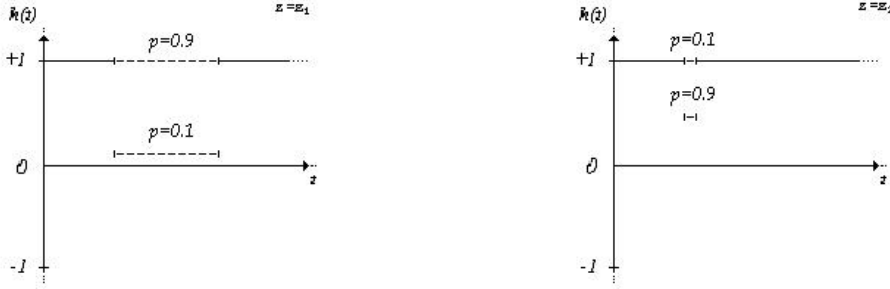


Figure 4

You choose the latter.

The solution of all previous cases has been obtained by considering the intervals of time in which the values of the probability p of happiness h are constant for both the options; then the only quantity representative for each of these intervals is the *expected happiness* \vec{h} which is the weighted mean of the values of happiness by the their probability. Then the preferred option is the one that has the greatest sum, made over all these intervals, of the expected happiness of each interval multiplied by the width of the same interval.

At this point, let the width of the intervals be infinitesimal. Clearly the values of the probability of happiness are constant in them. For every instant t and for every option z , then, what matters is just the expected happiness \vec{h} for that instant, which will be defined as⁸

$$\vec{h} = \vec{h}(z, t) = \int_{-\infty}^{+\infty} h(z, t) \nabla(p_h(z, t, h)) dh \quad (1)$$

where $\nabla(p_h(z, t, h)) dh$ is the probability of having happiness h at future time t , having chosen the option z at present time.

Thus, instead of graphing the happiness h (with all the associated values of probability) along the ordinate axis we can graph just the resulting expected happiness \vec{h} along the ordinate axis. Figure 5 is an example of this substitution.

An obvious observation: if some instant has positive happiness uncertain as much as

⁸This integral definition is typically for a non-discrete case; however, by a suitable definition of the probability distribution $\nabla(p_h)$ (see *Explaining a Simple Physical World*) the same definition can work also for a discrete case with a discrete sum. The probability $\nabla(p_h(z, t, h)) dh$ can be infinitesimal or finite.

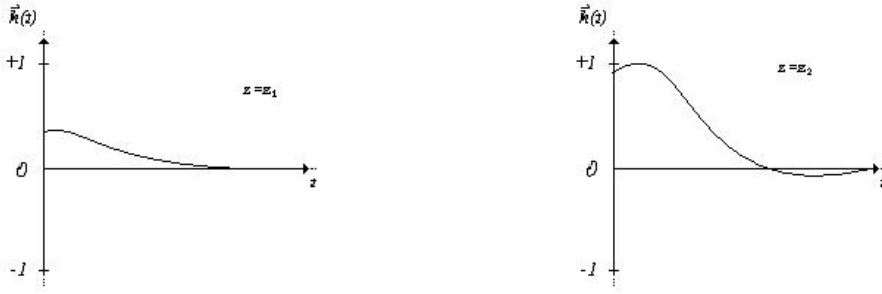


Figure 5

the “negative” happiness, then⁹ $\vec{h} = 0$.

Now there are infinite intervals of infinitesimal width and the sum will simply become the integral of the expected happiness over the whole future time

$$\mathcal{P} = \mathcal{P}(z) = \int_{\text{now}}^{+\infty} \vec{h}(z, t) dt \quad (2)$$

Finally, if we call ζ the set of the (rationally or a-rationally) considered options at the particular present instant, it follows that:

at any instant the self decides the option z given by¹⁰

$$\underline{z} = \max_{\zeta} [\mathcal{P}(z)] \quad (3)$$

namely, the option that maximizes the pleasure.

