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**Hedonism According to Shelly Kagan and Fred Feldman**

In his paper “Me and My Life,” Shelly Kagan raises the question whether or not hedonism and other “mental state” theories of intrinsic value are true through an examination of the so-called “Bad Businessman” objection. I will concern myself with this argument in §II. In §III, I will examine a counter to her argument proposed by Fred Feldman in “The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism,” and in §IV I will show that Kagan’s case for the falsity of hedonism as currently understood is far weaker than Feldman’s case for attitudinal hedonism. First, however, I will present and explain a coherent version of hedonism that will serve as the center of the dispute.

**I. Hedonism**

Hedonism is a system of thought based upon the concept that pleasure is an example of an intrinsic good. As Jeremy Bentham states in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, it does indeed appear to be at the very least plausible that, “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” (Bentham 1789). From the viewpoint of a philosopher interested in discovering whether or not there is such a thing as intrinsic value, a system which provides such a simple and straightforward answer in the affirmative should be investigated. Furthermore, should hedonism be true, it would undoubtedly lead to important discoveries in the study of ethics, especially in the area of morality as it relates to well being and right action.

For the purposes of this paper, I present J. Klocksiem’s “Coherent Formulation” of hedonism which bears up rather admirably under strain, something that cannot be said for more basic theories of hedonism. Within this system, let *x* refer to a “basic” state that has elemental, non-derivative, and irreducible intrinsic value; *x* is a good “basic” iff *x* is an episode of pleasure, and *x* is bad “basic” iff *x* is an episode of pain. We can measure the amount of pleasure or pain in an episode using the following formulae:

1) *H=(IP\*DP)* determines the number of hedons (units of pleasure) in the episode by multiplying the intensity of the pleasure by its duration.  
2) *L=(Ia\*Da)* determines the number of dolors (units of pain) in the episode by multiplying the intensity of the pain by its duration.   
The intrinsic value of episode *e* is equal to the number of hedons contained in *e* in the case of an episode of pleasure, and in the case of an episode of pain is equal to the number of dolors in *e* times -1. We can use this information in order to determine the intrinsic value of a life, world, consequence, state of affairs, or situation by finding the sum of all the intrinsic values of all the *e*s in the instance. As it would appear that the hedonism with which Kagan and Feldman are both primarily concerned is hedonism about welfare or quality of life, Klocksiem’s formulation is of even further use to us in this instance, as it provides a quantitative means for determining the value of instances.

**II. Kagan and the “Bad Businessman”**

In “Me and My Life,” Shelly Kagan attacks hedonism using the “Bad Businessman” objection. In the objection, there is a man who believes he is a successful businessman with a loving family and an adoring public. The man dies contented. Unbeknownst to him, however, he was the victim of a vast conspiracy; he was a terrible businessman, his family hated him, and his public thought he was a joke. The question at hand is whether or not the man had a good life. His mental states were the same mental states he would have had if he had been a good businessman with a loving family and an adoring public, and according to hedonism, since he “got the mental states right-there is nothing missing from this man’s life at all,” (Kagan 311). That seems intuitively incorrect; there appears to be something missing from the man’s life, although it is unclear what that thing is.

Perhaps it is that the man’s desires about how he wanted his life to go weren’t actually fulfilled; instead, the man just thought they were. Kagan does not believe this and raises the “Stranger on a Train” objection to a desire-satisfaction modification of hedonism. Imagine that you meet a stranger on a train and form a sincere desire that they achieve success. After you get off the train, you never see, hear, or even think of the stranger ever again. Should the stranger achieve success, it does not appear that your well-being would increase as a result, as you would have no way of knowing that the stranger succeeded and by extension, the stranger’s success would have absolutely nothing to do with you at all. Kagan suggests that for desire-satisfaction to affect well-being, the satisfaction of that desire must have something to do with the person whose desire is being satisfied. It may be inferred here that Kagan is trying to imply that for a person’s well-being to change through a desire-satisfaction process, that person must participate in the fulfillment of the desire in question for its satisfaction to matter.

