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**A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF JEREMY BENTHAM'S  
HEDONISTIC PHILOSOPHY AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY SOCIOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF  
NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

The citizen's wellbeing is the sole essence of the formation of government. The government is but a tool to making up each person's insufficiency. The making up of each person's insufficiency, therefore, implies giving satisfaction to the basic needs that guarantees existence. When the people have satisfaction, happiness becomes their expression in all of their doings. Hence, since the attainment of the people's happiness is the sole purpose of a government, and happiness is pleasure, all policies of the government ought to be tailored to producing maximum pleasure. This pleasure seeking and reaching policies is the synopsis of hedonistic philosophy. For Hedonism holds that every action (policy) is only good when it has the capacity of producing or maximizing pleasure for the individual or group of persons. This has not been the case within the socio-political and economic spheres of Nigeria. It has rather been situations where policies are navigators of hardship to citizens than the pleasure which ought to be the guiding principle. Nevertheless, in this essay titled "*A Critical Exposition of Jeremy Bentham's Hedonistic Philosophy and its Relevance to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Socio-Political and Economic conditions of Nigeria*", we sought to show that there will be a turnaround in the socio-political and economic spheres if policies are formulated and implemented with the intention of giving utmost pleasure to Nigerians. The work adopted the methods of critical analysis in analyzing concerned concepts as applicable to the work, and the method of exposition to demonstrate the applicability of Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic philosophy to the contemporary socio-political terrains of Nigeria. Hence, we advocated the consideration and application of the tenets

of hedonism to influence our socio-political and economic policies.

**Keywords:** Hedonism, Government, Socio-Political, Economic, Policies, Pleasure.

Word count: 278

## 1. Introduction

A worthwhile stroll down memory lane and a deep-seated meditation on the current sociopolitical cum economic quagmire and imbroglia of the country calls for proposal of a potent solution not mere analysis. The current socio-economic challenges in the category of high rate of poverty, huge youth unemployment, persistent power-blackout despite colossal amount of money invested therein, and above all, the perennial disgruntlement between the government and the citizens, that has as you might expect, led to high level of distrust on the leaders and the rest of the citizens must be tackled headlong. It is on this regard we found hedonism not just as a palliative but a panacea.

The conceptualization and propagation of Hedonic philosophy, no doubt was as a result or response to similar situation in England during the time of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Bentham saw his days to be characterized by inadequate policy-makers with their ill policies resulting to depleting economy culminating in inducing pain on the citizens. To salvage such a problem, he sought to reconstruct both legal and the socio-economic sectors of his days. He viewed the society as being unfulfilled because of the lack of pleasure, hence he took it upon himself to educate the people on why they ought to be pleasure-seekers and avoiders of whatsoever pain.

The objective of the research is to show that with the inculcation of hedonistic ideology in policy formulation and implementation, that will guarantee the *populis* pleasure, the Nigerian State will be better and more inhabitable than now. The work adopted the methods of critical analysis in analyzing concerned concepts as applicable to the work, and the method of exposition to demonstrate the applicability of Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic philosophy to the contemporary socio-political terrains of Nigeria

## 2. Hedonism

Hedonism, etymologically, is from the Greek "*hēdonē*", which is translated to mean "pleasure". In philosophy, it is the doctrine that pleasure is the sole or chief good in life and that the pursuit of it is the ideal aim of conduct. The theory of hedonism states that pleasure alone is the highest (or intrinsic) good (Uduigwomen 2006:25). Two important hedonistic theories were expounded in ancient Greece. The Cyrenaics, or egoistic hedonists,

espoused a doctrine in which gratification of one's immediate personal desires, without regard for other persons, is considered the supreme end of existence. Knowledge, according to the Cyrenaics, is rooted in the fleeting sensations of the moment, and it is therefore futile to attempt the formulation of a system of moral values in which the desirability of present pleasures is weighed against the pain they may cause in the future. In fact, they expect one to enjoy the pleasures of the moment without a consideration of their future consequences (Echekwube 1999:30). Unlike the egoistic hedonists, the Epicureans, or rational hedonists, contended that the true pleasure is attainable only by reason. They stressed the virtues of self-control and prudence.

Both doctrines survived practically without change until modern times. In the 18th and 19th centuries such British philosophers as Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill propounded the doctrine of universalistic hedonism, better known as utilitarianism. According to this theory, the ultimate criterion of human behavior is the good of society, and the guiding principle of individual moral conduct is allegiance to that which procures and promotes the welfare of the greatest number of people.

