

I. Norms and values.

Moral philosophy is the study of values and norms. Questions of value concern what is good or bad. Questions of normativity concern what is right or wrong.

When it comes to value, the main question is: what kinds of lives are good lives? What kind of life would you like to live?

When it comes to normativity, the main question is: what kinds of conduct are acceptable conduct? What kind of conduct should you avoid?

Today, we focus on the question of value.

II. Hedonism

Hedonism is the view that **pleasure is the only thing that is absolutely good, and pain the only thing that is absolutely bad.**

What does “absolutely good” mean, and “absolutely bad”? The contrast here is between absolute and instrumental value---absolute goodness versus instrumental goodness, and absolute badness versus instrumental badness. An **absolutely good thing is one that is good for its own sake.** An instrumentally good thing is one that **is good for the sake of the absolutely good things it promotes or facilitates.**

Something can be both absolutely and instrumentally good: drinking a cold glass of water on a hot summer day is good for its own sake, but also good for the sake of the health benefits it confers.

Something might also be absolutely good but instrumentally bad: **the pleasure of smoking a cigarette** might be one example.

Value hedonists say that the only things that are absolutely good are pleasures, and the only things that are absolutely bad are pains. Here, by “pleasure” we mean any state of mind or spirit that it is pleasant to be in, and by “pain” any state of mind or spirit that it is unpleasant to be in. Pains and pleasures come in all varieties. There is the pleasure of taking a warm bath, the pleasure of eating a good meal, the pleasure of solving a difficult intellectual problem, the pleasure of daydreaming, etc., etc. Likewise for pain: there are ordinary bodily pains (cuts, burns, etc.), emotional pains (heartbreak, disappointment, etc.), and other kinds of pains too.

Hedonism has a bad reputation, but that is mainly because the theory is widely misunderstood. For one thing, people tend not to realize that the **hedonist is working with a broad conception of pleasure to include more than just basic bodily pleasures** (associated with food, drink, sex, etc). For another, people tend to associate hedonism with *egoistic* hedonism. An egoistic hedonist thinks that *his own* pleasure is the only thing that is good for its own sake. But most hedonists do not take this self-centered view. Most

hedonists, like Roger Crisp, think that a pleasure contributes the same amount of goodness to the world no matter who the pleasure belongs to (and similarly for pain).¹

III. Arguments against hedonism

Hedonism has an undeniable appeal, especially for those who find, upon reflection, that their ultimate rationale for doing the things they do is to get some eventual payoff in the form of pleasure (or avoidance of pain).

Nevertheless, hedonism is not a popular view among moral philosophers. In fact, Crisp is one of only a few professional philosophers writing today who favor hedonism. The reason for hedonism's unpopularity among philosophers is that there are arguments against hedonism that many people find quite compelling. Crisp addresses a number of these in his article; we are going to address these and a couple more arguments against hedonism today. In general, the arguments are not conclusive, but they do point to important constraints on the shape that any defensible value hedonism would have to take.

The four arguments we shall consider are the **oyster argument**, the **"barely-worth-living" argument**, the **experience machine argument**, and the **argument from beauty**.

The goal of these arguments is to prove that how good something is doesn't just boil down to how much net pleasure or enjoyment it involves. Let's take a look at each of these arguments, starting with the Oyster.

A. *Oyster vs. Haydn*

You are a disembodied soul standing before an archangel, who is offering you either of two Earthly lives. Your first option is to be placed on the Earth as Franz Josef Haydn, a great composer and musical genius, who will lead a life full of enjoyment, and little suffering, dying at the respectable age of 77 years. (The idea here, I guess, is that you---the disembodied soul---will be placed into the infant Haydn's body, and so will enjoy all of Haydn's successes.)

Your other option is to be placed on Earth as an oyster. But not as an ordinary oyster! Rather, as an immortal oyster, who will lead a never-ending life of primitive, low-level pleasure and no suffering at all.

Which should you choose? Presumably, you want to choose the best life, i.e. the life that has the greatest absolute value. If the only absolutely good thing is net pleasure, though, it looks as if the oyster's life is the better of the two. It, after all, gets to enjoy a life of never-ending enjoyment. No matter how lowly its pleasures, there must surely come a point by which the total amount of pleasure that the oyster has enjoyed exceeds the total amount that Haydn enjoyed during his lifetime. The oyster has all of eternity to catch up.