This argument holds up as far as Kagan is concerned, “personal well-being has to be understood fairly narrowly [because] changes in personal well-being must involve (intrinsic) changes in the person, and that a person [is] a body and a mind…changes in the person must involve changes in the body or the mind, but only so far as…individual well-being is concerned,” (Kagan 318). When it comes to the person’s *life*, Kagan is much less ready to accept desire-satisfaction (or hedonism at all for that matter), as an adequate explanation.

A life is, according to Kagan, something akin to a body of work in the shape of a sequence of events or facts. If we choose to equate well-being and quality of life, then we must make the following modification to the desire-satisfaction view of well-being: changes in *quality of life* must involve changes in the person’s body or mind. Kagan does not believe that this is so. He points out that whereas it is possible to make such claims about well-being, it doesn’t seem possible for us to claim that a life is composed of a collection of intrinsic facts about the person’s body or mind. Going back to the bad businessman example, we sense that the bad businessman isn’t living a very great life, but only when we look at facts related to the businessman. From the businessman’s perspective, everything is going swell and he is well-off; it is only when we consider the businessman’s *life as a whole*, including his relationships and other factors external to the businessman, that we see a problem with the businessman’s quality of life. “That is to say, it just might be one thing for a person to be well-off, and quite another thing for that person's life to be going well,” (Kagan 319). In short, Kagan’s argument runs something like this:

I) If hedonism is true, then well-being == quality of life.

II) Well-being =/= quality of life.

III)Therefore, hedonism is not true.

**III. Feldman’s Response**

In response to Kagan’s attack on hedonism, Feldman advances several arguments in defense of intrinsic attitudinal hedonism (IAH). As he explains it, IAH is “the view that the value of a person's life is determined by the total amount of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure the person enjoys during that life (counting intrinsic attitudinal pain as ‘negative pleasure’),” (Feldman 613). This differs from traditional hedonism in that it focuses on enjoyment and ‘disenjoyment’ as the components of its calculations instead of pleasure and pain. This allows for a greater range of states of well-being in that the pleasure/pain an individual derives from an event/experience is relative to that person as opposed to being based on an empirical “pleasure=good, pain=bad” scale.

To support this view, Feldman uses the example of Stoicus, a man whose goal in life is live being entirely untouched by pain or pleasure. Stoicus lives such a life and dies at age 90 pleased with the life that he led. According to sensory hedonism and the hedonism Kagan is concerned with (pleasure=good, pain=bad), Stoicus lived a terrible life. However, under IAH, Stoicus lived a good life, even though he went through life without experiencing any intrinsic pleasures or pains, opting instead for attitudinal pleasure derived from his succeeding in avoiding such things and attaining peace and quiet. Feldman believes that IAH is superior to all other standing formulations of hedonism because it has the ability to account for cases such as that of Stoicus as well as cases where mere sensory pleasures/pains are involved provided that the person feeling such pleasures/pains is enjoying/disenjoying them. Having demonstrated his position, Feldman moves to defend it against Kagan’s “Bad Businessman” objection.

