

Hedonic Calculus

"(Gr.*hedone* pleasure) a method of working out the sum total of pleasure and pain produced by an act, and thus the total value of its consequences; also called the *felicific calculus*; sketched by Bentham in chapter 4 of his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 1789. When determining what action is right in a given situation, we should consider the pleasures and pains resulting from it, in respect of their *intensity*, *duration*, *certainty*, *propinquity*, *fecundity* (the chance that a pleasure is followed by other ones, a pain by further pains), *purity* (the chance that pleasure is followed by pains and vice versa), and *extent* (the number of persons affected). We should next consider the alternative courses of action: ideally, this method will determine which act has the best tendency, and therefore is right. Bentham envisaged the calculus could be used for criminal law reform: given a crime of a certain kind it would be possible to work out the minimum penalty necessary for its prevention."

The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy
ed. Thomas Mautner