¹ What about the pains and pleasures of non-human creatures? Those count too! (More on animal welfare in the upcoming lecture on eating meat.)

But if the oyster has a better life than Haydn, you, standing before the angel, should opt to be incarnated as the oyster! This strikes us as intuitively bad advice. Surely, we would and should attach more value to Haydn's life than to the oyster's.

So the argument is this: **if hedonism is correct, then the oyster's life is better (contains more pleasure = goodness) than Haydn's.** But then, if hedonism is correct, we should prefer to be incarnated as the oyster rather than as Haydn, whereas we would definitely prefer to be incarnated as Haydn. Since this is an entirely reasonable preference, hedonism must be incorrect. It's incorrect, because it tells us that the oyster has a better life than Haydn.

How can a hedonist respond to this challenge?

One traditional, but flawed, response is that the oyster's pleasures are so different from Haydn's that we can't really compare the two to make a judgment about which life is better or worse, in hedonic terms. Haydn's pleasures are, as they say, **"incommensurable"** with the oyster's---incommensurable in the sense of there being no 'common measure' by which to compare the pleasures, no "Pleasure-O-Meter" that we can use to measure the relative quantity or quality of oyster versus human pleasure.

This is a flawed response, because it implies that we should be indifferent when choosing to live as Haydn versus the oyster. Perhaps this is better than positively recommending the oyster, but it is still not right: **we are not indifferent between these lives.** We would prefer to live as Haydn, because we think that Haydn's life is a better life than the oyster's---better than, and hence comparable to.

A **different response to the Oyster argument focuses on the average pleasantness of the two lives (Haydn's and the oyster's), rather than on the total aggregate pleasure contained in each.** Even though the oyster's life contains a lot more pleasure than Haydn's overall, on a day to day (or minute to minute) basis, Haydn's life is far more pleasant than the oyster's. Each day of Haydn's life contains far more pleasure than any day in the life of the oyster; it's just that the oyster's life contains many more days. The problem with this suggestion is that if we are going to say that the better of two lives is the one that has the greatest average pleasure, **we'll have to say that the life of a very short-lived and well-supplied heroin addict is better---more valuable---than the life of, e.g., Franz Joseph Haydn. But this is not something we want to say at all.**

A better way for the hedonist to respond to the Oyster challenge is to start by questioning the coherence of the thought-experiment. I mean, if an Angel proposes to give me, Michael W. Pelczar, a life just like that of Franz Josef Haydn, what, exactly, is the Angel proposing to do? It sounds like the Angel is proposing to destroy me, and at the same moment create a baby that will go on to enjoy a life just like Haydn's. Likewise for the proposal to give me a life just like the oyster's: that just sounds like a proposal to destroy me and simultaneously create an immortal oyster.² Neither option sounds particularly attractive.

² Alternatively, it might be a proposal to trap my human soul with all its human hopes and desires inside the body of an oyster. This sounds like a fate even worse than death!

For the thought-experiment to work, we have to think of the being that stands before the Angel as some kind of spirit that is *not* Michael W. Pelczar or any other spirit that is distinctively human (or distinctively mollusk), but that is still somehow still capable of comprehending what the Angel is saying to it, and making a choice accordingly. How would such a spirit choose? Who knows?

A better example might be as follows. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that every human being is born with an immaterial soul. One day, an Angel (or Devil?) approaches you with the following proposition: if you agree to let the Angel destroy your soul when your body dies, the Angel will ensure that you live to the age of 100, enjoying tremendous pleasure (*à la* Haydn) and negligible suffering. Otherwise, you'll have just a modestly pleasant life on Earth, and then continue to have a modestly pleasant life in Heaven for all eternity after you die. **In this case, the hedonist must say that the second life is the better of the two.** But it's far from clear that this isn't the correct thing to say!

So, once we change the details of the thought-experiment to make it fully intelligible, it loses its force against the hedonist position.

B. The "barely worth living" argument

Suppose some alien civilization has the power to terraform a whole planet, and introduce life of its own design onto it. The terraformers are debating over which of two plans they should adopt for populating the newly habitable planet with life. If they follow one plan, things will evolve so that the planet ends up sustaining a stable population of 1 million extremely happy human beings. Everyone will have lots of space and more resources than he can possibly consume. The environment will be clean, and, with enough of everything to go around, there will be little strife. All in all, if the aliens go with this plan---which they call "Utopia"---they end up with a world containing a million people whose lives are as enjoyable as human lives can possibly be.