Exposition: the detailed discussion and description of a theory of work of art.

### 3. **Jeremy Bentham: A Concise Biography**

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), is a British philosopher, economist, and jurist, who founded the doctrine of utilitarianism. He was born in London on February 15, 1748. A prodigy, he was reading serious treatises at the age of three, playing the violin at age five, and studying Latin and French at age six. He entered the University of Oxford at 12, studied law, and was admitted to the bar after the footsteps of his father and grandfather; however, he did not practice. Instead he worked on a thorough reform of the legal system and on a general theory of law and morality, publishing short works on aspects of his thought. In 1789 he became well known for his masterpiece *Introduction to*

#### **The Principles of Morals and Legislation.**

In the **Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation**, Bentham advanced utilitarianism as the basis for reform. He claimed that one could scientifically ascertain what was morally justifiable by applying the principle of utility. Actions were right if they tended to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Happiness was equivalent to pleasure (John 2010:Par. 2). Through a kind of moral-mathematical calculation of pleasures and pains, one could tell what was a right or a wrong action. If all pleasures and pains were of the same order, then a utilitarian evaluation of moral, political, and legal activities would be possible. Also, Bentham argued, if values were based on pleasures and pains, then theories of natural rights and natural laws were invalid. John Stuart Mill, severely modifying some of Bentham's principles, discounted Bentham's method for

calculating quantities of happiness. Nevertheless, Jeremy Bentham did much to systematize utilitarianism (Roger and Tim 2005:1035).

Bentham's ideas had great influence on the reforms of the latter part of the 19th century in the administrative machinery of the British government, on criminal law, and on procedure in both criminal and civil law. His other works include the *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (1827) and the *Constitutional Code* (1830). Bentham was the leader of the Philosophical Radicals, whose members included James Mill and his son, John Stuart Mill. They founded and edited the *Westminster Review*, which served as an outlet for their reformist ideas. Bentham died in London on June 6, 1832. In accordance with his wishes, his body was dissected before friends. His skeleton fully clothed and provided with a wax head (the original was mummified), is kept in a glass case at University College, London, which he helped to found (Popkin 2008: par 5).

#### **4.0 An Exposition of Jeremy Bentham's Hedonistic Philosophy**

The hedonistic philosophy of Jeremy Bentham is both normative and motivational finding its popularity during the halcyon days of Empiricism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It is undeniable that this was the only period that the philosophy was considered popular, most scholars have argued. However, Bentham argued that happiness was the ultimate good and that happiness was pleasure and the absence of pain. He acknowledged the egoistic and hedonistic nature of peoples' motivation, but argued that the maximization of collective happiness was the correct criterion for moral behavior. Bentham's greatest happiness principle states that actions are immoral if they are not the action that appears to maximize the happiness of all the people likely to be affected; only the action that appears to maximize the happiness of all the people likely to be affected is the morally right action. For Bentham, this is that they should maximize utility, which for him is the same as producing the greatest happiness of the greatest number, which, again, is the same for him as maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain (Harrison 2005:93).

Bentham devised the greatest happiness principle to justify the legal reforms he also argued for. He understood that he could not conclusively prove that the principle was the correct criterion for morally right action, but also thought that it should be accepted because it was fair and better than existing criteria for evaluating actions and legislation. Bentham thought that his Hedonic Calculus could be applied to situations to see what should, morally speaking, be done in a conflicting or obfuscating situation.

In his monumental work "*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*" Bentham, in the opening page noted that humanity is but a slave to two masters who govern and direct our choices of actions. Hence, whatever moral action we engage into, it is as a result of meeting up to the demands of these masters. Bentham put it this way:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand, the standard of right and wrong, on the other, chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne (PML 1.1).

This implies that all of man's moral actions are answerable to any of these two masters. Hence in making choices which are supposedly our own detects, are only but in accordance to the services of the governors – pain and pleasure. Bentham affirmed this assertion when he wrote:

They (pain and pleasure) governs us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think, every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abhor their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law (PML 1.1).

This implies that it is not possible for one to run from the services of these governors. The option of one has an invariable implication of the other. But on the whole, from Bentham's explication, one of these masters or governors is dominant over the other. And the dominant governor or master here is pleasure since the human person has that natural inclination or propensity to avoid pain and seek pleasure in all its forms.

