

Hedonism

Hedonism is among the oldest, simplest, and most widely discussed theories of value – theories that tell us what makes the world better or what makes a person’s life go better. Hedonism, in a word, is the view that “pleasure is the good.” In its most comprehensive form, hedonism about value holds that the only thing that ultimately ever makes the world, or a life, better is its containing more pleasure or less pain. The term ‘hedonism’ is also sometimes used to refer to doctrines about other topics. ‘Universal hedonism’ sometimes stands for the view that we ought to bring the greatest balance of pleasure over pain into the world that we can and ‘psychological hedonism’ the view that all human behavior is motivated ultimately by desires to obtain pleasure or avoid pain. Our topic here is hedonism about value.

1. What is hedonism about value?

a. What is hedonism a theory of?

An important distinction among kinds of value is the distinction between something’s being good *for* some person (or other subject), and something’s simply being a good thing (*see* GOOD AND GOOD FOR). The former kind of value – called ‘welfare’ or ‘well-being’ – makes our *lives* better, or makes things go better *for us* (*see* WELL-BEING), while the latter kind of value makes the *world* better. Typically, whenever a person receives some benefit, or has his life made better, this also makes the world better. But it is at least conceivable that the two come apart, as when an undeserving person receives some benefit, making things go better for him without perhaps making the world better. Thus we can distinguish hedonism about welfare from hedonism about what we will call ‘impersonal value’.

A second, more familiar distinction in value, one that cuts across the welfare/impersonal value distinction, is the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value (*see* INTRINSIC VALUE; INSTRUMENTAL VALUE). Many things that we commonly describe as good are good merely instrumentally, or good for what they bring about, or prevent. For example, it’s sometimes good to take medicine, but taking medicine is good only because of what else it might bring, such as health. Medicine, important as it is, is of mere instrumental value. But if some things are of instrumental value, some other things must be good in themselves, or of intrinsic value. Hedonism holds that states of pleasure are *intrinsically* good and states of pain *intrinsically* bad, whether for their subjects, or impersonally as well. Hedonism about welfare is not a theory about what practical steps to take to get a good life. Knowing what tends to bring people pleasure is an empirical question, and a philosopher in the armchair is in no special position to answer it. Hedonism about welfare isn’t even committed to the view that, to get a good life, a person should try to get pleasure and avoid pain. As hedonists have long recognized, some people enjoy their lives most if enjoyment is not their goal, and they aim instead to achieve other things for their own sakes.

b. What are pleasure and pain?

In ordinary English, the term ‘hedonist’ connotes someone devoted to his own sensual pleasure. But the philosophical doctrine of hedonism does not imply that one should be devoted exclusively to one’s own pleasure, and, moreover, it affirms the value of all kinds of pleasure, not merely sensory pleasure. Thus, while any hedonist will agree that the pleasures of eating chocolate, getting high, and having sex make one’s life go better in themselves, hedonists also recognize the value of the pleasures of falling in love, helping a friend, solving a problem, appreciating art, being proud, finding something out, studying philosophy, appreciating nature, reading a novel, relaxing in meditation, etc. Furthermore, hedonists typically emphasize that these latter kinds of pleasure are often more worth our while, since they tend to be more lasting and less destructive, while sensual indulgence is fleeting, and often followed by bellyaches, hangovers, and other sources of suffering.

The lists above reveal the heterogeneity of pleasure, and naturally invite the question, important to any study of hedonism, of what pleasure *is* – of what all of the activities and states above have in common in virtue of which each is pleasant. The same question arises for the equally heterogeneous pain.

A simple answer is the *felt-quality theory*: the view that pleasure is a single, unanalyzable sensation or feeling, something in the same general category as a taste sensation, and one that happens to be caused by the varied activities and states listed above. But many have since followed Henry Sidgwick, who confessed that, “for [his]

own part, when [he] reflects on the notion of pleasure,—using the term in the comprehensive sense ... to include the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments,” he can find no common quality intrinsic to these states (Sidgwick 1907: 127; *see* SIDGWICK, HENRY). This argument from introspection against the felt-quality theory can be supplemented with another argument. Imagine a creature who is in no way attracted to this alleged distinctive feeling of pleasure and in no way bothered by the feeling of pain. Could it be correct to say that such a creature is actually getting pleasure when there are no attitudes of attraction taking place in her, and also that such a creature is truly in pain, yet bothered by nothing? It seems not. But the felt-quality theory seems committed to this possibility.

