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Hedonism in Ethics

The stereotype of hedonism in culture (policy of "eat, drink, and be merry") is not the same as hedonism in ethics

2 definitions of hedonism

Hedonism = an ethical position that states that pleasure is **the highest good** and the criterion for human behavior and that reduces moral demands in all their diversity to pleasure.

Hedonism = an ethical position that states that pleasure is **the only good** and the criterion for human behavior and that reduces moral demands in all their diversity to pleasure.

A morally good activity is always directed to pleasure

Hedonism is based on **anthropological naturalism**.

Naturalism tries to explain all human properties as natural phenomena (products of nature, results of evolution). Reason, emotions, mind, will – all humans these abilities (capacities) are products and tools of nature.

It is typical of hedonism that it refers to natural human inclinations in order to justify its own main thesis (pleasure = the only value):

Jeremy Bentham (*An Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation*):

“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 the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern 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.

The word ‘hedonism’ comes from the ancient Greek for ‘pleasure’ “hedone”.

- normative hedonism (the opposite of asceticism) = we should choose such activity which makes it possible to achieve pleasure; only pleasure is a value, only pleasure is valuable;
- descriptive hedonism (psychological hedonism): only pleasure and pain motivate really our decisions and activity;

“In ancient Greece one of the first exponents of ethical hedonism was the founder of the Cyrenaic school, Aristippus (early fourth century B.C.), who regarded as the highest good the attainment of sensory satisfaction. The ideas of hedonism were developed differently by Epicurus and his followers. Here they approached the principles of **eudaemonism**, insofar as the criterion for satisfaction was considered to be the absence of suffering and tranquillity of the spirit (ataraxia). Hedonist ideas were widely disseminated during the Renaissance and,

later, in the ethical theories of the philosophes. In the struggle against the religious conception of morality T. Hobbes, J. Locke, P. Gassendi, and the French materialists of the 18th century frequently had recourse to the hedonist interpretation of ethics. The principles of hedonism achieved their fullest expression in the ethical theories of utilitarianism, which conceived of utility as pleasure or the absence of suffering (J. Bentham, J. S. Mill)” (SEP: [https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/.](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/))

Main representatives of hedonism in ethics:

Aristippus , Epicurus, Jeremy Benham, John Stuart Mill, Moritz Schlick

“In general, pleasure is understood broadly below, as including or as included in all pleasant feeling or experience: contentment, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, exhilaration, exultation, gladness, gratification, gratitude, joy, liking, love, relief, satisfaction, Schadenfreude, tranquility, and so on. **Pain or displeasure too is understood broadly below, as including or as included in all unpleasant experience or feeling:** ache, agitation, agony, angst, anguish, annoyance, anxiety, apprehensiveness, boredom, chagrin, dejection, depression, desolation, despair, desperation, despondency, discomfort, discombobulation, discontentment, disgruntlement, disgust, dislike, dismay, disorientation, dissatisfaction, distress, dread, enmity, ennui, fear, gloominess, grief, guilt, hatred, horror, hurting, irritation, loathing, melancholia, nausea, queasiness, remorse, resentment, sadness, shame, sorrow, suffering, sullenness, throb, terror, unease, vexation, and so on.” SEP

Hedonism of Aristippus (He was a pupil of Socrates and is generally considered the founder of the **Cyrenaic school**):

1. Every pleasure is good, that is why every pleasure should be chosen; it should be chosen because it is good.
2. All pleasures are only positive. There is no negative pleasure.
Positive pleasure means: we fell pleasure when our needs are met (but **we must have a need**)
3. All pleasures are of the same nature; there is no difference between so-called spiritual and physical pleasures.
4. The only difference between pleasures is of quantitative nature: there are pleasures which are more or less intensive (a great intensity of sexual pleasure (extasy); a low intensity of pleasure of being not hungry;)

Hedonism of Epicurus (341–270 BC), Greek philosopher, founder of Epicureanism. His physics is based on Democritus' theory of a materialist universe composed of indestructible atoms moving in a void, unregulated by divine providence.

