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Bentham on Utility and Cultural Value

Bentham, utilité et valeur culturelle

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Résumés

English Français
When examining the relevance of Bentham's thinking to debates on cultural value, we should look, first of all, at the significance of utility as an independent ethical principle. Bentham finds the term 'utility' in the philosophy of David Hume, condemns Hume's use of this term as ambiguous, and establishes utility as an independent ethical principle that is opposed to Hume's preference for delicacy of sentiment and good taste. I argue that Hume is averse to the very thing that Bentham places at the centre of his ethics, namely a reckoning that we can all make with how pleasure shapes our sense of self. Bentham places us under an obligation to work out what our pleasures mean for us, how they situate us in the world, and how others will respond to what gives us the most pleasure. This working hypothesis on what gives each of us the most pleasure, must be conveyed in neutral, non-judgemental terms. Bentham espouses simple amusements, including games of push-pin and solitaire, as examples of how a recalculation of the possibilities for increasing pleasure and diminishing pain can take place, in defiance of cultural evaluations of what is 'high' and 'low'. These distinctions of high and low culture are only one example of how definitions of culture affect the social organization of pleasure, within a broader conception of cultural value. Bentham asks whether definitions of cultural value are equitable and just, when seen in relation to the ethical aim of prolonging pleasure and diminishing pain. (249 words)

Lorsque nous examinons la pertinence de la pensée de Bentham dans les débats sur la valeur culturelle, nous devrions tout d'abord examiner la signification de l'utilité en tant que principe éthique indépendant. Bentham trouve le terme « utilité » dans la philosophie de David Hume, condamne l'utilisation de ce terme par Hume comme ambiguë et établit l'utilité comme un principe éthique indépendant qui s'oppose à la préférence de Hume pour la délicatesse du sentiment et le bon goût. Je soutiens que Hume est opposé à la chose même que Bentham place au centre de son éthique, à savoir un calcul que nous pouvons tous faire avec la façon dont le plaisir façonne notre sens de soi. Bentham nous oblige à déterminer ce que nos plaisirs signifient pour nous, comment ils nous situent dans le monde et comment les autres réagiront à ce qui nous procure le plus de plaisir. Cette hypothèse de travail sur ce qui procure le plus plaisir à chacun, doit être énoncé en termes neutres et sans jugement. Bentham épouse des divertissements simples, y compris des jeux de punaise et de solitaire, comme exemples de la façon dont un recalcul des possibilités d'augmentation du plaisir et de diminution de la douleur peuvent avoir

lieu, au mépris des évaluations culturelles de ce qui est « haut » et « bas ». Ces distinctions entre haute et basse culture ne sont qu'un exemple de la manière dont les définitions de la culture affectent l'organisation sociale du plaisir, dans le cadre de la conception plus large de la valeur culturelle. Bentham demande si les définitions de la valeur culturelle sont équitables et justes, lorsqu'elles sont considérées par rapport à l'objectif éthique de prolonger le plaisir et de diminuer la douleur.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Bentham, Hume, utilité, plaisir, sentiment, culture, préjugés, éthique, calcul, valeur
Keywords : Bentham, Hume, utility, pleasure, sentiment, ulture, prejudice, ethics, calculation, value

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Texte intégral

1. Introduction

1   I make two main claims in this article. The first claim is that we can understand cultural value by showing how it marginalises utility as an independent ethical principle. The second claim is that Jeremy Bentham's defence of utility as an independent ethical principle, gives us resources with which to analyse cultural value as an apparatus of power. Bentham defined utility as a principle through which our own happiness, and that of others, is understood exclusively in relation to the experience of pleasure and pain. The experience of pleasure and pain is the locus of moral value precisely because we are, as Bentham puts it, 'sensitive beings' who are susceptible to pains and pleasures, therefore the end we ought to have in view is 'the good, i.e. the pleasure or pleasures, the exemption or security from such or such pain or pains'[1]. Since pleasure and pain are a constant presence in the lives of all sensitive beings, we can and should aim for a positive balance of pleasure over pain. This goal of prolonging pleasure and diminishing pain, places us under an obligation to make a reckoning with what our pleasures mean for us, how they situate us in the world, and how others will respond to what gives us the most pleasure. As examples of this kind of reckoning with pleasure, Bentham employs simple amusements such as the game of push-pin, which he famously contrasted with poetry, and solitaire, which, he argues, can be preferred to reading *The Iliad*. These examples show how an optimization of the possibilities for increasing pleasure and diminishing pain can take place, in defiance of cultural evaluations of what is 'high' and 'low'. Distinctions of high and low culture are only one example of how definitions of culture affect the social organization of pleasure, and thus the possibilities for an individual orientation to 'more pleasure', within a broader conception of cultural value as 'the effects that culture has on those who experience it and the difference it makes to individuals and society'[2]. The question that Bentham poses is whether definitions of cultural value are equitable and just, when seen in relation to the ethical aim of prolonging pleasure and diminishing pain.