The other plan has a different outcome. If the aliens go with this plan, the planet's human population does not stabilize until it hits around a trillion. People live in tiny apartments in giant housing complexes. The entire surface of the Earth resembles central Tokyo, only without any parks. The natural environment is severely degraded, but people have devised ways to keep themselves fed, albeit not with particularly tasty food. With fierce competition for resources, goods are rationed out by a central authority that ensures that no one starves---and no one gets anything extra. All things considered, each of these trillion people will have a life that is worth living, by hedonic standards---but just barely worth living. On average, a life in this world---the aliens call it "Dystopia"---contains just slightly more enjoyment than suffering, adding just a slight amount of net pleasure to the world's grand total.

Which world would it be better for the aliens to create? Utopia, or Dystopia?

Many people think it is obvious that Utopia is the better world. Certainly, anyone given a choice between belonging to the Utopian civilization and belonging to the Dystopian civilization would choose Utopia.

But if the aliens create Dystopia, they will create far more net-pleased people than if they create Utopia. Each Dystopian's life has to have only 1 one-millionth as much enjoyment in it as the average Utopian's, in order for Dystopia to be just as good as Utopia, in terms of total net pleasure. Even if we assume that Utopians enjoy life 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all we have to allow the Dystopians is 32 seconds more pleasure than pain per year, on average, in order to generate more total net pleasure in Dystopia than we find in Utopia.³

If we allow the average citizen of Dystopia a full minute of unmitigated pleasure each year, Dystopia as a whole will contain considerably more pleasure than Utopia. So, if hedonism is correct, we must conclude that Dystopia is a better world than Utopia!

What can a hedonist say to this? He can't deny that hedonism implies that Dystopia is better than Utopia. Accepting this, he must argue that this is not a crazy thing to think.

Well, suppose the aliens have a choice between creating the 1 million 100% pleased Utopians, and 100 million almost-Utopians, each of whom is "only" 99% pleased. Surely the aliens should create the 100 million almost-Utopians rather than the one million Utopians.

But the reasoning here is no different from that by which the hedonist concludes that the aliens should create Dystopia rather than Utopia, given that they must create just one or the other. We simply change 100 million to a trillion, and 99% to .000001%.

What about the fact that no one would choose a life in Dystopia, given the opportunity to live in Utopia instead? Suppose the aliens are consulting you on which world to create, with the understanding that whichever world they create, you will have to inhabit. Surely you would be a fool to recommend that they create Dystopia. Surely, the rational thing for you to recommend is that they create Utopia.

This points to a potentially awkward implication of hedonism. A hedonist must, it seems, say that it can be rational to choose the worse of two options (e.g., the worse of two worlds: Utopia rather than Dystopia). Normally, we think that when offered a choice between A and B, where A is better than B, the rational thing to do must be to choose A. Hedonists must deny this, maintaining that in some situations, it is rational to choose B over A.

Pushing this a step farther, what is the hedonist to say about the value of the choice to create Utopia rather than Dystopia? Here I'm talking about the act of choosing, rather than the thing being chosen (Utopia). This act has little, if any, *absolute* value or disvalue, according to hedonism, but we can still ask about its instrumental value.

³ (32 seconds per year) times (1 trillion Dystopians) = 32 trillion seconds of net pleasure per year in Dystopia. (24 hours a day) times (3600 seconds per hour) times (365 days a year) times (1 million Utopians) = 31.536 trillion seconds of net pleasure per year in Utopia.

A hedonist must acknowledge that the choice to bring about Utopia has far less instrumental value than the choice to bring about Dystopia would have had, since the choice to bring about Utopia results in far less net pleasure than the choice to create Dystopia would have resulted in.

So not only must the hedonist say that it is, in this case, rational to choose the worse of two things (the less valuable of two worlds): he must also say that it is rational to make the worse of two choices. In this case, it is worse to make the rational choice than the irrational choice!

How big a problem is this, for the hedonist? I'm not sure. But it is certainly something to bear in mind when comparing hedonism to other conceptions of value.