This is a neat more *general* formulation of the expected utility rule and it looks as if it is *necessary* ad a priori.

Precisely, the pleasure \mathcal{P} would stand for what could be indicated as the integral over time of the usual expected utility and the expected happiness \vec{h} would stand for the expected utility $\mathbb{E}(U)$. The traditional expected utility rule, at most¹¹, could correspond to the pleasure for considering one instant only (formula (1)). Besides, happiness is an intrinsic value and utility is not.

So, if the supporters of the standard expected utility rule have to face the previous choices, they must be committed to buy my more general formulation. Main different features of my formulation are that it considers the “utilities” over all future time (even long-term

⁹This is the case, for instance, of a future time after death for both the atheist and the rather-sinful religious. This is at the root of the fact that often we seem to discount the future. (although this does not hold for people who are strongly religious).

¹⁰Here there is an annoying technicality (holding only for the case where two or more pleasures are infinite) related to the concept of infinity: for example, in the case of **Figure 1** we’d obtain that the thesis does not hold because ∞ is not greater than ∞ . However, this problem remains also for the standard expected utility rule and it would be solved by a proper interpretation of infinity: there exists a certain finite time, after which, (the integral of) the pleasure for option z_2 calculated until *any* successive finite time is *always* finitely greater than the one for z_1 .

¹¹I mean without the ability to incorporate discrete and continuous formalism in one.

consequencies cannot be neglected) and that all of them are evaluated in probabilistic terms.

A note is worth to be done about the probability that has been mentioned hitherto. In fact, at every instant, we don't meet the case where a completely-trustworthy god tells us the probability of the options. However, the fact that god was completely trustworthy was up to us ultimately and the "objective" probability claimed by that god stands for nothing but the projection of our own subjective probability (subjectivism): just we have estimated the trustworthiness! The probability at stake is *believed* estimate of the frequency limit had by the event if it could have been repeated in the same known conditions¹² and I call it *DDB*: *descriptive degree of belief*. Likewise, the happiness proposed by god would clearly be the *subjective happiness*: *intrinsically* and completely independent of the action that caused it.

As for an ethical perspective, this *Pleasure Theory* is descriptive primarily: if I believe in Christian heaven, then *PT* predicts that I'm likely to behave as a Christian (and the more I believe, the more I behave). On the other hand, ought I behave like a Christian? Yes, if Christian heaven is at least minimally probable (but different than 0).

No, if Christian heaven has probability equal to 0.

If Christian heaven is probable to exist then it's convenient to behave as a Christian (believing in Christ too), but clearly it's not convenient to behave as a Christian (believing in Christ too) if Christian heaven does not exist at all¹³.

Therefore *PT* is also prescriptive, in the condition of knowing the prescriptive objective probabilities¹⁴ associated to every option. Then, the study of the concept of probability (philosophy of probability) turns out to be fundamental even for moral issues¹⁵. *PT* becomes prescriptive when a prescriptive probability is used. The prescriptive option \underline{z} is then called *PMPO*: *prescriptive maximum-pleasure option*.

However *PT* is not prescriptive *per se*, but rather the estimation of probability is *the* prescriptive source: the probability of the subjective happiness.

¹²As in the case of frequency limit of a certain color from the spinning of the same wheel of fortune, which equals the arc of circumference of that color. Therefore, this subjective probability can be *coherently* measured with an objective one: put in comparison the particular degree of "sensation of truth" with the one you have in the case of specifications from wheels of fortune. So you act like your option has an objective probability of value p . On the other hand this sensation of truth is necessarily subjective (and not inter-subjective): for example, mainly the man that has just fallen in love would find his beloved as objectively very very beautiful.

¹³Analogously, the more a person believes in Christian heaven (i.e., has a high *DDB*), the more he/she can accept to suffer on Earth to deserve it.

