

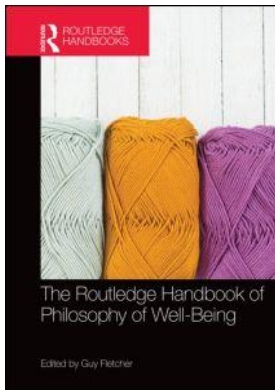
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PART II

Theories of well-being

9

HEDONISM

Alex Gregory

Roughly, hedonism is the view that well-being wholly depends on how you feel. Slightly more precisely, it says that all and only positive experiences are good for you, and that all and only negative experiences are bad for you. Hedonism has seemed like an attractive theory to many people, but crude to others. Without doubt, it is one of the most influential theories of well-being. Historical defenders have included Epicurus, Mill (1863, especially Chapter 2), and Bentham (1789, especially Chapters 1 and 4). In this entry, I shall first briefly survey some arguments for hedonism, and then distinguish some different formulations of it. But the majority of the entry focuses on objections to the view.

Hedonism about well-being should be distinguished from psychological hedonism. Psychological hedonism says that we are motivated to do things only if we expect they will give us positive experiences or allow us to avoid negative experiences. Psychological hedonism aims to describe our actual behavior, whereas hedonism about well-being aims to describe what is good for us. These are different issues, since we might not always do what is good for us. Hedonism about well-being should also be distinguished from hedonism as a theory of value. The hedonic theory of value says that only positive experiences are valuable, and only negative experiences are disvaluable. This view coincides with hedonism about well-being only if we make the additional and controversial assumption that all and only well-being has value. Hereafter, this chapter focuses solely on hedonism about well-being.

A final introductory point: the name “hedonism” may mislead. In everyday English, “hedonists” value the present over the future, and value bodily pleasures over all other pleasures (e.g., intellectual). Hedonism, in our sense, has no such commitments: hedonists might agree that someone who works long miserable hours in order to prepare for an early retirement of peaceful contemplation is efficiently promoting his or her well-being.

Arguments for hedonism

To get a grip on the view, it’s helpful to start by looking at what its attractions are supposed to be.¹

First, it seems to deliver the right results across a wide variety of cases. Torture, depression, and headaches are all bad for us, and a natural explanation of that fact is that they feel bad. Parties, tasty food, and sex are all good for us, and a natural explanation of that fact is that they feel good. To make the point most stark, note that it’s very hard to think of a time when your

life was going badly but you felt great, or a time when your life was going well but you felt terrible. So hedonism seems to have many plausible implications.

Second, hedonism seems to have plausible implications in a different respect. Whilst people can have levels of well-being, other objects—such as cars, solar systems, and numbers—cannot (cf. Sumner 1996: 14–16). Hedonism is well placed to explain this fact. According to hedonism, only things that have experiences have levels of well-being. This explains why objects such as cars, solar systems, and numbers cannot have levels of well-being: because they do not have experiences. And to the extent that it is debatable whether, say, lobsters, have a level of well-being, according to hedonism that is debatable just because it is debatable whether lobsters are conscious. This all seems plausible.

Third, hedonism might seem attractive because it respects the *experience requirement*: the idea that anything that affects your level of well-being must feature in your experience (Griffin 1986: 7–20). We might think that if your life starts going worse or better, this must be something you notice. Take the following example: imagine that my brother has moved to Australia, and we have no means of contacting one another. Some anti-hedonists might think that how my brother fares affects my level of well-being: because he is part of my family and significant personal relationships contribute to well-being, because I want him to be happy and satisfying desires contributes to well-being, or whatever else. Now imagine that his fortunes change wildly over the day today: he is really enjoying a great party, but then he has an accident and breaks his arm, but then he receives medical attention which numbs the pain, but then the attending doctors notice he has cancer and inform him that he’s going to die soon, but then they revise their judgment and tell him they can fix it. What a day he’s had! Our anti-hedonist tells us that my brother’s ups and downs also affect my level of well-being. But since I’m unaware of everything that’s happened to him, this might strike us as incredible. I’ve been benefited and harmed at various points today, and I didn’t even notice? Being tempted by the idea that facts about our own well-being must be accessible to ourselves, we might be tempted to think that they must consist in states of mind. This argument for hedonism has some appeal, though it’s not clear whether it merely preaches to the converted. That is, one might think that the experience requirement is so close to hedonism that appealing to the former in support of the later is effectively circular. Still, this is undoubtedly a way in which many people are attracted to hedonism.