This argument points to an alternative approach of the nature of pleasure and pain, the *attitudinal theory*. Sidgwick (1907: 127) defended such a theory, which C. D. Broad (1930: 237- 38) interprets thus: “the statement: ‘This experience of mine is pleasant’ just means: ‘I *like* this experience for its non-hedonic qualities’” (emphasis added; cf. Feldman 2004: §4.1). According to Derek Parfit (1984: 493), “What pains and pleasures have in common are their relations to our *desires*. On the use of ‘pain’ which has rational and moral significance, all pains are when experienced unwanted, and a pain is worse or greater the more it is unwanted” (emphasis added; *see also* Brandt 1979: 38). These attitudinal theories avoid the result that it’s possible to be completely unbothered by anything yet still be in pain, since it’s reasonable to maintain that *dislike* and *aversion* are ways of being bothered. It may be good news for hedonism if an attitudinal theory of pleasure is correct, for otherwise hedonists must say that experiences that someone is completely indifferent to nevertheless make her life better.

c. What determines the intrinsic value of a pleasure or a pain?

Jeremy Bentham believed legislators should craft laws with a view to the effect on people’s pleasure and pain (Bentham 1907: ch. 1; *see* BENTHAM, JEREMY). He thought it would help legislators to know the determinants of the value of pleasure and pain, and thus devised his now famous “hedonic calculus.” Bentham’s measure seemed to be cataloging the determinants not only of the intrinsic but also the instrumental value of a pleasure or a pain, and to be taking into account uncertainty as well. Putting these factors aside, Bentham appeared to hold that the value of a pleasure or a pain was determined simply by two factors: *intensity* and *duration*. The longer and stronger the pleasure, the better. For Bentham, it didn’t matter whether the source was lofty or lowbrow: “Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry” (Bentham 1843: III.i).

Bentham’s view prompted critics to dub hedonism “a doctrine worthy only of swine” (Mill 1863: ch. 2). John Stuart Mill famously responded to this charge by adding a third determinant: *quality* of pleasure (*see* MILL, JOHN STUART; *see also* Aristotle 1999: X.3). Mill’s theory “assign[s] to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation” (Mill 1863: ch. 2). Crucially, Mill’s view isn’t merely that the higher pleasures have greater *instrumental* value – a point with which Bentham could have agreed – but that they have greater *intrinsic* value. That is, an intellectual pleasure is of more intrinsic value, according to Mill, than a sensory pleasure of equal intensity and duration. In this way Mill believed he could deliver the result that “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied” (Mill 1863: ch. 2). Some critics, however, claim Mill’s view to be inconsistent with hedonism (Moore 1903: 47). More recently, Fred Feldman has offered ostensible forms of hedonism on which all sorts of factor can determine the value of pleasure, such as whether what the person is pleased about is *true*, or whether it is *pleasure-worthy* (Feldman 2004:

ch. 5). These theories are, like Mill's, designed to avoid certain objections to hedonism (some of which are discussed below), though questions remain about whether the theories are genuine forms of hedonism (Zimmerman 2007:435-7).

d. What about happiness?

After stating his normative ethical theory that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness," Mill (1863: ch. 2) writes, "By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain." Sidgwick, too, often used 'pleasure' and 'happiness' interchangeably, as do others. These philosophers are in fact committing themselves to some version of *hedonism about happiness*, a substantive doctrine about the nature of the psychological state of happiness, according to which, to be happy during some period of time is to experience a favorable balance or pleasure over pain during that time (*see* HAPPINESS). If, but only if, hedonism about happiness is true do the views that pleasure is the good and that happiness is the good coincide (*see* EUDAIMONISM).

2. Why think hedonism is true?

a. The argument from psychological hedonism

The great historical hedonists all appeared to subscribe to hedonism for more or less the same reason: that "from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance" (Epicurus 1926), that "[n]ature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure* ... [it being] for them alone ... to determine what we shall do" (Bentham 1907: ch. 1), that "there is in reality nothing desired except happiness" (Mill 1863: ch. 2; *see also* Aristotle 1999, X.2). That is, they argued from psychological hedonism to hedonism about value. Sidgwick stands out among historical hedonists for explicitly rejecting this line of argument (Sidgwick 1907: I.iv.1-2).

Let's understand psychological hedonism as the thesis that the only thing that anyone ever desires for its own sake is his own pleasure (we'll ignore pain here to save words). Thus, whenever a person desires something other than his own pleasure, he desires it as a means to his own pleasure. The argument from psychological hedonism uses this psychological claim as a premise in establishing the conclusion that the only thing that is intrinsically good for someone is his own pleasure. Psychological hedonism is of course insufficient on its own to establish any conclusion about value (*see* IS-ought GAP), and requires the additional, often suppressed premise that only what a person desires for its own sake is intrinsically good for him.

