Kitkat Dambeck

Professor Jacqueline McDaniel

Expository Writing

23 March 2023

A Hedonist’s Guide to Self Understanding

A hedonist is someone that seeks pleasure, and avoids pain. Hedonism has had a long and texutred history, however today hedonism is becoming so common place as to seem benighn. It has become a basis for Utilitarianism, and has become a method of analysis in psychology, as well as an unstated paradigm among individuals. For as simply stated a basis as "seek pleasure, avoid pain", practically achieving this motto is still a great challenge. The aim of such a motto is summed as "happiness," but the specifics of what "happiness" is will vary on the development of the aspirant. The human brain is a product of nature and therefore brings with it many counter intuitive functions that can hinder the pursuit of happiness. Positive Psychology Daniel Gilbert has spent many years studying these phenomenon, publishing their findings in Stumbling Into Happiness. Another Positive Psychologist, Barbara Fredrickson, author of Love 2.0, studies the cultivation of "love" and its role as a precursor to happiness. Because the specific content of happiness varies depending on the development of the aspirant, a wise hedonist must become self-aware, so that they can pursue their happiness in the most effective way.

The first factor of motivation is pleasure. It is the fun brain chemicals which brains use in their reward centers, but it is not a reliable guide to happiness. Gilbert wrote "Clever Hans was no genius, but Osten was no fraud. Indeed, he'd spent years patiently talking to his horse about mathematics and world affairs, and he was genuinely shocked and dismayed to learn that he had been fooling himself" (Gilbert 143). Osten had been following pleasure: each time Hans answered correctly, Osten's brain was rewarded with excitement and joy. However, with out sufficient skepticism, Osten had built up a huge amount of emotional investment on very shaky ground. Human brains aren't naturally wired to be skeptical in this way. Therefore, if one wants to be sure of their investment, they aught to develop their own habit of skepticism. For example, if one is to enter into an intimate relationship, doing so recklessly can leave on heart broken, and sadder than if they had been a loner. That is not to disavow intimacy entirely, but to assert the necessity of sketpicism for one's partner, and real awareness of what is happening. Fredrickson argued "When you equate love with intimate relationships, love can seem confusing. At times it feels great, while at other times it hurts like hell. At times it lifts you up with grand dreams for your future and at other times oppresses you with shame about your inadequacies, or guilt about your past actions" (Fredrickson 120). Love, as in agape, is an eternal virtue, seperate from its fickle contexual counter part, eros. When these eros, intamcy, is equated with agape, true love, it becomes confuesd, uncertain, and non-eternal. Love is not the bond one has for another, but the harmony of that bond; A harmoy which can be found with many people, and is not destroyed when the bond falters. Similarly, pleasure, like that experienced by Osten, is subject to disruption. Just as the path to agape is intertwined, but not contained within, the path to eros, the path to true happiness is entertwined but not contiand with the path to pleasure. In fact, the paths toward agape and true happiness are also intertwined.

Before confronting suffering, suffering seems eternal. However, this paradigm is eventually replaced. Gilbert writes "We blithely assume that the dreadful view we have when we look forward to the event is the dreadful view we'll have when we look back on it. In short, we do not realize that our views will change becuase we are normally unaware of the processes that change them" (Gilbert 144). The human brain in its 'state of nature', or with its factory firmware, is not well equipped to make acuate predictions about its own future emotional state. The principal effect of this is that suffering can seem permanent, and to be avoided at all costs. The key word is "seem"; This is an element of perception, rather an illusion, not of truth. When lost in this illusion, the aspirant may try to restrict themselves only to pleasure, and become frustrated when their attempts fall through. By reckoning with the fluid nature of their emotions, one can begin to update their brains metaphorical firmware. The aspirant learns that the nature of any particular pain is temporary, and that everything, pleasant or otherwise, is impermanent. Fredrickson said "Impermanence is the rule- constant change, the only constancy. True for all things, this is especially true for living things, which change or adapt as needed in response to changes in context." Change is the nature of the universe. This presents an issue to the hedonist who seeks a constant state of pleasure. However, it does not defame the hedonist completely. If they want to avoid pain, they aught to avoid the pain of loss. Simply willing this is not enough, and perfection in this aim may perhaps even be impossible. Instead, the hedonist must be ready to face loss, and know that even loss is temporary. The theme of this stratagy is flexibility. When hard times come, rather than resist it, bend into it, feel the streach, and let it pass. When easy times come, rather than cling to it, enjoy it, and do not be disapointed when it leaves.

In addition to poorly preditcting future emotional states, the brian also is not very good at understanding present emotional states. Therefore, a wise hedonist will cultivate the self awareness to recognize the reflexive response, and to grapple with the true causes. Fredrickson writes that the body’s “love” system “shape your motives and behaviors in subtle ways, yet ultimately, their actions serve to strengthen your relationships and knit you in closer to the social fabric of life” (Fredrickson 122). A brain has a set of responses which favor social cohesion. This is likely to be pleasurable, however it is not guaranteed to be in the interest of one's long term happiness. For example, because forming a bond with someone is automatic, one can easily end up with an attachment to someone to someone they don't want to or even can't sustain with. When that bond is broken, they will feel pain. Awareness of the phenomenon is the first step to navigating it, updating the firmware. Gilbert said that ignorance, that is a lack of awareness, “causes us to mispredict the circumstances under which we will blame others, but it also causes us to is predict the circumstances under which we will blame ourselves“ (Gilbert 146). The brain typically blames others for things that they're not to blame for, and leans hard into self doubt, when its not able to do that. Returning to the example, when the bond is broken, it is easy to blame the person; it is what the brain is programmed to do. However, by becoming aware of the context that brought one into the scenario, the frustrating emotions can be understood. A hedonist who thoroughly understands themselves, begins to develop a higher sense of happiness. This happiness is not found in the immediate pleasure, though it can be. Rather it is founded in an enjoyment of all experience, and relinquishment of attachment.

Happiness can be thought of as containing three catagories of things, each corresponding to the mindset and development of the beholder. At first it can be thougth of only as pleasure, as Osten’s exitment, or a lover in honeymoon. However when the hedonist clings to these earthly things, and they give way to entropy, the hedonist must reckon with the nature of reality, and therby happiness becomes not the pleasure itself, but a relation to it. Lastly, when one attains a mastery of awarness, the hedonist transcends the dualistic mindset of pleasure and pain, and is able to appritate all experiences simply as they appear.

Works Cited

Fredrickson, Barbara, Love 2.0, 2023. New York: Hudson Stre­et Press. pp.117-140.

Gilbert, Daniel, Stumbling On Happiness, 2006. New York: New York. pp 141-159