2   Bentham makes the individual experience of pleasure the fulcrum of his ethical system, because we all must face the fact that 'pleasure and pain may come upon him from a quarter from which he was not accustomed to expect it.'[3] An unaccustomed pleasure may give us the opportunity to revisit our working hypothesis on what gives us the most pleasure, but it also invalidates the simple philistinism of 'I know what I like', while showing us what is missing in the way that pleasure is managed within the cultural domain. The phrase 'I know what I like' fosters the illusion that we will always encounter pleasures that are typical and familiar. In contrast, Bentham's emphasis on simple amusements that have little or no cultural value, suggests that pleasure will be found everywhere and in all circumstances. In turn, this ensures that, whatever happens, we will be able to aim at the goal of prolonging pleasure and diminishing pain.

For Bentham, pleasure and pain are, at one and the same time, proof that we exist in the world and proof that our orientation to the world can be deceptive. Our experience of pleasure is also an encounter with truth, because what is 'really good' may not be what we supposed it to be. In Bentham's terms, the social politics of pleasure is defined by the distinction between utility as an independent ethical principle that obliges us to make a reckoning with our own pleasures, and other ways of defining the good that do not allow such a reckoning to take place. Notions of 'good taste' and 'bad taste' exemplify the latter position, since the standard of judgement they apply offers no opportunity for individuals to recognise how pleasurable experiences shape their sense of self.[4]

3   Bentham challenged the Aristotelian argument that hedonism cannot constitute its own standard of ethical judgement. The independence of Bentham's principle means that his utilitarianism, which offers 'morality made easy'[5], recognises hedonism as an ethical standard in its own right, which gives the capacity to define the good to all. Although Bentham emphasised that nobody could 'know as well as yourself what it is that has given you pleasure or what it is that has given you most pleasure'[6], this knowledge assumes a political dimension precisely because the judgements of others do not come into play. Bentham was keen to point out that his politics of utility was opposed to the political apparatus of culture and taste, which supported those sections of society who wanted to keep the power of judgement to themselves. This thinking informed the work of Bentham's followers in the UK Parliament, who obtained funding for the first state-supported art school in Britain in 1837. This school was not founded on aesthetic principles, but rather on a political challenge to the constitution of the Royal Academy of Arts, which linked the RA to the monarchy and aristocratic patronage[7]. Bentham invites us to understand the relationship between taste and utility on non-aesthetic terms, and see it as an ethical difference through which culture is grasped politically, as relating to the formation of social elites.

4   The broadening of the capacity for ethical agency in Bentham's philosophy, carries implications for debates on cultural elitism and cultural inequality. However, Bentham's understanding of utility as the name of an ethical principle is not a feature of debates on cultural value, which generally align utilitarianism with instrumentalism in the service of cultural criticism of *homo economicus*. The distinction that Tony Bennett made over a quarter of a century ago, between the aesthetic properties of culture and 'its bureaucratisation and its subordination to a utilitarian calculus'[8] is not a feature of Bentham's thought. As Bennett admits, nineteenth century projects that sought to enhance the 'usefulness' of culture within the order of leisure, using new means of distribution such as museums, were guided by a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate pleasures that Bentham would not have recognised[9]. It is important not to confuse a Benthamite economy of increased pleasure and diminished pain, which works with the assumption that neither pleasure nor pain are a scarce resource, with the industrial capitalist economy that Tony Bennett refers to, in which the distinction between work and leisure determines how pleasure is understood[10]. Instead, the Benthamite revolution in ethics was directed towards 'the real good'[11] of pleasure. This good is located by distinguishing the fictions of value that are encountered in judgements of approbation and disapprobation, from the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain.

5   The marginalisation of utility as an independent ethical principle, accompanied by the valorisation of culture as the royal road to 'the good', can be traced to David Hume. Bentham finds the term 'utility' in Hume, but condemns Hume's use of the term as vague. Bentham's reaction is to set utility up as an independent ethical value in opposition to Hume's standard of taste. Hume's assertion that 'beauty, as well as virtue, always lies in a medium'[12] means that he gives the highest priority to 'where this medium is placed' in the cultural field, for example, in those writers who can be praised because they are neither too simple nor too refined. For Hume, culture is a mode of life in which the chimerical search for 'a medium', rather than the search for more pleasure, is given the highest value. As he puts it in his essay 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and

Passion', the person of fine discrimination 'is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem or a piece of reasoning than the most expensive luxury can afford.'[13] It should first be recognised that this statement establishes a connection between the person of taste and others, by means of a free choice that, ostensibly, allows everyone to enjoy themselves in their own way. However, it also separates the person of culture and taste from those others who have not grasped how 'a medium' can be ascertained. This makes Hume averse to the very thing that Bentham places at the centre of his ethics, namely the reckoning that we can all make with how pleasure shapes our sense of self.

6   Bentham argues that Hume's reliance on the virtues of a medium is grounded in hedonophobia, a fear of pleasure that takes the form of a discourse on the good. This means that the 'influential classes' who treat culture as a mode of life, maintain that mode of life by being thoroughly immoderate in their attitudes towards the pleasures of others. This marginalises utility as an independent ethical principle, and makes utilitarianism appear synonymous with instrumentalism. David Wootton, following the arguments of Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, has argued that, after Machiavelli and Hobbes, the possibility of virtue as a way of life is replaced by strategies for pursuing pleasure and advantage, and that 'Utilitarianism was the logical outcome of this mode of thinking'[14]. In contrast, Jeremy Bentham shows us that social life in the West since the eighteenth century has been marked by an acceleration of the power of the 'immoderate moderation' of culture and good taste, in which it is the possibility of a utilitarian ethics that is ruled out.