We might try and shore up this argument to make it more conclusive. In particular, we might think that alternatives to hedonism are incoherent.² According to rivals to hedonism, some things contribute to well-being that do not affect our conscious experience. But something contributes to your well-being only if it is good for you. And how can something be good *for you* unless it affects your conscious experience? But this bolder way of understanding the above argument is suspicious. It’s helpful to set it out more formally:

P1 Something contributes to your well-being only if it is good for you.

P2 Something can be good for you only if it is experienced by you as good.

So, C Something contributes to your well-being only if it is experienced by you as good.

The problem is that, although there is a way of understanding the phrase “good for you” that makes P1 definitely true, and a way of understanding the phrase “good for you” that makes P2 potentially attractive, these ways of understanding the phrase “good for you” are distinct. Sometimes, “good for you” means “contributes to your well-being.” In that sense, P1 is definitely true, but P2 is so close to hedonism that the argument begs the question. Alternatively “good for you” sometimes means “good from your point of view” (cf. “true for you”). In that

sense, P2 *may* be plausible, but P1 makes the highly controversial claim that things can seem good from your point of view only if they make you feel good. Even independently of any doubts about hedonism, that claim is undermined by the fact that we value things other than our own well-being (e.g. the well-being of others). In short, the argument may seem compelling only if we equivocate between different senses of “good for you.” So it is not clear that this argument can be understood in a way that makes it soundly provide independent grounds for hedonism.

What is hedonism?

I began by loosely characterizing hedonism as the view that only positive experiences are good for you, and only negative experiences are bad for you. Call this *broad hedonism*:

Broad hedonism: All and only positive experiences are good for you, and all and only negative experiences are bad for you.

Broad hedonism is very vague, since it doesn’t specify which experiences are positive and which are negative. But although broad hedonism is vague, it does seem to capture the core of hedonism: what matters for well-being is how you feel, all things considered. It is helpful to think of any more specific formulation of hedonism as a particular member of the hedonism family, and broad hedonism as the umbrella term for the family as a whole. Thinking about hedonism in this manner is helpful since it allows us to distinguish arguments for and against hedonism in general from arguments for and against particular hedonistic theories.

A more standard formulation of hedonism is the following:

Classic hedonism: All and only pleasure is good for you, and all and only pain is bad for you.

There is good reason to think of hedonism as classic hedonism, since the very word “hedonism” comes from the Ancient Greek word for pleasure. But it’s best to instead see classic hedonism as merely one version of broad hedonism, combined with further independent assumptions about which experiences are positive and which are negative. Seeing this view in this manner is helpful since it allows us to say some natural things about some objections to classic hedonism.

For example, there is a straightforward—and I think decisive—reason to think that classic hedonism is false. This is that some experiences are unpleasant without being painful, and those unpleasant experiences detract from well-being. For example, consider eating a sand sandwich, having a severe itch that you are unable to scratch, feeling nauseous, or being depressed. These experiences are not painful, as such. So according to classic hedonism they are not bad for you. But these experiences are bad for you. This objection undermines classic hedonism. I doubt that many hedonists will be moved by this problem, and I suggest that this is because their most fundamental sympathies lie with broad hedonism rather than with classic hedonism.

Perhaps classic hedonism should be understood as using the term “pain” in some technical and broader sense. But rather than use words in unusual ways, it is more transparent to formulate hedonism as broad hedonism and see classic hedonism as a more specific, literal, and suboptimal formulation of that broader view. Another better possibility is to adopt the following view:

Classic hedonism+: All and only pleasure is good for you, and all and only displeasure is bad for you.