¹⁴Cicero (106BCE-43BCE) said 'Probability is the very guide of life'. On the other hand, Bruno de Finetti (1906-1985) begins his *Theory of probability* by the statement '[OBJECTIVE] PROBABILITY DOES NOT EXIST'. However a probability can be prescriptive also for a radical subjectivist.

¹⁵At least much more than it is usually considered.

Moreover, as the value of probability is a contingent matter, so is the prescription of some option.

So, applied ethics is matter of justification of probabilities. Psychology as well as any other human activity is matter of justification of probabilities: *PT* applies to any human action¹⁶.

Besides, *PT* may look prescriptive even “against itself” seemingly! If the use of rational calculations for the probabilities takes too long time or, is too effortful, or brings to wrong conclusions¹⁷, then *PT* prescribes to *not* do the such calculations rationally, but a-rationally. For example, in the cocktail party effect¹⁸ the recognition of the sound is done a-rationally and brought to a rational level for we have interest (pleasure) in being rationally attentive when someone is calling us or talking about us.

Similarly, if we’re doing probability calculations a-rationally and by this we get less pleasure than doing them rationally, then *PT* prescribes to do them rationally. For example, who decides to wake up? The self does because we have a lot of things to do and we don’t have so much pleasure from sleeping anymore.

Finally, rationally computing *all* consequences and their probabilities is not possible, therefore the argument holds as long as we get pleasure from that process, *ad libitum*.

Therefore, the description of *PT* is necessary even in the a-rational case too: the a-rational self can never *decide* to do what doesn’t maximize its pleasure otherwise it would be contradictory as much as for the rational self: if the self chose¹⁹ to do a different decision from that associated to the most pleasure, it means that the a-rational self was not the “happiest” about that decision (contradiction).

I conclude with a round-up of three likely objections: the masochist, the real-life faults and the second-order-desire account.

First, the case of masochist, e.g. of a person that wants to injure oneself just *for fun*, can be illustrated by the following **Figure 6**

Also here let’s assume that the two graphs have the same scale, namely, that the tick mark indicates one hour after which the pleasure $\mathcal{P}(z)$ in the life looks (*probably*)

¹⁶The term option has been preferred because if we are brains in a vat, the concept action is not suitable. Anyway the term action rightly reminds of theories of action.

¹⁷Wronger than doing it a-rationally.

¹⁸It occurs when we are talking with our friend in a noisy crowded party and rationally we can listen and understand what our friend says and can simultaneously ignore what other people say. Then if someone over the other side of the party room utters our name, we also notice that sound and react to it immediately.

¹⁹As the thoughts we have could not be caused by us (and, unfortunately we cannot cause any thought we want!), we don’t exist because we think (we cause thoughts), but because we decide with the *psychological* intention (or goal, or purpose) to maximize the pleasure. In fact, I’m not able to conceive a mind without that does actions, thinks, without a purpose. This would suggest a re-definition of the self from the *res cogitans* to the *res decerniens*.

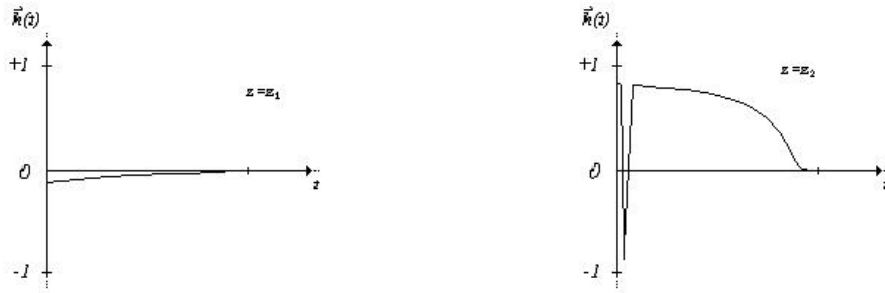


Figure 6

indifferent to the decision z the masochist has performed now. The negative peak in z_2 is for the precise instants when the masochist is injuring himself, but great happiness is otherwise. The little slope in z_1 is for the discontent from not having injured himself. It should be clear, by now, that the masochist injures himself in order to maximize his pleasure.