2. The cultural marginalisation of utility

7   In his 'Article on Utilitarianism', Bentham tells us that while he dates his own encounter with the term 'utility' to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* of 1751, Hume's treatment of the term was unsatisfactory and 'altogether vague'[15]. In this instance, Hume's supposed vagueness should be understood solely in relation to Bentham's own, later, understanding of utility according to the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain. In fact, in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume offers a highly specific, 'cultured' definition of public utility that carries ethical value, opposing it to utility as instrumental reason. In the appendix 'Concerning Moral Sentiment' in *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, utility is accorded a moral value through the agency of sentiment:

> But though reason, when fully assisted and improved, be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions; it is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation. Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a *sentiment* should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. Here therefore *reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial.[16]

8   This distinction between utility as 'a tendency to a certain end' and utility as the basis for 'a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies' is about how the good can be actively ascertained through a preference that is based on an original sentiment, rather than a passive observation. The power of distinction is thus located in a *sui generis* 'humanity' that is grasped from within an impartial ethical perspective. This is prefigured in Hume's *Treatise*, where he claims that the pleasurable conception of utility as an end (such as the survey of a well-made fortification) only takes on meaning at one remove, as 'a sympathy with the inhabitants, for whose security all this art is employ'd'[17]. Utility becomes annexed to virtue only through an evaluation of the good

and bad tendencies of character and action. Hume uses the analogy of a fruit tree that is good because it habitually bears good fruit, and not because of a good harvest in one year, which may be followed by a bad harvest in another.

9   In his essay on 'Hume's Virtues', Bentham also refers to the ambiguous status of the word 'useful' in in Hume's *Enquiry*, noting that this ambiguity stems from the fact that 'it may be conducive to pleasure or to any end, whatever that end may be.'[18] For Bentham, Hume's ambiguity about the word 'useful' shows a reticence about naming pleasure as the only good and thus the only end in view. In 'Hume's Virtues', Bentham also rejects 'humanity' as the basis of a moral distinction in everyday life, arguing that, rather than enabling us to see the moral dimension of utility, the exercise of human feeling and empathy can lead us astray: 'The humanity of a king would lead him to pardon at the expense of penal justice. He would do good on a small scale, harm on a large scale, so that there would be a great loss in the balance.'[19] This is also the argument 'Against Empathy' made by Paul Bloom, that it 'can lead to bad decisions and bad outcomes'[20] In Benthamite terms, a Humean conception of the ethical value of public utility is a 'fiction' in which the mind's constructions 'are dressed up in the garb, and placed upon the level, of real ones.' [21]It is at odds with Bentham's notion that the principle of utility is a fictitious entity which does not offer 'any such persuasion as that of their possessing each for itself any separate, or strictly speaking any real, existence'[22]and which, as Philip Schofield has commented, is 'expounded in terms of its relationship to happiness (again a fictitious entity), which in turn was expounded in terms of its relationship to the real entities of pleasure and pain.'[23] Fictions deny us access to utility as an independent ethical principle based on these real entities, and are unethical insofar as they present the appearance of meaning while relying on the arbitrary exercise of power. In Bentham's philosophy, on the other hand, utility's ethical significance is always held in reserve. As a fictitious entity without 'any separate, or strictly speaking any real, existence', the ethical meaning of utility only becomes apparent in a statement about the calculations and recalculations that lead to the goal of increased pleasure and diminished pain. Moreover, as Emmanuelle de Champs[24] has argued, Benthamite ethics can only be expressed in language that eliminates eulogistic (approving) or dyslogistic (disapproving) terms for moral actions. This 'cold' language gives us the correct vocabulary for Bentham's ethics.

10   Hume's refusal to give utility an independent ethical value, denies the capacity for pleasure and pain to constitute a standard of right and wrong, and for more pleasure to be defined as the highest good. Bentham's argument is also that Hume's ambiguity on utility conceals hedonophobia, which refuses to give pleasure an ethical value in its own right: 'Moralists are so afraid of pleasure that they would put it aside'[25]. Bentham inverts this erasure of value, by positing utility as the basis for an ethical reflection on Hume's preference for refinement, culture and taste: 'There is no taste which deserves the epithet *good*, unless it be the taste for such employments which, to the pleasure actually produced by them, conjoin some contingent or future utility: there is no taste which deserves to be characterized as bad, unless it be a taste for some occupation which has a mischievous tendency.'[26]

11   This inversion of value, in which Bentham's hedonism enables us to approach cultural value as a particular way of conceptualising 'the good', is not the way that cultural value is generally understood in contemporary debates on this topic. Current theories of cultural value do not focus on the historical intelligibility of the concept of cultural value. Instead, they place emphasis on the experience of culture, the role of cultural institutions, the rights and wrongs of cultural policies that use various types of valuation (for example, aesthetic, social or historical) to establish the value of cultural 'assets', and, finally, how these different types of valuation come to bear in an assessment of the significance of these assets to individuals, groups, and national or international communities. A recent UK publication, *Culture is Bad For You*, concluded that: 'we will need a new theory of value, both of the value of culture, and of the value of persons. These, and many more, changes will be needed to sever the long-standing link between elite dominance of cultural production and consumption and social

inequality.'[27] This is a laudable aim, but it raises two questions. The first is whether the inequalities that stem from the use of culture as a social standard can be addressed by a new theory of cultural value. The second, related, question is whether an engagement with the concept of cultural value would reveal an ineradicable inequality. The latter is what Bentham's philosophy reveals. I have argued elsewhere that Jeremy Bentham was not interested in what counts as cultural value, but rather in the question of whether culture has any value at all to a project of enlightenment[28]. The question of what counts as cultural value, whether that is high or low, elite or everyday, traps us in a game of cultural distinctions that assumes that culture is our common ground, and invites us to take our position within it. This assumption of a common ground does nothing to tackle inequality, because it does not enable us to assess cultural value as a particular way of conceptualising the good. The following section discusses some of the tools that Bentham provided for this assessment.