The argument from psychological hedonism is now almost universally rejected, even by hedonists. Both premises are problematic. First, psychological hedonism itself seems to have clear counterexamples. Although of course people may often be after nothing more than their own enjoyment, it seems just as certain that people sometimes want, for their own sakes, other things – the happiness of their children, a victory by their team, to play a piano part just right. If these desired things come about, the person will typically take pleasure in this, but it doesn't follow that the person wanted the thing as a means to this pleasure. Especially problematic for psychological hedonism are cases involving desires for what occurs after one is dead. But even if we grant psychological hedonism, the argument seems to backfire. For it is, in effect, endeavoring to establish hedonism about welfare on the basis of a more fundamental truth about welfare: the second premise that only what a person desires for its own sake is intrinsically good for her. This premise is in fact a competing theory of welfare: the desire theory (*see* DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD). Thus a proponent of the argument from psychological hedonism seems committed to *rejecting* hedonism as the fundamental theory about welfare.

b. Arguments involving the idea that nothing other than pleasure is intrinsically good Pleasure and pain, broadly construed, are the least controversial examples of things that make our lives better and worse (Goldstein 1989: 255). Thus, we have reason to think that pleasure and pain are at least *among* the benefits and misfortunes of life. But hedonism is a much stronger thesis than that: it holds that pleasure and pain are the *only* fundamental intrinsic goods and ills. Any argument for hedonism thus must be an argument against the intrinsic value of anything else. This has

some fairly direct intuitive plausibility, at least when it comes to welfare. Pluralists about welfare often believe in the intrinsic welfare value of some or all of the following: friendship, love, knowledge, health, achievement, aesthetic appreciation, freedom, intellectual activity, creative activity, and moral virtue (cf. the list in Frankena 1973: 87–8; *see* VALUE PLURALISM). Most of us enjoy having or doing the things on this list. Hedonists thus agree that these things typically make our lives better, but maintain that the value here is merely instrumental. The pluralist insists that some of these are, in addition, good in themselves to have.

The way to try to resolve this dispute, it seems, is to imagine a person who receives these things, but gets no enjoyment out of it; then we ask ourselves whether the person seems to be receiving any benefit. When we make it vivid that the person has no interest in these things, is just utterly unimpressed by them, it can seem rather implausible to insist that the person is nonetheless made better off by their presence in his life. This is some evidence for hedonism about welfare.

The argument of the last paragraph relies on the idea that if something is to be of genuine benefit to a person, it must engage or excite or resonate with her in some way (Railton 1986: 9). This basic intuition is sometimes called the internalism requirement on welfare (Velleman 1998). Whether hedonism can indeed accommodate it seems to depend upon the nature of pleasure. If a felt-quality theory is true, and pleasure is just one feeling among others, one that may or may not resonate with its subject, then hedonism would seem to violate the internalism requirement as much as any pluralist theory. But attitudinal theories of pleasure evidently allow hedonism to obey the internalism requirement, for to take pleasure in or enjoy some experience or activity is for it to resonate with you.

There is no analogous evidence for hedonism about impersonal value. One of the more intuitively compelling intrinsic impersonal goods is justice, in the sense of apportioning welfare to desert. W. D. Ross asks us to “compare two imaginary states of the universe, alike in the total amounts of virtue and vice and of pleasure and pain present in the two, but in one of which the virtuous were all happy and the vicious miserable, while in the other the virtuous were miserable and the vicious happy” (Ross 1930: 101; *see* ROSS, W. D.). Ross claims that “very few people would hesitate to say that the first was a much better state of the universe,” and concludes that, “we must recognize, ... as [an] independent good, the apportionment of pleasure and pain to the virtuous and the vicious respectively.” Internalism about welfare provided the hedonist about welfare an argument against pluralism about welfare. But Ross’ argument here is about impersonal value, and no analogous principle holds. The universe isn’t even the kind of thing that can be engaged by something.

Another line of argument for hedonism begins with the truism that what you don’t know can’t hurt you – in other words: “a state of affairs can make me better off only if, in one way or another, it enters or affects my experience” (Sumner 1996: 127). This, the “experience requirement” on welfare, arguably implies that only certain experiences or mental states can be intrinsically good for a person (cf. Sidgwick 1907: III.xiv). Once we have that claim, together with the observation that pleasures form quite a broad category of mental state, we have some reasonable evidence that only pleasures are intrinsically good for us (cf. Kagan 1992: 185-7).