But there may be further counterexamples to both classic hedonism and classic hedonism+. In particular, if there is a difference between feeling happy and feeling pleasure, we might think that it is feelings of happiness, and not feelings of pleasure, that matter for well-being. Daniel Haybron offers one reason for thinking that there is a difference between feeling happy and feeling pleasure: that insignificant pleasures fail to contribute to happiness. He writes: “I enjoy, get pleasure from, a cheeseburger, yet I am patently not happier thereby” (2001: 505). If this pleasure fails to contribute to happiness, we might think that it also fails to contribute to well-being. In light of this thought, we might abandon classic hedonism+ and instead adopt:

Happiness hedonism: All and only feelings of happiness are good for you, and all and only feelings of unhappiness are bad for you.³

Happiness hedonism also avoids the other objection above: feelings that are unpleasant but not painful might presumably detract from happiness at least sometimes, and when they do, it seems plausible that they detract from well-being. So perhaps happiness hedonism is the best formulation of broad hedonism. But even if happiness hedonism should turn out to be false, we might yet continue to endorse broad hedonism.

In short, we should be careful to distinguish different formulations of hedonism. Classic hedonism seems to face decisive objections, and should be abandoned. Classic hedonism+ and happiness hedonism might well be superior theories. But even the falsity of these theories should not by itself convince us that broad hedonism is false.

Objections to hedonism

I shall now examine three popular objections to hedonism, focusing primarily on the first two. Since hedonism has historically often been formulated as classic hedonism, I shall often express the objections as objections to that view. But I shall frequently note how hedonists might respond by moving to another hedonistic view (this is a common theme in Feldman 2004).

Distinctions between pleasures

One major objection to hedonism is the so-called “philosophy of swine” objection. According to hedonism, all that matters for well-being is that you have pleasures, and lack pain. But, so the objection goes, some pleasures are better than others. For example, the pleasures of reading comics contribute less to well-being than the pleasures of reading philosophy. Hedonism wrongly fails to discriminate between different kinds of pleasure, some of which contribute more to well-being than others. (It’s not clear if those pressing the objection would also want to discriminate between different kinds of pains, and say that some pains detract from well-being more than others. I assume that everything I say below about pleasure could be extended appropriately.)

We should be careful with the objection here. In one sense, hedonists can definitely accommodate the fact that some pleasures are better than others. In particular, they can definitely allow that one pleasure might be better for you than another because it is more intense, or has a longer duration. The objection then, is that some pleasures are better for you than others, and not merely because they are more intense or have a longer duration. The point is sometimes put by saying that hedonism pays attention only to the *quantity* of pleasure when it should also pay attention to *quality*.

The force of this objection has to be supported by example, and hedonists might well contest those examples. Hedonists might say that some pleasures are better than others for reasons that

are entirely compatible with their view, but deny that any pleasures are better than others in ways that are incompatible with their view. Let's examine three examples.

First, there are cases like the one above: we might think that the pleasures of reading comic books contribute less to well-being than the pleasures of reading philosophy. Or, to take a more classic example, we might think that the pleasures of poetry contribute more to well-being than the pleasures of pushpin (an extremely simple game). With respect to such examples, hedonists might follow Bentham's lead and suggest that discriminating in these ways reflects nothing but prejudice (Bentham 1843: Book 3, Chapter 1). Hedonists might insist that they want to hear an explanation of what makes some pleasures better than others, and lacking some such explanation, they might be justified in believing that such discriminations have no basis in fact. Further, in many cases they can offer a debunking explanation of why we are tempted to view some such pleasures as better than others. In particular, there are often good *instrumental* reasons to discriminate between kinds of pleasure. People who read philosophy and poetry might have their minds expanded in ways that contribute to their future pleasure, and the lives of others, in a way that people who read comic books and play pushpin do not. Accepting this is perfectly consistent with hedonism.

A second kind of example to illustrate this objection appeals to immoral pleasures. We might think that a life spent enjoying the suffering of others is not a life well spent, even for the person whose life it is. Again, hedonists might dispute this. They might say that in normal cases, we are inclined to see a life as bad if it involves a lot of immoral activity, but question whether the disvalue of such lives consists in a lack of well-being *for the person who lives it*. After all, we might think that some awful people have had lives that are extremely good for them. Indeed, we might think that it is a familiar feature of life that what's best for ourselves would sometimes involve doing wrong by others.

A third kind of example to illustrate this objection appeals not to differences between pleasures we have, but instead, more starkly, to differences between our pleasures and those of certain animals. The classic example involves comparing the life of Socrates and the life of a pig (Mill 1863: Chapter 2). We might think that the life of Socrates is the better one to live even if these lives involve equal amounts of pleasure, and indeed, even if Socrates' life involves less pleasure than the pig's. Roger Crisp has more recently given a different example involving an extraordinarily long-lived oyster (2006: 630–631). If the oyster's life involves constant mild pleasures—like “floating very drunk in a warm bath”—and survives for long enough, it seems as though its life will contain more pleasure than ours.⁴ But do we really want to say that its life is better than ours? Should we be envious of long-lived oysters?