3. Double standards

12   It is significant that Jeremy Bentham raises the issue of cultural value under the heading of 'Principles Adverse to Utility' in his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (hereafter IPML). Under this heading, Bentham discusses the absurdity of over-valuing culture, for example in violent disputes over 'the comparative merits of two composers at London; where riots between the approvers and disapprovers of a new play are not infrequent.'[29] What needs to be further examined is exactly why a dispute over the merits of a play might be adverse to utility, as this term is understood in Bentham's philosophy. This is because such a dispute, by definition, cannot take account of 'the real good' of pleasure and pain, but is instead conducted as a groundless, and therefore potentially endless, contest between eulogistic sentiments of approval and dyslogistic sentiments of disapproval. This contest of approval and disapproval introduces another, cultural, standard for evaluating the good, which overrules hedonism. It does not do this with reference to empirical evidence, but rather on the Aristotelian grounds that hedonism cannot constitute its own standard of evaluation. This is also the basis of J.S. Mill's criticism of Bentham in his famous remarks on the satisfied pig in his article on utilitarianism of 1861: 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.'[30] Despite Mill's attempt to remain within the compass of pleasurable experience by dividing 'higher' from 'lower' pleasures, Mill's use of these eulogistic and dyslogistic terms shows that, in this instance, his scale of value is cultural, not utilitarian.

13   An example of how critics build their disapproval of creative work on the assumption that pleasure is not a sufficient standard of evaluation, was provided in a recent, belated assessment of the cultural value of the animated film *Shrek* (2001), which declared ''It's hard to account for why Shrek hit the cultural moment as squarely as it did – other than, you know, people seemed to enjoy it'[31]. The phrase 'seemed to enjoy it' is significant here, as if enjoyment was not something that anyone could take seriously, or stand as a good enough explanation for the success of *Shrek*. The discounting of enjoyment on cultural grounds, and a corresponding admission of 'guilty pleasures', is a kind of epistemic injustice[32] in which explanations that rely on pleasure as a standard of value are given a lower level of credibility, and people who use these kinds of explanations to distinguish the good from the bad are put at a disadvantage in social situations. A startling example of how this kind of reasoning is a feature of even the most elevated levels of cultural discourse, is offered by the question: 'How much can we really rely on someone who loved The Doors?' This question appeared in a review by Patricia Lockwood, published in January 2018, of a documentary film about the writer Joan Didion, directed by her nephew Griffin Dunne[33]. Even if we accept the question

'How much can we really rely on someone who loved The Doors?' as an example of sophisticated literary irony, it carries the implication that, if Joan Didion can't properly organize her own preferences, what does that say about us if we express a preference for the work of Joan Didion? Discovering reasons why Didion might *not* be relied upon, where she might have been led astray by simple pleasures, shows how a cultural evaluation acquires an ethical status. It also demonstrates that our status within culture actually concerns the value of our evaluations. What is supposedly invalid about a preference for a film such as *Shrek* or a piece of music by The Doors is that 'I enjoyed it' is the only evaluation that we can make. This creates a social problem of choice for utilitarian ethics, since the 'cheap and cheerful' items that allow us to account for pleasure without resorting to eulogistic and dyslogistic terms, are the very things that are 'marked down' in assessments of cultural value. To use Bentham's words, how can we choose 'A pure and simple amusement'? when 'to be hard to please, and to have our happiness dependant on what is costly and complicated, shall be found to be advantageous'?[34] This kind of injustice or 'prejudice', in which utility, taken as a reckoning with pleasure, is checked by a cultural explanation that supposedly offers a higher standard of the good, is referred to by Bentham in *The Rationale of Reward*:

> Even Hume himself, in spite of his proud and independent philosophy, has yielded to this literary prejudice. 'By a single piece,' says he, 'the Duke of Buckingham rendered a great service to his age, and was the reformer of its taste!' In what consisted this important service? He had written a comedy, The Rehearsal, the object of which was to render those theatrical pieces, which had been most popular, the objects of general distaste. His satire was completely successful; but what was its fruit? The lovers of that species of amusement were deprived of so much pleasure; a multitude of authors, covered with ridicule and contempt, deplored, at the same time, the loss of their reputation and their bread.[35]

14   Bentham addresses the relation of utility to cultural value, as well as the question of how to challenge prejudice and injustice, in one of his best known and most widely quoted statements in *The Rationale of Reward*: 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either'[36]. What is remarkable about this statement is that the only standard of value it offers is 'more pleasure' and that push-pin, poetry or music only have value in relation to this standard. If pleasure is good, more pleasure is 'pure good':

