
Hedonism

Our understanding of hedonism can be summarized by a quote from Jeremy Bentham. In regards to pleasure and pain, he says:

'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.' (The Principles of Morals and Legislation)

Now, pleasure is a bit of an older way of referring to what most of us would now call *happiness*. Our textbook also offers the notion of *attitude satisfaction* since something may satisfy us even though we don't have a particular sensation or feeling of happiness. However we wish to cash this out, there is a common theme underlying these notions: they all endorse the following thesis about goodness and badness.

Hedonist Thesis: Pleasure / Happiness / Attitude Satisfaction is the only intrinsic good, and pain/ misery is the only intrinsic bad. Other things are good / bad derivatively (i.e. depending on whether they tend to bring about happiness or pain).

Since pleasure / happiness / attitude satisfaction is the only basic good, then for a life to be considered a good life, it must have been a life with much happiness. Since pain is the only basic bad, then for a life to be considered a bad life it must have been devoid of happiness and / or full of pain. You may think that there is more to life than just being happy, but I assume that you would prefer for your life included happiness rather than pain. Hence, hedonism has some pretty clear intuitive appeal.

To be clear, the hedonist is not claiming that pleasure / happiness / attitude satisfaction is just what can be experienced with your sensory organs. A delicious candy, such as a Reeses, may make us happy, but such happiness is usually short-lived. It would be odd, however, to claim that a life full of just Reeses-eating was a good life. This is why our textbook emphasizes attitude satisfaction. The positive attitude of *enjoyment* is supposedly more general than pleasure or happiness. To avoid redundancy, I will simply use the term 'happiness' for the remainder of the handout, but it is good to keep these nuances in mind.

Hedonism does provide an interesting amount of flexibility when it comes to determining how good one's life is going. Some ancient philosophers, for example, thought that particular studies were essential to a good life. However, if such studies do not (or, perhaps, cannot) provide you happiness, hedonism does not require you to pursue them.

Problems

As a simple matter of logic, if there are more intrinsically good things than what the hedonist claims, then hedonism is false. So, if you wish to resist hedonism, this is a good place to focus.

Robert Nozick, our textbook explains, attempted to do just that. His thought experiment about an experience machine pushed back on the hedonist thesis. When we took a vote in class, most of you said that you would *not* plug into the machine. Hence, you have some sort of intuition that happiness is not all that matters for the kind of life that you wish to lead. The question, then, is what else matters.

Our textbook highlights that a reduction in one's autonomy seems to correspond with our judging that life to be less good - even if happiness is increased. Other potential candidates for intrinsic value are *truth*, or *love*. In regards to truth, most of your beliefs in the experience machine will be false. In regards to love, no one will love you in the machine, and there will be no one to love. Such losses are not balanced by a life full of happiness, and, so, if these things have intrinsic value, then hedonism would be found lacking.

Additionally, while a good life is the focus of hedonism, it doesn't have a clear answer as to what makes a person a good person. Intentions, for example, seem morally relevant and yet the basic form of hedonism that we are looking at doesn't incorporate them as being morally relevant. What matters is how much happiness your life amasses, but that doesn't seem to explain whether or not you were a good person.

Hedonists, of course, have attempted to reply to such claims, and the issue is a perennial source of debate.

Key Takeaways:

- Hedonism relies on the claim that there is only one intrinsically good thing (happiness) and one intrinsically bad thing (pain).
- A good life is a life full of happiness and devoid of pain, and a bad life is one full of pain and devoid happiness.
- Physical happiness is not the goal.
- If there are more things of intrinsic value than just happiness, then hedonism is false.
- It is unclear what it means to be a good person from the hedonist standpoint.