Such examples are unlike the first two in that they involve evaluating not particular pleasures, but instead whole lives. Cases that are similar in this respect (even if very different in many other respects!) involve comparing the lives of humans with severe cognitive disorders with those without such disorders. Do such lives promise equal amounts of well-being? You might think not: you might think that such disorders are bad for those who have them. And we might think that this is true not merely because of their effects on the amount of pleasure such people can experience. As such, these cases might also appear to threaten hedonism.

These examples may be harder for the hedonist to dismiss than the two above. Again, hedonists might argue that there are good *instrumental* reasons to treat our lives as better for us than lives as pigs or oysters would be, and also argue that there are good *instrumental* reasons to prefer to minimize the occurrence of severe mental disorders. Such concessions are consistent with their view. But it's not clear that they are enough to show that hedonism is plausible. When I hope that my child doesn't have a severe mental disorder, I have that hope not merely because of the ways in which the condition might affect how she will feel, nor merely for instrumental

reasons given by the impact of her life on others, but also for her sake: such a life itself seems potentially worse in ways that hedonism fails to capture.

If hedonists cannot reject the force of the examples above, they might instead try to reformulate their view to accommodate them. They might take these examples not as undermining hedonism, but instead as placing constraints on how hedonism is best formulated. Mill is an example of one such hedonist who endorsed this general strategy. He endorsed hedonism but nonetheless distinguished between higher and lower pleasures, claiming that higher pleasures are better for us than lower ones (1863: Chapter 2; see also Feldman 2004: 71–78). In what follows, I will use Mill's view to illustrate the points being made, talking about whether hedonists can allow a distinction between higher and lower pleasures. But do bear in mind that this is just for ease: we might want to distinguish between the quality of experiences other than pleasures (e.g., happiness, pain), and we also might want a scale of quality than is more finely grained than a mere two-way distinction between “higher” and “lower.”

There is some dispute about whether distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures is consistent with hedonism (Moore 1903: section 47; cf. Feldman 2004: 113–114, 168–187). Since hedonism says that all and only experiences can be good or bad for us, we might think it entails that well-being wholly depends on experience. That is, we might think that hedonism is committed to what we'll call *the supervenience constraint*, which says that there cannot be difference in well-being between A and B unless there is a difference in experience between A and B. If the supervenience constraint were true, then since Millian hedonists claim that higher pleasures contribute more to well-being than lower pleasures, they would also have to claim that the distinction between higher and lower pleasures is a distinction between kinds of experience. That is a significant constraint on how they might formulate their view, since one natural possibility is that the difference between higher and lower pleasures is not a difference between kinds of experience, but instead a difference between the *objects* of those experiences. For example, we might say that one pleasure is of higher quality than another just when it is taken in an object of more value. If we were to draw the distinction between higher and lower pleasures in that manner, then the resulting view would violate the supervenience constraint, since it would permit that well-being is affected by things that are not experiences. For example, imagine that you take pleasure in owning a Ferrari. If we think that your level of well-being depends on whether your pleasures are taken in worthwhile objects, then your level of well-being might depend on the value of Ferraris. That would be contrary to the claim that well-being supervenes on experience alone. So if hedonists are committed to the supervenience constraint, then they cannot distinguish between higher and lower pleasures by appeal to facts about the objects of those pleasures.

Might we accept hedonism but nonetheless deny the supervenience constraint (e.g., Feldman 2004; cf. Fletcher 2008)? Such a view would say that the only things that are good and bad for us are experiences, but also claim that the extent to which those experiences are good and bad for us may depend on other things, such as the value of the objects of those experiences. An analogy may be helpful: The only thing that makes noise in my office is my phone, but just how much noise there is in my office nonetheless depends on other things, since other things can affect how much noise my phone makes (e.g., whether I hand out my office phone number to students). So too, hedonists might say that there is only one source of well-being—conscious experience—but other factors can intensify or attenuate the influence of that source.