> If pleasure be a *good*, and, abstraction made of any evil of which it may be productive – i.e. of any evil of which the acts employed in the procurement of it may be productive in the shape of positive pain or loss of greater pleasure, a *pure* good .. what the shape is in which it has been enjoyed, is, on the above supposition, as to what is the value of that pleasure taken singly, a matter of indifference.[37]

15   If we are asked who the ethical subject is in Bentham's comments on push-pin and poetry, one answer would be 'the one who played push-pin because it furnished more pleasure'. 'The one who played push-pin because it furnished more pleasure' was not 'good' or 'bad' *a priori*, in fact, their status as an ethical subject depends, as far as is possible, on a non-judgemental description of what they did, rather than an understanding of what kind of person they are. Nonetheless, as Bentham points out in IPML, the value of more pleasure can only be understood as a matter of individual calculation and recalculation:

> To a person considered *by himself*, the value of a pleasure or pain considered *by itself*, will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:
>
> 1. Its *intensity*.
>
> 2. Its *duration*.

3.Its *certainty* or *uncertainty.*

4.Its *propinquity* or *remoteness.* 3⁸

16   These benchmarks of value apply in a situation where anything can be a source of pleasure and in which the 'pure good' of more pleasure is the ethical goal. The achievement of more pleasure is not a question of preferences, but a matter of personal discovery and innovation in our relationship to real entities, using what I have called a 'working hypothesis' on pleasure to modify our behaviour. How much this differs from Hume's position can be seen in Hume's essay 'The Sceptic', which contains a passage of writing which is, at first glance, strikingly similar to Bentham's comments on push-pin and poetry: 'The catching of flies, like Domitian, if it give more pleasure, is preferable to the hunting of wild beasts, like William Rufus, or conquering of kingdoms like Alexander'³⁹ Here Hume seems to employ a moral distinction ('if it give more pleasure') between a simple amusement and a more complex one, aligned with a scale of human activity from the least to the most destructive. However, in this example, 'more pleasure' does not function as an ethical distinction in either a Benthamite or Humean sense. Bentham's ethics would require a recalculation of pleasure by Domitian, not a comparison of the activities of Domitian, Rufus and Alexander, who, at various times, might assume different places on this imaginary scale of destructive behavior. From the Humean point of view, on the other hand, Domitian, Rufus and Alexander are each seen to possess a *characteristic* mode of behavior, but, for this very reason, they lack the character that is the source of original ethical judgements. In 'The Sceptic', Hume divides culture from amusement because he believes that amusements cannot generate their own path to an ethical reflection, whereas attention to the liberal arts 'softens and humanizes the temper, and cherishes those fine emotions, in which true virtue and honour consists.'⁴⁰ In Hume's view, even 'durable' amusements like gaming and hunting, which mix the pursuit of pleasure with the attainment of skills, are not conducive to the development of an ethical character.

17   In *The Rationale of Reward*, Bentham offers an ethical conception of more pleasure as a pure good which is elided in Hume's search for a cultural 'medium'. Bentham sees value as emerging in a dynamic model that aligns 'farther uses'⁴¹ with 'more pleasures', and in which an ethics of character is subordinate to an ethics of discovery and encounter. For Bentham, ethical behaviour is demonstrated in individuals who are engaged in a search for value:

> In morals, as in legislation, *the principle of utility* is that which holds up to view, as the only sources and tests of right and wrong, human suffering and enjoyment —pain and pleasure. It is by experience, and by that alone, that the tendency of human conduct, in all its modifications, to give birth to pain and pleasure, is brought to view: it is by reference to experience, and to that standard alone, that the tendency of any such modifications to produce more pleasure than pain, and consequently to be *right*—or more pain than pleasure, and consequently to be *wrong*—is made known, and demonstrated.⁴²

18   A definition of cultural value that tells us whether push-pin or poetry is more worthy of our esteem is not at issue here. Nor are we dealing with the instrumentalization of culture for particular ends – in fact, Bentham's argument is that the simple pleasures offered by push-pin are less easily instrumentalized than the refined pleasures of poetry. Poetic language is rich in the eulogistic and dyslogistic terms that can be used for manipulative purposes by those in power. Solely because it offers a simple pleasure that is available to all, push-pin constitutes an ethical choice on Bentham's terms. However, the possibility of a choice between simple pleasures and refined sensibility is obstructed by the value attached to sensibility itself, which opens the gateway to another, 'cultured' choice between push-pin or poetry. As I have shown, J.S. Mill's assertion is that a person cannot tell what it is that offers the most pleasure without applying another standard that reflects their character and humanity. This is also what led Pierre Bourdieu to declare that 'There is no way out of the game of culture'⁴³

because culture constitutes a 'monopoly of humanity'[44] that brings all activity within a framework of cultural definitions and distinctions.

