

Bentham's Hedonic Calculus

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lone pleasure	Richness	brings many joys
accompanied by pain	Purity	painless
distant	Remoteness	immediate
mild	Intensity	intense
unlikely	Certainty	probable
affects just one person	Extent	affects lots of people
brief	Duration	lasting

Bentham's Hedonic Calculus is used to choose between two courses of action. For each possibility, you add up all of the pleasure/pain, and then you do whichever action leads to the most pleasure/least pain. It's not an exact science, but if you try using numbers (say 1-50) you get an idea how it works. You may want to go down to -50 to indicate pain - whatever works!

It's worth noting that Bentham felt it was important to reduce pain first and then look at pleasure. However, if one course of action involves a small amount of pain but a huge amount of pleasure, it will be better than an action that leads to no pain but only little pleasure. Remember, once you've done this a few times, you can make similar decisions on a 'rule of thumb'.

The calculus gets a lot of stick for being 'unworkable' - pain/pleasure is immeasurable, unpredictable and incalculable (3 separate points - try explaining why!), but this is basically the system used when deciding how to spend lottery money or choosing who to operate on in hospitals.