With regard to the principle of utility, Bentham is of the view that moral agent lords over every object to obtain result beneficiary to him/her. He captured it thus:

By (principle of) utility is meant that property in any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all these in the present case comes to the same thing), or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief pain evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered (PML 1.3).

Implying that in every situation one finds his/herself, one should ensure that it is that which is aimed at maximizing the good of the individual and the total avoidance or diminishing of pain. Hence, an act can only contain to the principle of utility principle when it has tendency to argument favourably the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it (PML 1.6). This according to Lawhead (2002) is the fundamental moral rule of utilitarianism as "act always to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest member" (439). With this it becomes unwise to view or ask for the

justification of what the value of utility since it is the ability to produce happiness as the prime value of everything or anything else.

Nevertheless, Bentham believes that a direct refusal of this principle of utility would only result in what he called alternatives. These alternatives are two. The principle of asceticism and the principle of sympathy and antipathy.

#### **4.1 Psychological Hedonism**

The psychological hedonism of Jeremy Bentham stems from the fact of his assertion that all actions of the human person are a response to the innate desire to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. According to Andrew Moore (2013), it is Bentham's claim that pain and pleasure determines what we do makes him a psychological hedonist and more specifically a hedonist about the determination of action (Par 4). This implies that all of our actions are motivated by either pleasure or displeasure. Bentham believes that each moral agent is always motivated to maximize what we take to be our own good, plus the claim that we accept that our good is our maximal or sufficient balance of pleasure over displeasure.

Dan Weijer held that psychological hedonism (motivational hedonism as he calls it) is the theory that the desires to encounter pleasure and to avoid pain guide all of our behaviour (par 19). It is psychological because this desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain influences on our behaviour, either consciously or unconsciously, or directly or indirectly. This is the ground on which Bentham said human behaviour is governed and controlled by a need to increase pleasure and decrease pain. Human beings are naturally inclined to act in search of and naturally disposed to seek pleasure (Echukwube 1990:30).

What psychological hedonism shows is that there is a natural drive in the human person to be inclined in pursuing what pleases him/her (pleasure) and that propensity to abhor what is hurting and displeasing (pain). For instance, it is a fact that everyone wants to live a good life and despise the wrong or bad. There may be an argument here that even when you are demanding to be 'hurt', since you enjoy such sensual pleasure, it is good and fitting for you. Hence, such is pleasure.

#### **4.2 Ethical Hedonism**

Ethical hedonism is the claim position that all only pleasure has positive importance and all and only pain or displeasure has negative importance (Moore 2013: Par 7). This means that an ethical act is judged to be praiseworthy in so far as it is aimed at bringing or producing or having positive importance to the moral agent. Whereas an act is seen as being wrong or bad blameworthy if such an act is capable of producing negative importance. Here, suffice it to say that ethical hedonism is a guiding principle

or moral code or norm that states that a moral act is to be fudged good or bad, right or wrong depending on the positive pleasure it produces. If it produce much pleasure, it is praiseworthy, and when it produces pain it is blameworthy.

Ethical hedonism is the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible to them ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/hedonism/ethical\\_!](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/hedonism/ethical_!)). It is the light of this that G. B. Ncha (2016) buttressed that:

... it is the belief that although it is possible to deliberately avoid pleasure or choose pain, it is morally wrong to do so. The implication of this theory is that pleasure and pain are the sole determinant of the morality of our actions, then our actions must be elevated on the basis of the consequences such actions produce (9).

This goes to imply that on the basis of evaluating the morality of an action, such action must of necessity have the likelihood to satisfy the being of the individual. The action must have pleasure element at least, f not in totality but must not have any element of pan in it. Ethical hedonism is characterized by the urge to act to satisfy one's desires irrespective of the pain this may cause others (Echekwube 1999:30).

#### **4.3 Hedonic Calculus**

Bentham enunciated his hedonic calculus as a scientific method to quantify and calculate the value of different pleasures (PML 1999:4.1-8). It seeks to caution that when considering any action, we should evaluate the amount of pleasure or pain it will produce according to the seven dimensions (Lawhead 2002:440). However, Bentham's Hedonic Calculus identifies several aspects of pleasure that contribute to its value, including certainty, propinquity, extent, intensity, and duration. The Hedonic Calculus also makes use of two future-pleasure-or-pain-related aspects of actions – fecundity and purity. These are explained thus;

- i. Certainty refers to the likelihood that the pleasure or pain will occur.
- ii. Propinquity refers to how long away (in terms of time) the pleasure or pain is.
- iii. Fecundity refers to the likelihood of the pleasure or pain leading to more of the same sensation.
- iv. Purity refers to the likelihood of the pleasure or pain leading to some of the opposite sensation.
- v. Extent refers to the number of people the pleasure or pain is likely to affect.
- vi. Intensity refers to the felt strength of the pleasure or pain.

