

The Sum of Human Happiness?

I'm going to give you a bowl of ice cream. Your favourite flavour, served just how you like it. As it's an imaginary bowl of ice cream, add whatever toppings you like. It's on the house. I'm also throwing in a warm summer's day so that it will be cool and refreshing.

Sounds good? There's a catch. In this thought experiment, there is no gain without pain. To receive your bowl of delicious ice cream, you also have to give in to some sort of pain. Which of the following would you be willing to endure in exchange for your ice cream?

- Be pinched on the arm for ten seconds?
- Be pinched on the arm for 1 minute? 10 minutes?
- Be pinched on the arm for ten seconds, but with only a 50/50 chance of getting the ice cream?
- Be pinched on the arm for ten seconds now, but you get the ice cream in a week? In a year?
- Be pinched on the arm for ten seconds, knowing it will leave a very slight ache for the rest of the day?
- Be pinched on the arm, get the ice cream, but know that the ice cream will also give you a tummy ache?

Discuss this with your family and/or share your thoughts on Google Classroom.

Are your choices different to other people?

You probably said yes to some and not to others. What you've been doing is "the prudential calculus"- weighing up pleasures and pains and seeing whether overall, there's more benefit in each ice-cream/pinching combination than in leaving you hungry and your arm not pinched.

Prudence is about weighing up different parts of your life and taking decisions that make sense in your life overall. For example, you might study hard in a subject you don't much enjoy, because you know it will be important to pass the exam at the end of it.

You might also be kind to other people and make sacrifices for them. You might study hard for your exams because you want to train to be a doctor and help other people. That's a different sort of calculation, but it still involves weighing up pleasures and pains and seeing what is going to lead to the best balance of pleasure over pain in all the people involved.