19   Although Bentham, like Bourdieu, explicitly recognised the problem of a 'monopoly of humanity' in the ethics of cultured sentiments, unlike Bourdieu, he asserted that utility offered an exit from the game of culture. This exit was marked out by a choice between refinement and utility that would enable simple pleasures to assume an ethical status. This is why it is important to understand Bentham's remarks on poetry and push-pin as using utility, rather than culture, as a frame of reference. Bentham is not subverting the game of cultural preferences and asking us to imagine how radical we would be if we preferred push-pin to poetry or music. What an appeal to utility asks us to do, however, is to set 'prejudice apart', that is, to put aside the fictions of cultural value that oblige us to choose between poetry, music and push-pin. The alternative, Benthamite, ethics of 'more pleasure' that is referred to here, is the value that appears when cultural value is set aside. Rather than being an individual choice between cultural alternatives, this choice assumes a social dimension by being framed as a statement, free of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms, through which an individual's ethical orientation to 'more pleasure' can be understood. The good appears directly through the search for value, rather than between 'good' and 'bad' options that supposedly reveal the moral character of the person that makes them.

20   Similarly, Bentham's answer to cultural disputes is not to find ways to mitigate their violence, but rather to challenge the terms and concepts that make this violence seem justifiable, and which lend the moral signification of 'good' and 'bad' to cultural activity. He does this by changing the ground of moral action from sensibility to utility, suggesting that every groundless reflection that is initiated by a morality based on sentiment, should be answered by a reflection grounded in the real entities of pleasure and pain:

> Whether a moral sentiment can be originally conceived from any other source than a view of utility, is one question: whether upon examination and reflection it can, in point of fact, be actually persisted in and justified on any other ground, by a person reflecting within himself, is another: whether in point of right it can properly be justified on any other ground, by a person addressing himself to a community, is a third.[45]

21   Although Bentham goes on to say that the first and second reflections 'are questions of speculation' and that the real issue is what happens when moral sentiment enters the public realm, in 'A Table of the Springs of Action', he offers an analysis of how a utilitarian reflection on moral sentiment counters inequality. There, Bentham writes 'Hume acknowledges the dominion of utility but so he does of the moral sense: which is nothing more than a fiction of ipsedixitism.'[46] This seems anachronistic at first glance, as if Bentham is accusing Hume of being insufficiently Benthamite. However, if we focus on the charge of ipsedixitism (defined as the ungrounded authority of opinion[47]) that Bentham levels against Hume's reworking of Hutcheson's moral sense theory, the true contours of Bentham's accusation emerge. The accusation is that Hume's philosophy sets up a situation in which pleasure and pain are recognised as the foundation of sentiment, but never acknowledged as a standard of right and wrong. Ipsedixitism is concerned with maintaining the value of its own evaluations, at the expense of other ways of understanding value.

22   Elsewhere in 'A Table of the Springs of Action', Bentham goes out of his way to state that the value of his own opinion is 'nothing', because acknowledging utility as a standard of right and wrong, means beginning with the calculations and recalculations of others as to what constitutes a balance of pleasure over pain, rather than with one's own point of view[48]. This attitude also informs Bentham's proposal for 'deontologists', practical moralists whose role would be to connect private pleasure to public duty. The field of action for the deontologist and those whom they advise is the same, namely happiness defined as a balance of pleasure over pain. The role of the deontologist is to maintain the integrity of the encounter with truth that characterises our experience of

pleasure, in the absence of the judgements of approval and disapproval that characterise dialogues on taste and aesthetics. The deontologist fulfils this role by 'scouting out' the social trajectories and consequences of someone else's experience, which they must also assume to be inviolable:

> But to each man what is pleasure? To every man what is the greatest pleasure? To every man what is pain? To every man what is the greatest pain? That which in his own judgement, assisted by his own memory, and through that printed upon his own feelings, is so .. can there be – that man who knows or who can know as well as yourself what it is that has given you pleasure or what it is that has given you most pleasure?[49]

23   Each of us has to 'figure out' a relationship with what gives us the most pleasure, but, through the deontologist, we re-encounter our private reckoning with pleasure within the public domain. Ipsedixitism is the skeleton at this feast; it can acknowledge the existence of pleasure and pain, but it can only take pleasure in the perfection of its own evaluations. These evaluations are intentional, that is, directed towards the world in some way, but they are said to be 'original', i.e. not copies or representations of things in the world. This is also productive of inequality, insofar as the originality of the valuation is what is being prioritised. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume says: 'A very small variation of the object, even where the same qualities are preserved, will destroy a sentiment. Thus, the same beauty, transferred to a different sex, excites no amorous passion, where nature is not extremely perverted.'[50] Following Bentham's principles, if discovering male beauty in the female sex offered more pleasure, and thus a 'pure good', than discovering female beauty in the female sex, that would be an ethical act. Hume, on the other hand, sees it as evidence of a perversion of human nature. In this way, Hume promulgates an injustice, by using a philosophical principle to consign any individual who discovers such a path towards pleasure to the margins of society.