Such a view can accommodate the examples we began with, by saying that some pleasures are better than others. And it seems coherent. But we might nonetheless wonder whether the resulting view is consistent with the motivations for adopting hedonism in the first place. After all, the third argument for hedonism appealed to the experience requirement: the fact that our own

level of well-being should impinge on our experience. But denying the supervenience constraint may well commit us to the view that our own level of well-being may be opaque to us. Again, imagine that I take pleasure in owning a Ferrari. According to the hedonistic theory at issue, the degree to which this pleasure is good for me depends on the value of Ferraris. But the value of Ferraris might be difficult for me to discern, and in turn it may be difficult for me to tell how well my life is going. That sits unhappily with one of the main original attractions of hedonism. In general, hedonists must tread a fine line between modifying their view so as to make it plausible, but nonetheless retaining enough of the original theory so as to maintain its attractions.

The experience machine

A second popular objection to hedonism—in fact, probably the main objection to hedonism—is Nozick's experience machine (1974: 42–45). Imagine an extremely effective reality simulator, which promises to give you all sorts of pleasures if you plug in (and very little pain—I take this for granted from here onwards). If the machine is effective enough, plugging yourself in will guarantee that you have more pleasure in the machine than you possibly could if you remain outside of the machine. But, we might think, life inside the machine is not necessarily better than life outside: there is something important about living in the real world that hedonism fails to capture. Since hedonism seems to entail that life inside the machine is best for you, hedonism seems to be false.

If this were an isolated example, hedonists might simply dig in their heels and just accept that we should plug in, especially since the machine is such a far-fetched possibility. But on reflection it should be clear that this is just a particularly stark example of a more common phenomenon: we sometimes think that people who feel good, but only because they are ignorant, are living worse lives than they might be. Shelly Kagan adapts Thomas Nagel's example of a businessman who, by the lights of hedonism, is living a great life: he feels great about his job, his family, his children, and so on (Kagan 1994: 311, Nagel 1970: 76). But if he feels this great only because he is ignorant about these matters—his co-workers believe he is incompetent, his wife is cheating on him, his children don't respect him—then it sounds as though his life is not ideal.

How might hedonists respond to such objections? They might claim that deluded lives are no better than informed lives, and argue that the only reason we are inclined to say otherwise is because we get distracted by the irrelevant fact that the actions of the relevant people involved are morally bad: we think that getting into the machine is wrongful since you thereby neglect your obligations to others, and that what is bad in the case of the businessman are the actions of those around him. Moral claims like these are consistent with hedonism, and if they are the only source of our unease about the examples, then the examples do not threaten hedonism. But this response is unconvincing: even when we attend carefully only to facts about well-being and ignore moral questions, it seems clear that life in the experience machine is worse than an equally pleasurable life outside, and clear that the businessman's life is not wholly enviable.

Another response on behalf of hedonism appeals to the claim that in both cases one's pleasures are fragile: they might disappear at any moment if one's ignorance is dispelled. In the long run, pleasure based on knowledge might be thought to be more secure than pleasure based on ignorance, and therefore better for reasons that are consistent with hedonism. So again, hedonists might deny that these examples threaten their view. But again, this alone doesn't seem enough to save hedonism. We might set up these cases so that the relevant ignorance is unlikely to be dispelled. For example, we might imagine that Kagan's businessman is instead an astronaut, who takes pleasure in these thoughts whilst on a one-way mission and already out of contact with the human race. Or we might imagine that the person entering the experience

machine will die soon anyway, certainly long before the machine breaks. When we modify the examples in this way, it may still seem that these lives are lacking in ways that hedonism cannot explain.

A third—and better—strategy for hedonists in the face of these objections is to first distinguish two different things that such cases might be thought to show, and then to give different responses to each. In particular, hedonists might distinguish the objection that false pleasures don't contribute to well-being from the objection that some things other than pleasures do contribute to well-being. This seems like a useful distinction to make: one problem is that hedonism values too much, the other that it values too little. With it in hand, hedonists can try to address the two objections separately.