Feldman frames Kagan’s objection thus, “Attitudinal hedonism implies that the [bad] businessman's life is a good one, yet none of us would want such a life; none of us would wish such a life for our loved ones; such a life is not easily thought to be ideal,” (Feldman 615). According to Feldman, several basic solutions to this objection exist. First and foremost, the fact that we as observers know information about the bad businessman’s life that he is *by stipulation* unable to know provides a valid explanation for the reason that the bad businessman’s life appears undesirable to us. Given the choice, almost nobody would choose the life of the bad businessman because they would know facts relating to his situation that he does not know, therefore, we would not take attitudinal pleasure in the experiences that he takes attitudinal pleasure in within the context of the objection. Second, the fact that the pleasure that the bad businessman takes in his life is so precariously balanced as to be in constant danger of total annihilation is a good reason for not actively seeking such a life given the choice. Most people would prefer to live a stable pleasurable existence than an unstable one. Third, it is not clear whether or not the bad businessman is hurt by the deception since he is totally unaware of its existence.   
 Instead of taking one of these solutions and running with it to its conclusion, Feldman pursues a different tack. He proposes that, as stated before, enjoyment and disenjoyment are the building blocks of intrinsic value, but modifies this statement by stating that enjoyment enhances a life more if it is enjoyment of a true pleasure than if it is enjoyment of a false pleasure. The result is termed “Veridical Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism” (VIAH). Put simply, VIAH is the idea that pleasures taken in true propositions are superior to pleasures taken in false propositions, “This single modification yields a view according to which the life of the deceived businessman is not very good, even if internally indiscernible from the life of his cousin the undeceived businessman whose mental life is just the same, but whose family and colleagues are in reality as they appear to him to be,” (Feldman 616). The bad businessman’s life is much worse than the good businessman’s life because the bad businessman is enjoying false pleasures, which are not worth as much as the true pleasures the good businessman is enjoying. This reformulation of hedonism handles the primary problems posed by the bad businessman objection, namely that if hedonism is true, then two lives that appear identical to the people living them must be identical in point of intrinsic value even if one person is actually living a life where they are taking false pleasure in their circumstances.

**IV. Why Feldman’s Case is the Stronger**

I am of the opinion that Feldman’s argument is by far the stronger of the two arguments. The bad businessman objection as formulated by Kagan is intended to show that if hedonism is true, then the lives of the two businessmen are identical, which they obviously are not. Feldman successfully incorporates the objection into VIAH by creating a system based upon pleasure/pain as the markers of intrinsic value that when applied to the bad businessman objection can explain the intuition that the two lives have different external or overall values while their internal values are exactly the same. VIAH goes a step further in giving a reason for why this is so beyond relying on a simple intuition. If true propositions are more valuable than false pleasures, as VIAH argues, then Kagan’s argument that ‘If hedonism is true, well-being =/= quality of life’ is disproved, as VIAH is a kind of hedonism which clearly supports the distinction between well-being and quality of life. By RAA, we can reject the premise upon which Kagan’s argument rests and bring the bad businessman objection crashing down in the process.

Feldman’s argument is, however, by no means immune to attack. One such attack, addressed by Feldman in his paper, is the argument against hedonism from worthless pleasures. Feldman’s own example is a mite too risqué for my tastes, however, so I will attempt to reformulate it in a more tasteful manner. VIAH would maintain that a life spent in the pursuit of pleasure through the use of heroin to be a good life. The pleasure taken from the use of heroin would be true pleasure on a basic level, and if we are to maximize pleasure as VIAH suggests, then a life spent under the perpetual influence of heroin would be pretty good. The problem with this is that the intuition exists that a life spent under the perpetual influence of heroin would not actually be so good. If, as has been suggested by medical science, the amount of endorphins and opioids released by the brain after the administration of a dose of heroin exceed those released by all other activities including the fulfillment of sexual lust, would not all human endeavors be best put towards discovering a way to live under the influence of heroin from cradle to grave? One cannot believe in VIAH without believing that this is also the case.

Feldman addresses this particular objection in his paper by modifying VIAH again to include “appropriateness” as a further provider of higher value, and the resulting formulation appears to hold its own, but undoubtedly there exist further and further objections that, if we are forced to add further and further higher value providers to accommodate, we run the risk of diluting the hedonism inherent in the view. The more higher value providers we add to a given formulation of hedonism, the more like it is to saying that intrinsic value is not only determined by pleasure, but also by other things, a claim that would make it seem to appear that perhaps pleasure is not an example of intrinsic good after all. Perhaps, as it has been suggested, there is no such thing as intrinsic value because there exist at every level further and further atoms of value to be reduced and analyzed and explained on and on *ad infinitum*.

However, since the debate within the context of this paper is solely between Kagan and Feldman, and since Kagan’s argument has been shown above to be unable to surmount Feldman’s VIAH reformulation of hedonism, it is the opinion of this author that the argument for hedonism as presented by Fred Feldman is the stronger argument of the two.