C. The Experience Machine

Now we come to the most influential argument against hedonism, due to **Robert Nozick**. Nozick asks us to imagine that we develop sophisticated virtual reality technology---so sophisticated that you can, if you choose, enter one of the VR pods---the "experience machines"---and never come out. (There is an ultra-reliable life-support system inside the machine.) Once inside the experience machine, you forget that you are in an experience machine, and begin to have experiences that exactly replicate a life full of pleasure and enjoyment, and largely devoid of pain and suffering. These experiences are not mere dreams---they are far more vivid and realistic than dreams, so much so that they are completely indistinguishable from an ordinary life lived outside of any experience machine.

So, the deal is that if you go into an experience machine, you are guaranteed to have a life that is far more enjoyable than any life that anyone could realistically expect to have outside of an experience machine.

Since the only absolute goods in life are pleasures, according to hedonists, a life inside the experience machine must, according to hedonists, be a better life than a normal life outside the experience machine.

But Nozick thinks that this is intuitively wrong. We think that a life confined to an experience machine would likely be far less valuable than a life lived outside the machine. As Nozick points out, even though the person in the experience machine gets far more pleasure than an ordinary person, **the person in the machine gets far less out of life in terms of accomplishment and personal relationships**, not to mention the fact that he is totally deceived about his actual situation.

This is another case in which the hedonist has to take the bull by the horns and accept the seemingly counter-intuitive implications of his theory. He must say that life in the experience machine is better than life outside it. He can point out that we shouldn't be fooled by our reluctance to enter an experience machine---realistically, that would require us to abandon our friends and families, with serious adverse consequences, even as measured in hedonic terms. But supposing we can smooth out all of these complications---supposing we could orchestrate a scenario in which all human lives take place inside experience machines, and all with great pleasure---a hedonist is obliged to say that such a situation would be far better than our actual situation.

Now, Nozick thinks that this is absurd. He thinks that a life like Haydn's, for example, is obviously more valuable---obviously a *better life*---than the life of someone permanently plugged into an Experience Machine. This is because, according to Nozick, someone plugged into an Experience Machine never makes any friends or builds any relationships, never makes any real discoveries, never *accomplishes* anything of any importance at all. The fact that the Experience Machine life is quite impoverished when compared to the life of (e.g.) Haydn shows that there is more to having a good life than having lots of pleasure.

The best response to this, I think, is Crisp's. What's so great about friendship? What's so great about building relationships, or making discoveries, or accomplishing important things? If you are like many people, you will find that, upon reflection, the reason why you value these things is that they bring you or other people *pleasure* (or relief from pain). If these things never gave anyone any pleasure, and never spared anyone any pain, we would not value them at all (bearing in mind that we are working with a broad understanding of pleasure and pain to include, e.g., intellectual pleasure and emotional pain).

A hedonist could also argue that life in an experience machine would not be very different from life in Heaven, as Heaven is popularly conceived (a place where people exist in a disembodied form after they die, with pleasant experiences provided by a benevolent deity). Given that most people think that a Heavenly existence is preferable to any other existence, this suggests that the hedonists' support of the "EM lifestyle" may not be so far removed from common sense, after all.

D. Mindless worlds

Consider two "possible worlds": two ways the universe could have been. Neither of these worlds contains any sentient beings: no people, no animals, no spirits, no deities, no artificial intelligences. One of the worlds is full of high mountains, clear lakes, deep forests, grassy plains, wide oceans, flowing rivers, towering cloud formations, etc. Call this "Beautiful World." The other world contains nothing but dust and rubble under a dull beige sky. Call this "Ugly World."

Which world is better---Beautiful World, or Ugly World?

A hedonist must say that these worlds are equally valueless, since neither of them contains any pleasure (or any pain). Beautiful World would have a lot of value if there were human beings living in it, but, since there is no one in Beautiful World to appreciate its beauty, there is no enjoyment, and therefore no value, in this world.

To defend this conclusion, a hedonist can point out that a landscape that gives us pleasure might be considered ugly by Martians, who might derive great pleasure from viewing the (to us) barren Martian landscape. In fact, if the Martians' sense of pleasure is more highly developed than ours, it could even be true that an Ugly World populated by Martians would contain more pleasure than a Beautiful World populated by human beings. Given that Martian pleasure counts for as much as human pleasure, we should not be too quick to judge Beautiful World a better world than Ugly World.

M.W.P.