So remember the first possible way of understanding the objection: as attempting to show that false pleasures contribute nothing to well-being. This claim might be disputed. After all, even if your pleasures are false, surely they still count for something: it is better to have false pleasures rather than none at all, and better to have none at all than false pains. Here it can be helpful to redescribe the objection. Above, we described the objection as though what is at stake is whether a fantastically pleasurable life inside the experience machine is better than a moderately pleasurable life outside the experience machine. That issue might be hard to resolve, and one can imagine that some people would agree with hedonism that the life inside the machine is indeed better. But it is helpful to instead attend to a slightly different issue: whether a fantastically pleasurable life outside the machine is better than a fantastically pleasurable life inside the machine. Here, hedonism is committed to the answer that such lives are equally good. But it might seem very plausible that the former life is better, and that as such hedonism must be mistaken. If we press the objection against hedonism in this manner, it is consistent with the possibility that false pleasures count for something. The important claim is that false pleasures contribute less to well-being than true pleasures do, not that false pleasures contribute nothing at all. That more modest claim may be enough to undermine hedonism.

A better strategy for the hedonist is perhaps to concede the force of the objection, but again, to reformulate hedonism in response. Above we explored the possibility of distinguishing higher and lower pleasures, and claiming that higher pleasures contribute more to well-being than lower pleasures. Similarly, we might distinguish true and false pleasures, and claim that true pleasures contribute more to well-being than false pleasures (Feldman 2004: 109–114). Such a view can easily handle the experience machine case, if the upshot of that case is just supposed to be that false pleasures contribute less to well-being than true experiences. Again, such a modification of the view forces us to deny the supervenience constraint according to which levels of well-being supervene on conscious states alone. And so, again, hedonists who wish to respond to the objection in this manner must show that the resulting view retains the merits of hedonism. But this move would at least enable hedonists to respond to the experience machine objection when it is understood in this way.

I distinguished two different upshots that the experience machine objection might be thought to have: either that false pleasures don't contribute to well-being, or that some things other than pleasures do contribute to well-being. Having discussed the first possibility, let us now turn to the second.

To repeat, the second way of interpreting the supposed upshot of the experience machine objection is as showing that some things other than conscious experiences do contribute to well-being. For example, it might be thought to show that achievement, significant personal relationships, or virtue contribute to well-being (cf. Nozick 1974: 43–45). These are things that one can get outside the machine, but cannot get inside (of course, one can get the apparent experience of these things in the machine, but one cannot get the real thing). This time, there

is simply no scope for hedonists to fiddle with the details of their view in order to try and accommodate the objection. “Revising” hedonism so as to allow that some things contribute to well-being that are not conscious experiences is not revising hedonism but instead replacing it with another theory of well-being altogether.

If we instead try to find a general argument that only conscious experiences can contribute to well-being, then we ought to return to the third argument above in favor of hedonism: we might think that there is some general reason to believe that anything that affects our well-being must be a state of mind. But sadly, this is just the argument that hedonists must give up if they wish to deny the supervenience constraint, as I suggested they might. So hedonists may instead have to respond to this objection just by taking proposed contributors to well-being one by one, and in each case, formulate arguments that the thing in question makes a difference to well-being only if it makes a difference to our conscious experience. Certainly, they might concede that the relevant item *often* contributes to well-being, but argue that this is so only because it often contributes to giving us positive experiences. Whether this strategy is plausible obviously depends on the thing in question, and here we cannot canvass all possibilities.

Perhaps one of the more difficult cases here is that of achievement. We might think that life in the machine is not so good because it is a life that lacks in achievement. Whilst in the machine it might seem to you as though you are a great athlete, writer, and parent, but whilst in the machine you can’t actually succeed in those roles. That might seem to be part of the cost of entering the machine, and a cost that hedonism fails to capture.

Again, less extreme examples of the same phenomenon are available. Freud had cancer in his jaw throughout his life, which caused him great pain. But he supposedly refused to take pain-killers, fearing that they would cloud his thinking and prevent him from doing his work. One natural reading of Freud’s decision was that he valued finishing his work over a life of positive experiences. If we think that Freud’s decision was prudent, it might seem that we are committed to thinking that achievement sometimes matters independently of the pleasure it brings, and in turn, committed to thinking that hedonism is false. Hedonists might suggest that Freud probably got some pleasure from the knowledge that he could complete his work, and that it is precisely because of those pleasures that we think his choice was reasonable (cf. Crisp 2006: 637). Vice versa, they might add, if Freud didn’t get any pleasure as a result of his work, we would indeed think that his choice was foolish. Perhaps such a response is plausible.