Second, the real-life faults case can be represented by real-life examples of failed choices, like they often occur to a person for real-life prisoner dilemmas or for real-life offers of betting quotients that can be Dutch-booked. I think these cases are not qualitatively different from a possible refusal of a present of 1 billion euros (with no obligation to donate his eyes or to die within one week and so on).

Here, he can not care for being without a billion dollar even rationally, or maybe, at the moment of the offer, he can be as tired as to badly estimate the great deal that is missed. But, whether the probability has not been assessed optimally, can often be said a posteriori easily; in any case he really has more pleasure in doing what he does: if he really knew that he would have regretted for the whole rest of his life, then he wouldn't have done so.

Third, in contrast to all accounts with various orders of desire, according to my synchronic account there are just first order desires: I want z (at *present* time). Cases where I say that “I don't want to want z_1 , but I want z_1 *now*”, just mean that I don't want the option z_2 = ‘to want z_1 ’ for a *future* instant, that is to say, I have great pleasure now in having little pleasure from z_1 in future. It's not logically possible to want z_1 with a certain pleasure and not to want z_1 with the same pleasure *at the same time*²⁰.

²⁰According to a Frankfurt's example (in ‘Freedom of the will and the concept of person’), any narcotic addict prefers taking the drug more than he doesn't (and for this reason he takes it), but an unwilling addict ‘does not prefer that one conflicting desires be of paramount over the others’ because ‘it is not the will he wants’. Maybe an unwilling narcotic addict doesn't want to take the drug (now) as much as a willing narcotic addict does, or maybe an unwilling narcotic addict wants to quit in future more than a willing one, but, I see as *not* logically possible ‘to prefer to not prefer taking the drug’ and ‘to prefer taking the drug’ *at the same time*. At each instant I just can do one action (or one set of actions with no logically incompatible actions), but not two. At each instant I prefer just one specific option, and not two options. At each instant I choose to do what maximizes my pleasure and there could not be two different maxima, otherwise I should choose between the two of them, but this would be a different choice for a future instant.

So, having defined what I precisely mean by pleasure I can sum up the main thesis by:
I do what I want most, i.e., what I like most, i.e., what gives me the most pleasure.

P.S.

If we call PDC the probability when assessed in the most “objective” way from the enumeration of the experienced favourable cases²¹ then we have the interesting following thesis. Ideal science occurs when the descriptive probability DDC is given by PDC ,²² or in symbols: when $p := \Pi$.

However, whether ideal science is always the best system²³ to adopt is an accidental matter: for example in the Middle Ages an average person would have got more pleasure in not living in a scientific way (see, for instance, Giordano Bruno or Galileo Galilei). A lot of actions, though rational, are not scientific. If believing in something is objectively likely to have a lot of problems or to hell, then I don’t believe in it clearly²⁴.

P.P.S.

Despite PT is intrinsically subjectivist (and therefore relativist), “objective-like” ethical terms like ‘duty’ or ‘moral responsibility’ are (better) re-definable in it²⁵.

²¹See *Explaining a Simple Physical World*.

²²Or, using Lipton’s words, it would translate to: when the *loveliness* of a theory is given just by its *likeliness*. This thesis can have analogies to the Lewis’ *Principal Principle*, but in contrast to it, my thesis is not an “obvious” (*unjustified*) principle to obey.

²³The eventual meaning of ‘best’ is: that gives the most pleasure.

²⁴Another example is the case of scientists who have lost a beloved person and they believe that he/she is still alive and he/she can see them and help them. This is not scientific, but just rational as there is a huge happiness associated to that unlikely and non-scientific belief.

²⁵Future papers will be available to support also these claims.