- vii. Duration refers to how long the pleasure or pain are felt for. It should be noted that only intensity and duration have intrinsic value for an individual.

Certainty, propinquity, fecundity, and purity are all instrumentally valuable for an individual because they affect the likelihood of an individual feeling future pleasure and pain. Extent is not directly valuable for an individual's well-being because it refers to the likelihood of other people experiencing pleasure or pain. With this, Bentham was able to show the ideal human behaviour from the measurement of relative gains and losses in pain and pleasure in order to determine the most pleasurable action a human could chose in a given situation

([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/psychological\\_egoism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/psychological_egoism)).

It suffices to state from the foregoing that Bentham's inclusion of certainty, propinquity, fecundity, and purity in the Hedonic Calculus helps to differentiate his hedonism from Folk Hedonism. Folk Hedonists rarely consider how likely their actions are to lead to future pleasure or pain, focusing instead on the pursuit of immediate pleasure and the avoidance of immediate pain. So while Folk Hedonists would be unlikely to study for an exam, anyone using Bentham's Hedonic Calculus would consider the future happiness benefits to themselves (and possibly others) of passing the exam and then promptly begin studying (Harrison 2005:14).

Most importantly for Bentham's Hedonic Calculus, the pleasure from different sources is always measured against these criteria in the same way, that is to say that no additional value is afforded to pleasures from particularly moral, clean, or culturally-sophisticated sources. As this calculus indicates, Bentham was interested chiefly in the qualitative aspects of pleasure, so that all actions are equally good if they produce the same amount of pleasure (Stumpf 1976:370). For example, Bentham held that pleasure from the parlor game push-pin was just as valuable for us as pleasure from music and poetry. It is worth noting that since Bentham's theory of Prudential Hedonism focuses on the quantity of the pleasure, rather than the source-derived quality of it, it is best described as a type of Quantitative Hedonism.

Bentham argued for several types of hedonism, including those now referred to as Prudential Hedonism, Hedonistic Utilitarianism, and Motivational Hedonism (although his commitment to strong Motivational Hedonism eventually began to wane).

## **5. Hedonism and its Relevance to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria**

The relevance of hedonism to the 21st century Nigeria can never be overemphasized mostly at this era where development aid to Nigeria has dwindled compared to other African countries thus, leading the country to lose her place as the largest economy in Africa. It is a trite, that Nigeria has recently undergone sociopolitical cum economic reforms and (presently on)

recession that both outside donors like AU, UN, USAid, NEPAD, ECOWAS and international NGOs, and domestic forces driving the reform have been tirelessly sustaining it but to no productive and substantive results. In the sense that the policies so orchestrated are not in favour of the common/ordinary Nigerians. The policies seem stiffer by the day in spite of the palliatives from the aforementioned bodies and even the government.

Thus, the fears of Nigerians in this present sociopolitical and economic crisis represent a people whose existence is not what it 'ought' to be. Following the hedonic principle of Jeremy Bentham, the experience and endurance of pain is but evil, bad and has to be avoided and the orchestrator(s) of this is blameworthy. More so, the present condition of the country portend to show that no one is ethical since to be ethical in the framework of hedonism is to conscientiously seek pleasure than pain. This present pain ought to be replaced with pleasure in all ramifications. The hardships from stiffened economic policies are self inflicted wounds. Maggie Fick put it thus;

...the "self-inflicted" wounds –the currency policies and associated import control set up to converse hard currency by prioritizing strategic imports...have starved existing business of inputs leading to a collapse in supplies of everything from medicines to spare parts, while incidents of price gouging have risen. The policies are also blamed for encouraging capital flight while forestalling fresh investment (<https://www.ft.com/content/2f5e5d2c-2338-11e6-9d4d-c1176a5124d>).