Dangers of externalism about pleasure

A final objection to hedonism that we should briefly examine is that it collapses into some version of the desire satisfaction theory of well-being (Kagan 1992: 170–171). Hedonists need some account of the distinction between positive experiences and negative experiences, and one might think that this distinction is best understood as a distinction between states of mind that we want to be in and those that we do not want to be in. But if that is true, then it seems that what really does the work in explaining why certain things are good for us and others are bad are our desires. And if *that* is true, it seems as though we should also think that desires for other things—achievements, friends, etc.—contribute to well-being when satisfied. What is so special about desires for conscious experiences that make their satisfaction affect well-being in a way that the satisfaction of other desires does not? Without an answer to that question, it might seem as though hedonism is just an unduly restrictive version of the desire satisfaction theory of well-being.

One issue here that might turn out to be a red herring is the question of whether pleasure and pain should be analyzed with reference to our desires. If, as I suggested, hedonists should abandon classic hedonism, and instead adopt some other view about which conscious experiences

are relevant for well-being, then hedonists may not need to worry about whether pleasure and pain should be analyzed in terms of our desires. But there will still be a worry: hedonists must appeal to a distinction between positive and negative experiences when they formulate their view, and hedonism may be on shaky ground if that distinction can be made only by appeal to the desires of the agent in question.

In the face of this objection, hedonists have two responses available to them. First, they might try to draw a distinction between positive and negative experiences that doesn't rely on the role that our desires play. For example, I mentioned happiness hedonism, which claims that the relevant distinction between positive and negative experiences should be understood as a distinction between states of mind that contribute to happiness and those that do not. Since analyses of happiness in terms of desire are rare (the exception being Davis 1981), it might seem that such a view avoids the objection altogether.

The other response available to hedonists is to claim that, although the distinction between positive and negative experiences is best drawn by appeal to our desires, they might argue that this doesn't put hedonists on a slippery slope towards holding a desire satisfaction theory of well-being. They might say that there is something special about desires regarding our own experiences that makes the satisfaction of *those* desires contribute to well-being even though the satisfaction of other desires does not so contribute. Hedonists taking this line would have to explain what it is that makes desires about our own mental lives particularly relevant for well-being. But—perhaps by appeal to some of the original arguments for hedonism that we canvassed above—this might be done.

Conclusion

Hedonism is a highly controversial theory of well-being, one that is popular with some figures but deeply unpopular with others. We addressed three arguments for hedonism, before clarifying the nature of the view, being careful to distinguish hedonism in general from more particular claims about exactly which experiences are good and bad for us. But, in keeping with the literature on the topic, the majority of this chapter focused on objections to hedonism. The first was the objection that some pleasures contribute more to well-being than others. We asked whether hedonists might reject that claim, as well as whether they can reformulate their view to accommodate it. The second objection, and by far the most important, was the experience machine objection. We considered numerous responses to the objection, at least in part because the objection seems so multi-faceted. Here, hedonists will have to get involved in the nitty-gritty details of distinguishing different objections and finding ways to respond to each. Whether they can succeed in that task is an open question. Finally, we briefly examined whether hedonism should be threatened by the possibility that the distinction between positive and negative experiences should be defined in relation to desire. The objection looked serious but, as it stands, indecisive.

Related topics

Hedonistic theories in antiquity, happiness, pleasure, achievements, pain, atomism and holism, the experience requirement.

Notes

- 1 Two further novel arguments for hedonism can be found in Bradley (2009: 17–40).
- 2 This argument is not prevalent in the literature, but seems tacit in the kinds of remarks some hedonists make about rival views, and certainly sometimes surfaces in conversation.

- 3 To be clear, I'm borrowing an argument from Haybron and putting it to use in ways he might well object to. Haybron raises the cheeseburger example in the course of arguing for the broader claim that happiness is constituted by more than feelings alone (2001). That is a claim that hedonists (about well-being) may need to reject.
- 4 Here, cf. the repugnant conclusion (Parfit 1984: 381–390), which also relies on the claim that a very large number of barely good things need not be that good. If the comparison is apt, another option for hedonists—which I won't explore—might be to deny the aggregative assumption that the value of a life is the sum of the values of its moments (cf. Velleman 1991).

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