24   A perusal of Bentham's writing in *Of Sexual Irregularities,* indicates that he would not have been troubled by the 'perversions' that Hume mentions:

> The truth is that, by the epithet *unnatural,* when applied to any human act or thought, the only matter of which it affords any indication that can be depended upon is the existence of a sentiment of disapprobation, accompanied with passion, in the breast of the person by whom it is employed: a degree of dissocial passion by which, without staying to enquire or to consider with himself whether the practice, and thence the conduct and character of him whose practice it is, be or be not in any way, and if any way in what degree, noxious to society, he endeavours, by the use thus made of this inflammatory word, to kindle and point towards the object of his ill-will, the same dissocial passion in other breasts.[51]

25   In *Of Sexual Irregularities,* Bentham argues that sexual desire does not depend on the expression of a sentiment through an appropriate object, but is a particular kind of observation, a 'sixth sense' that responds to external information on possible sources of pleasure. Moreover, as I have noted, in IPML, Bentham tell us that the sources of pleasure are not predictable:

> The quantity of pleasure or pain, which from any given occasion a man may experience from an application of any sort, may be greatly influenced by the expectations he has been used to entertain of pleasure and pain from that quarter; but it will not be absolutely determined by them: for pleasure and pain may come upon him from a quarter from which he was not accustomed to expect it.[52]

26   The Humean view is that the possibility of an evaluation of 'the good' depends on the alignment of an original sentiment and an object in which this sentiment can find its fullest expression. This is an echo of Joseph Addison's injunction that 'the Taste is not to conform to the Art, but the Art to the Taste'[53]. For Bentham, as I have said, value emerges in a process through which the good is discovered and rediscovered, calculated and recalculated. He therefore offers us the paradox of an ethical judgement on 'what is the greatest pleasure?' which is not original, but which, for that very reason, is unique

and inviolable. It is not an original judgement in the Humean sense, because it depends on a contingent encounter with the material world in which a source of pleasure is discovered. It does not ascertain the good, instead it encounters it through an engagement with the world that, for example, includes the possibility of discovering male beauty in the female sex and vice versa.

4. Bentham and the historical intelligibility of cultural value

27   The previous two sections introduced some of the ways through which we can understand cultural value, by examining how the political apparatus of culture marginalises utility as an independent ethical principle, and thereby limits the possibility for 'simple pleasures' to assume an ethical status. In this section, I will show how this gives us resources with which to address the historical intelligibility of the concept of cultural value, as a means of organising pleasure in the public realm. In one sense, this can be understood as a process through which Bentham finds utility in Hume, condemns Hume's use of the term as ambiguous, and sets utility up as an independent ethical principle opposed to delicacy of sentiment and good taste. However, to make cultural value historically intelligible, we should focus on the political aspects of a specific historical transformation, namely the transformation of taste into 'good taste' through aesthetics. Aesthetics, as it has been understood since Alexander Baumgarten, initiated the historical transformation of taste as sensation into 'good taste' as a particular kind of sensibility. Aesthetics is what shifts the focus of attention from sensation as such, to sensation as the privileged basis for judgement. Individual judgements on the good and the bad in culture, could now be grounded in the 'greater good' of a refined sensibility and registered in feelings of sympathy and antipathy.

28   Good taste is a fiction in which hedonophobia protects the value of original sentiments, and by extension the value of humanity itself. As Bentham puts it in *Hume's Virtues*: 'Delicacy is another branch. There is physical and physiological. There is often weakness, avoidance of suffering pain from objects that cause no pain to others. So they take the merit to themselves. And why? Because it is a mark of their belonging to the influential classes: the ruling few.'[54]

29   A crucial point that Bentham makes in this passage is that 'suffering pain from objects that cause no harm to others' marks a social difference in power between the strong and the weak. This is a difference between the power of 'the influential classes' who see culture as a universal and more essentially human way of life, and those others who are socially marginalised because, for example, they have discovered a harmless pleasure in observing male beauty in the female sex. The delicacy of the influential classes can be seen as virtuous, precisely because it is a way of life in which pleasure is moderated by 'the good' of culture. Bentham, on the other hand, argues that it is delicacy itself that is immoderate, because offences against good taste are not amenable to an analysis of injury and redress. As Bentham notes in *Of Sexual Irregularities*, those people who oppose harmless pleasures can only be satisfied with total surrender, precisely because no actual injury has been caused to them: 'Produced by contrariety of opinion or of taste, the appetite of vengeance is even more difficultly to be satiated or appeased than when produced by injury: in the case of contrariety, if appeased at all, it is by manifestation or declaration of conformity that it must be appeased.'[55]

30   Jeremy Bentham shows that the concept of cultural value is made historically intelligible through the realisation that the influential classes who treat culture as a mode of life, maintain that mode of life by being immoderate in their attitudes towards the pleasures of others. However, because this 'immoderate moderation' of pleasure marginalises utility as an independent ethical principle and makes utilitarianism synonymous with instrumentalism, this historical intelligibility is hard to discern. Over

thirty years ago, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton made progress towards the goal of historical intelligibility when he wrote:

> For before "interpretation" in its modern hermeneutical sense was brought to birth, a whole apparatus of power in the field of culture was already firmly in place and had been for about a century. This was not an apparatus which determined the power-effects of particular readings but one which determined the political meaning and function of "culture" as such. Its name was and is aesthetics.[56]

31   Bentham's challenge to aesthetics, which has not been fully recognised until recently, was precisely on the ground that Eagleton identifies, namely the role of aesthetics as an 'apparatus of power in the field of culture .. which determined the political meaning and function of "culture" as such.' However, Terry Eagleton accompanies his analysis of the ideology of the aesthetic with a paradoxical celebration of the appeal to humanity in Francis Hutcheson's moral sense theory: 'Speaking from the Gaelic margins, from Scotland and Ireland, these men denounce bourgeois utility and speak up bravely for sympathy and compassion.'[57] This is not how Bentham saw it, when he referred negatively to 'the use of ipsedixitism extended by Hutchinson [sic] of Glasgow and Hume'[58] and noted that references to utility within theories of moral sentiment did not make sentimentalism less immoral: 'By coinciding with those of utility, sentimentalists' conclusions are not rendered innoxious .. Sentimentalism, in so far as independent of utilitarianism, is in effect a mask for selfishness or malignity, or both for despotism, intolerance, tyranny.'[59]