This implies that there was no consideration of the citizen's immediate happiness in the formulation and implementation of these policies. Hence, it affects the entire system with the poor having the greater percentage of the pain. Samuel Ogunpide quoted Oby Ezekwesili to buttress this thus;

"the weakest and the most vulnerable suffer the impact of inflation the most. Enormous power is being abused as a result of opaque economic policies. Companies are suddenly finding themselves unable to produce because they are unable to access foreign exchange (<http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/202672-buharis-economic-policies-opaque-archaic-ezekwesili.htm/>).

The implication of this is that the stringent economic policies are hurting the poor. This can be considered as a malevolent expression or manifestation of the leadership posture. When policies are put in place not minding the impact they would have on the hoi polloi, there are termed anti-hedonistic. For they deny the people the pleasure they ought to have derived from the existence of such a government and its policies. However, it is surprising that this self-

inflicted wounds of ill economy due to formulating and implementing anti-hedonistic policies, widens the gap between the poor and the rich in the country thereby creating more hardship. We therefore disagree with the submission of Dahida Deewua Philip and Maidoki B. Peter (2013) that problematique in Nigeria is not policy formulation but implementation. In their words they wrote:

...the problem in Nigeria is not policy formulation but implementation. ...this is caused by conflicting interest by the elite-class whom they differ sharply in ideological setting, self serving interest and manipulation of the instrument of policy making to their advantage (2013:63).

The problem is not with the formulation and implementation of the policies but the misdirectedness of the intention. For if the intention is guided with hedonistic philosophy as postulated by Jeremy Bentham the said elite-class would not obstruct its implementation on the grounds of ideological indifference. This is owed to the apodictic fact that the human person is a pleasure seeking being. That is to say, even the elite-class in the opposition would definitely support the implementation of such hedonistic policy since they will draw pleasure, happiness from it.

Nevertheless, the implication of hedonistic philosophy would have it that based on the principle of utility clear, objective and disinterested public discussion that would enable decisions to be made where conflict of interest (legitimate) seem to arise. The principle of utility will also make it lucid that each of the policies to be made must be that which seeks to maximize pleasure and avoid pain to the people. For it is when people enjoy pleasure that the essence of their being is defined thus their country. The welfare, living-good of a people determines the development of such a country. It is when the citizens derive happiness from any policy that the presence of a government is appreciated. Happiness here implies feeling good, enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained (Layard 2005:125). He broadly explained that “happiness is what people [government should] want for their children and for their fellow citizens...the greatest happiness of all [therefore] deserves to be the ultimate goal of government and policymakers” (2005:124-125).

Furthermore, in the utilization of hedonic calculus in our sociopolitical cum economic spheres, the pleasure and pain in making decisions would be calculated before the making and subsequent implementation of that policy. Stumpf (1976) observes thus “sum up all the values of all the pleasure on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act...if on the side of pain, the bad tendency” (370). For instance, the policy of import control and restriction of foreign exchange was supposed to

be weighed on this existential scale to know whether it is good for the citizens before implementation. In ensuring this, everyone would be capable to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, socio and cultural development of the country. The people to whom the country is meant for do not have to dwindle in abject poverty and advance in pain but to live in pleasure. Pleasure that has to be calculated to be the sum total of all that has the potentiality of producing its kind. Nigeria in the 21st century will therefore experience happiness if hedonistic philosophy or ideology is utilized.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the work has been able to show that the hedonistic philosophy of Jeremy Bentham is not only relevant for intellectual speculation alone but is of utmost solution to the plethora of problems facing the country, Nigeria. The work demonstrated that a given people for whom a given country is created do not need to suffer in penury owing to stringent policies but ought to have the joy of their creating a nation state from each of the policies drawn or about to be drawn by its lawmakers. Any anti-pleasure-giving legislation should be discarded in totality. As well as any bill which as a matter of fact may portend to have a future referential benefit in it but has the inherent propensity to administer a small portion of pain in the here and now, should be avoided and frowned at. This pleasure must be scientifically determined but in whichever form, the interest of the moral agent (citizens) is most paramount.

The soliciting of Hedonism to be the basis of Nigeria's socio-political cum economic sphere is deduced from the thrust that pain or suffering is a living enemy to humanity, hence abhorred at all cost. The making of policies with a hedonistic mindset or inclination will aid the booming or revitalization as well as diversification of the Nation's economy. The citizens are bound to be motivated in their socio-political and economic engagements when policies are hedonistically formulated and implemented, since their activities will grant them the pleasure they so sought for in life. More so, the citizens will go about their exploring opportunities if the policies are favourable to guarantee the better existence thereby reducing the rate of social vices.

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