Some pluralists about welfare will continue to insist that the items on their lists *do* make our lives better, whether or not they engage us or affect our experiences. Against these pluralists, hedonists sometimes make arguments involving error theories of pluralists’ intuitions. One kind of argument claims that it is a common mistake to attribute intrinsic value to highly reliable instrumental values (cf. Smart 1973). If we get pleasure every time we appreciate great art, perhaps this causes us to mistakenly intuit that appreciating great art is itself of intrinsic value. Another such argument begins by drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, the welfare value of a life, and, on the other hand, other modes of evaluation for lives, such as moral value, aesthetic value, or excellence (Sumner 1996: 20-5). The hedonist may claim that those who have the intuition that, say, a life of moral virtue is better than an equally enjoyable nonvirtuous life may be confusing intuitions about moral value for intuitions about welfare. A third kind of error-theoretic argument points to the advantages, evolutionary and otherwise, of being disposed to believe that some things other than pleasure have intrinsic value (Crisp 2006: 637-9).

3. Why think hedonism is false?

Hedonism involves two core claims: that *all* pleasures are intrinsically good, and that *nothing other* than pleasure is intrinsically good (ignoring pain again for simplicity). Both claims face important objections.

a. Arguments against the view that all pleasures are intrinsically good

One of the oldest objections to the view that all pleasures are good appeals to *base* pleasures (Aristotle 1999: X.3). G. E. Moore (1912: 237-8) compares “the state of mind of a drunkard, when he is intensely pleased with breaking crockery” to “that of a man who is fully realising all that is exquisite in the tragedy of King Lear” (see MOORE, G.E.). In an earlier work, Moore (1903: §56) reminds readers that “[i]t is commonly held that certain of what would be called the lowest forms of sexual enjoyment ... are positively bad, although it is by no means clear that they are not the most pleasant states we ever experience.”

Another popular counterexample is *malicious* pleasure. According to someone who knew him, serial killer and rapist Ted Bundy was “a sadistic sociopath who took pleasure from another human’s pain and the control he had over his victims, to the point of death, and even after” (Rule 2009: xiv). Everyone – hedonists included – can agree that Bundy and his behavior were morally monstrous, and that he made the world a much worse place. But were things mitigated, at least somewhat, by the fact that Bundy enjoyed what he did? Many are inclined to think that this actually made things worse. Hedonists can point to considerations that at least cast some doubt on these objections.

With respect to malicious pleasures in particular, we have to be careful that we aren’t making the wrong kind of evaluation. Bundy’s actions were obviously immoral; perhaps even his pleasures were. Hedonists need not deny this; they claim rather that his pleasures were a good thing, just considered in themselves. Perhaps on reflection, only the negative *moral* evaluation holds of Bundy’s pleasures.

This sort of reply is most effective for hedonism about welfare. Even if one cannot accept that anything good is going on, impersonally speaking, in a case of malicious pleasure, it is more plausible that the person indulging in the malicious pleasure is at least getting something that’s good *for him*. Indeed, this judgment would help explain why cases of malicious pleasure so offend our sense of justice: not only is the perpetrator doing this horrible thing – he’s *benefitting* from it (Goldstein 1989: 269-71). From what was said in this and the previous section, one can see how a hedonist might reply to the argument from base pleasures. Perhaps the putatively base activities mentioned by Moore – drunken mischief and bestiality – are open to *moral* criticism, and perhaps those who indulge in them thereby lead degraded lives, but this may not be to say that they are worse lives *for them*. And if these activities aren’t immoral, then there probably is nothing wrong with the pleasures they cause in the first place.

Finally, perhaps a hedonist can take “higher ground,” and agree that base and malicious pleasures have little, or even literally no value (Mill 1863: ch. 2; Feldman: ch. 5). As noted, however, there is controversy over whether this is in fact consistent with hedonism.

b. Arguments against the view that only pleasure is intrinsically good

In discussing hedonist arguments against pluralism, we have already studied some aspects of the debate over whether some things other than pleasure might be intrinsically good. We will conclude with two of the most widely discussed problem cases for the view that nothing other than pleasure is intrinsically good for people: Plato’s oyster and Nozick’s experience machine. In the *Philebus*, Plato inquires into whether it is pleasure or knowledge that ultimately makes our lives worth living. In arguing that a life containing both pleasure and knowledge is superior to one containing only pleasure, Plato has Socrates point out that the latter life would contain no memory of past pleasures, no anticipation of future pleasures, and even no awareness of present pleasures. Socrates declares this life to be “the life, not of a man, but of an oyster” (Plato 1996: 21).