1. Every pleasure is good but not every pleasure should be chosen, even if it is good.
2. There are positive and negative pleasures. Positive pleasure means: we fell pleasure when our needs are met (but **we must have a need**). Negative pleasure means: we fell pleasure because we have all we want. We fell no lack = we do not have any needs.
3. There are different types of pleasure:
 - i. physical pleasures
 - ii. mental (spiritual) pleasures.
 - iii. Negative pleasures (static pleasure)
 - iv. Positive pleasures (moving pleasure)

4. There are qualitative differences between pleasures.

Spiritual pleasures are higher.

Physical pleasures are more fundamental (basic)

What are criteria of the position of pleasure?

Duration; what is more pleasant lasts longer.

Power or independence: one can be happy feeling spiritual peace – even if one feels some physical pain. But one cannot be happy without feeling spiritual peace - even if one is rich or only healthy.

Relation to time; physical pleasure is directed to the present only, spiritual pleasure are directed both the present and the past (the future)

Epicurus' hedonism is connected with **rationalism and asceticism**.

Epicurus distinguishes also various forms of human desires;

- natural and necessary desires (eg. desire for food, desire for sleep, shelter)
- natural but non-necessary desires (desire for luxury food. Desire for comfort, desire for elegance)
- vain and empty desires (desire for power, desire for fame, desire for wealth).

Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism as a form of hedonism. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) states that all human activity may be explained based on pleasure and pain. We seek pleasure and avoid pain:

“II. To a person considered by *himself*, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by *itself*, **will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances**:

1. Its *intensity*.
2. Its *duration*.
3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty*.
4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*.

III. **These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself**. But when

the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any *act* by which it is produced, **there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account**; these are,

5. **Its *fecundity*, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind**: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.

6. **Its *purity*, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind**: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasure or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.

IV. To a *number* of persons, with reference to each of whom to the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones; viz.,

1. Its *intensity*.
2. Its *duration*.
3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty*.
4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*.
5. Its *fecundity*.
6. Its *purity*.

And one other; to wit:

7. Its *extent*; that is, the number of persons to whom it *extends*; or (in other words) who are affected by it.

V. To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as follows. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable *pleasure* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
2. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it *after* the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pleasure* and the *impurity* of the first *pain*.
4. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pain*, and the *impurity* of the first pleasure.

5. Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* 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 upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that *individual* person; if on the side of pain, the *bad* tendency of it upon the whole.

6. Take an account of the *number* of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of *good* tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *bad* upon the whole. Take the *balance* which if on the side of *pleasure*, will give the *general good tendency* of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of *pain*, the *general evil tendency*, with respect to the same community.

VI. It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.

VII. The same process is alike applicable to pleasure and pain, in whatever shape they appear: and by whatever denomination they are distinguished: to pleasure, whether it be called *good* (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or *profit* (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of, distant pleasure,) or *convenience*, or *advantage*, *benefit*, *emolument*, *happiness*, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called *evil*, (which corresponds to *good*) or *mischief*, or *inconvenience*, or *disadvantage*, or *loss*, or *unhappiness*, and so forth.

VIII. Nor is this a novel and unwarranted, any more than it is a useless theory. In all this there is nothing but what the practice of mankind, wheresoever they have a clear view of their own interest, is perfectly conformable to. An article of property, an estate in land, for instance, is valuable, on what account? On account of the pleasures of all kinds which it enables a man to produce, and what comes to the same thing the pains of all kinds which it enables him to avert. But the value of such an article of property is universally understood to rise or fall according to the length or shortness of the time which a man has in it: the certainty or uncertainty of its coming into possession: and the nearness or remoteness of the time at which, if at all, it is to come into possession. As to the *intensity* of the pleasures which a man may derive from it, this is never thought of, because it depends upon the use which each particular person may come to make of it; which cannot be estimated till the particular pleasures he may come to derive from it, or the particular pains he may come to exclude by means of it, are brought to view. For the same reason, neither does he think of the *fecundity* or *purity* of those pleasures."