32   What Terry Eagleton sees as moderation, that is, as sympathy and compassion, Bentham interprets as immoderate selfishness and malignity. The difference between these two positions is that what Eagleton calls 'bourgeois utility' is, in Bentham's philosophy, the name of an independent ethical principle. Bentham's focus remains where Eagleton begins, with the issue of culture as an apparatus of political power, and on the moderation of sentiment ('delicacy' in Bentham's terms) as the means by which power is exercised. More recently, Eleanora Belfiore has returned to the analysis of cultural value as power, calling it 'a largely neglected lens through which to dissect matters of 'value''[60]. Accordingly, she has called for 'A collective effort, by scholars as well as cultural professionals and policymakers, to strive for a new approach to understanding 'cultural value', more cognisant of the reality that this space is an arena for power struggles and a site of inequality'.[61] Belfiore's focus on power brings us closer to a political analysis of cultural value than does the plea, in *Culture is Bad for You*, for a new theory of cultural value that could address the issue of inequality. Belfiore's analysis is Bourdieusian in its reference to symbolic violence and a struggle over cultural value, which echoes Bourdieu's idea of culture as a game with no exit. For Bentham, on the other hand, culture is not so much a game with no exit, as a game with no chance of fair play. This is because, as I have emphasised, the liberal moderation that shapes the idea of culture depends on the influential classes being thoroughly immoderate in their hedonophobic attitudes towards the pleasures of others.

5. Cultural value and the utilitarian object

33   In my introduction, I referred to the work of Jeremy Bentham's followers in the UK Parliament, who obtained funding for an art school that was not founded on aesthetic principles, but because of a political challenge to the constitution of the Royal Academy of Arts. I also suggested that this was an example of the opportunity, which is offered by Bentham's thought, to understand the relationship between taste and utility on non-aesthetic terms, and to see it as an ethical difference through which culture is grasped politically, as relating to the formation of social elites. The paradox of an art school that is founded on political, rather than aesthetic, principles by the utilitarians in the UK

Parliament, was preceded by the paradox of Bentham's auto-icon, which was intended to express an ethical proposition, not an aesthetic one. If we take the auto-icon as Bentham's final address, on his own utilitarian terms, to the problem of the public representation of his doctrine, all the 'solutions' to the problem emphasise the value of the multiple uses of things over and above the fixed representations of those same things. The auto-icon, as it was originally conceived, is a rough signpost to a real entity ('a man who is his own image'[62]). This real entity is the 'business end' of the auto-icon, the element that is intended for 'farther uses of the dead to the living'[63]. The auto-icon is an assemblage of the material elements of Jeremy Bentham, dressed in his own clothes, that looks somewhat like a statue of Bentham but isn't, and is suitable for display in a proposed museum of auto-icons which would have been nothing like a museum of art, or even a museum of anthropology. The nearest comparison is with a museum of zoology, in which the preservation of specimens for further study replaces the 'beginnings' and 'ends' of biography. The auto-icon promotes an ethics of contact with real bodies in order to realise the farther uses of these bodies for anatomical and other purposes. The eventual replacement of Bentham's head ('a suitable prop for a hammer film'[64]) with a waxwork portrait by Jacques Talrich, is the clearest indication of a tension between the representational elements of the auto-icon and the utilitarian programme of 'farther uses' that it exemplifies.

34   It would be a mistake to think of the auto-icon as a cultural object that was also intended to fulfil certain instrumental ends. Instead, we should think of it as a utilitarian object that discourages any of the usual ascriptions of cultural and aesthetic value, while also functioning as the public signature of Jeremy Bentham, and an emblem of his commitment to an economy in which things are used and reused in the service of the increase of pleasure and the diminution of pain. For this reason, when looking for the relevance of Bentham's thinking to debates on cultural value, we should look, first of all, at the political significance of utility as an independent ethical principle. This ethical principle operates through a working hypothesis about what gives each of us the most pleasure, which is intended to be conveyed in non-judgemental terms. Bentham's address to Hume on this issue, leads Bentham to oppose utilitarian ethics to distinctions of taste. Bentham's eventual preference for 'the greatest happiness principle' over 'the utility principle', indicates that perhaps an ethics of utility could never be independent enough, or lose the taint of instrumentality. Bentham's editor and executor John Bowring offered an example of Bentham's frustration at this misapprehension of utility as a useful end, rather than as the route to an understanding of pleasure as an end in itself: 'An observation made to Mr Bentham by Lady Holland produced a great impression on him. She said that his doctrine of utility put a veto on pleasure; while he had been fancying that pleasure never found so valuable and influential an ally as the principle of utility.'[65] Bowring claims that Lady Holland's intervention meant that 'Dissatisfaction .. with utilitarian phraseology, gradually increased in Bentham's mind'. Nonetheless, it is through Bentham's attempt to defend utility as an independent ethical principle, that he gave us resources with which to analyse cultural value as an apparatus of power.

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Introduction [Texte intégral]
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Droits d'auteur