A problem for Plato's argument is that lives in which people can recall, anticipate, and appreciate their pleasures typically contain much more pleasure, since these activities are themselves pleasant. Thus hedonism can agree that the pleasure-plus-knowledge life would indeed be better. But Plato's oyster has inspired other challenges to hedonism. J. M. E. McTaggart (1927: 869), for example, imagines an "oyster-like life," with "very little consciousness, and ... very little excess of pleasure over pain" at each moment, but that is *prolonged indefinitely* (see also Crisp 2006: 630-1 and Lemos 1994: 53-5). Hedonists, at least those of Bentham's variety, are committed to saying that such a life will eventually become far better than the best human life.

This case is in fact a challenge for everyone, given that any plausible theory of welfare will assign some value to sensory pleasure. The sheer longevity of the oyster life enables its value to approach infinity, thus swamping whatever other values a pluralist might appeal to. One solution is to appeal to so-called incommensurable values, and in fact this is one interpretation of Mill's appeal to higher quality pleasure (*see* INCOMMENSURABILITY (AND INCOMPARABILITY) and Lemos 1994: ch. 5). McTaggart himself, though not a hedonist, argues that the oyster-like life is in fact better (McTaggart 1927: §870).

Perhaps the most influential objection nowadays to hedonism derives from a brief section of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* called "The Experience Machine" (though Nozick himself makes no mention of hedonism there; Nozick 1974: 42-5; cf. Smart 1973: 19- 25). The experience machine is an imaginary device that gives users perfect replicas of real world experiences. Let's suppose (deviating slightly from Nozick's presentation) that the machine is programmed to give you a much more enjoyable life than your actual life, by making you believe that you are doing the things you would most love to do in life (fall in love, write a novel, become an astronaut, whatever). In fact, you'd be spending your whole life plugged into this machine, being fed illusions. Nozick asks, Would you plug in? Probably few of us would. However, it is not a trivial step from this psychological claim to the claim that hedonism about welfare is false (Feldman 2012: 67-72). Thus, others have put the argument differently (Crisp 1996: 635-6). They begin by describing an ideal life according to a standard pluralist view, a life with real relationships, real achievements, and whatever else you like, all thoroughly enjoyed. Then we imagine an experience-for-experience identical life lived on the experience machine. Since pleasures and pains are experiences, the experience machine life will contain the same pleasures and pains as the real life, and will thus be an equally good life to get according to hedonism about welfare. But is that the right result?

A less fanciful case that gets at the same idea is Shelly Kagan's deceived businessman, (Kagan 1994: 310-12; cf. Nagel 1970: 76). A businessman dies believing he got everything he wanted in life: a successful business, respect from his colleagues, a family who loves him, and the admiration of the community. In fact, he had none of these things: his business partner embezzled from the company, which will soon go bankrupt, his wife cheated on him regularly, and his children and the community hold him in contempt. Kagan claims (1994: 311) that "it is difficult to believe ... that this life has gone about as well as a life could go." But since the man enjoyed his life about as much as a life could be enjoyed, hedonists are committed to this verdict. Not everyone shares Kagan's intuition about the case. On their view, the true facts of the businessman's life *risked* ruining his life, but they turned out to be harmless in the end. What you don't know can't hurt you. Even so, it is hard to deny that something is amiss with the businessman's life. Might it be something other than welfare? One possibility involves the fact that the businessman failed to achieve his aims. Perhaps it is simply built in to the notion of an aim, or an intention, that if one adopts it, but doesn't fulfill it, this is a kind of failure, a kind of defect. Since the businessman's life is full of failed aims, it is defective in this way. But it is an open question whether this sort of defect makes his life worse *for him*.

As with all of the arguments and replies discussed above, the reader must reflect carefully on the cases, make sure she is asking the right questions about them – i.e., questions genuinely about welfare – and decide for herself the most reasonable conclusions to draw.

SEE ALSO:

Bentham, Jeremy; Desire Theories of the Good; Eudaimonism; Good and Good for; Happiness; Life, Value of; Instrumental Value; Intrinsic Value; Is-Ought Gap; Incommensurability (and Incomparability); Mill, John Stuart; Moore, G. E.; Paradox of Happiness; Perfectionism; Pleasure; Prudence; Ross, W. D.; Sidgwick, Henry; Utilitarianism; Value Pluralism; Well-Being.