**The Case for Non-Hedonism (Not Anti-Hedonism)**

Hedonism is the theory that goodness is to be defined as pleasure. It is classified as a theory of metaethics, which is the study of goodness, our awareness of which is widely taken to be the material origin of our moral agency; the basic input to moral judgment. Although prospective goods can be elaborated and combined in the imagination *ad infinitum* into complex goods, none of this invention is *ex nihilo*, but rather is derived from the simple goods of which we are at first immediately or intuitively aware in our experience. Metaethics seeks to answer the question what these goods are. The products of such investigation are called axiologies, or theories of value.

Hedonism is one attempt at accomplishing this, and it has a certain appeal, especially to the skeptic, who may hold out little hope in answering deeper questions about what human life is all about. In that sense, it is good news if hedonism is true. It would give us the grounds for an elegant theory of moral awareness based on something easily notable, and even, in a sense, measurable, in our experience. Its intuitive appeal also stems from the fact that pleasures are things we inherently like, while their opposite: pains, are things we inherently dislike. If good things are supposed to be likable things and bad things are supposed to be dislikable, why might it not be that pleasure is what defines goodness and pain evil? (For the remainder of this essay, let it be tacitly understood that for whatever is alleged about pleasures, a counterpart allegation is intended for pains.)

Hedonism is a theory with longstanding and far-reaching influence in the social sciences and the arts, as well as in philosophy and even to some extent theology. Most utilitarians are hedonists, even though the two are conceptually unrelated. Utilitarianism, as a normative ethical theory, i.e., seeking to answer the question what makes right acts right, could just as easily be matched with a non-hedonist axiology. Its own intuitive appeal notwithstanding, this accidental association with utilitarianism is perhaps the key to the enduring influence of hedonism to our day, since utilitarianism’s popularity in the political, economic, and military sciences has carried in hedonism with it.

My concern about hedonism is that although I see it as withstanding some of its key criticisms, it may yet be diverting us from thinking squarely about what really is the defining good of moral awareness: life itself, a point to which I will return after presenting my own critique of hedonism. (My thought here is not that our enjoyment of pleasures is the thing that diverts us, but the thought that pleasures are the greatest good is what leads us off track.)

In spite of what hedonism may have in its favor, hedonists are well aware of the controversy of their position. For the theoretical commitment they are making argues against the possibilities that there are goods that are not pleasures or there are pleasures that are not good. Yet hedonism has proven to be resilient to these two criticisms, which we will review shortly.

Another worry about hedonism is that it would lead us to make overtly immoral choices, causing us to become dissolute pleasure-seekers. This criticism, I think, also comes up short, as discussed below.

After reviewing these three what I consider to be failed critiques of hedonism, I will discuss some criticism of my own before elucidating what I consider to be a viable non-hedonist – not anti-hedonist – axiology: that goodness is to be defined as life itself.

I say “not anti-hedonist” because one of the most troubling aspects of the philosophical discussion of hedonism over the centuries was its collapse into a false choice fallacy, in which the opponents of hedonism – most notably the stoics – took a position that was the contrary extreme to hedonism, that pleasures are bad or at least distracting, and should be ignored in order to live the virtuous life. This presented an obsessed focus of attention on two extreme theories at the cost of attention to the middle ground between them, something akin to the capitalism-socialism polemic of our times.

The first two longstanding criticisms against hedonism which I consider as failed are the two complementary sides of what I call the definitional criticism. For any successful definition of x by y, y defines x if and only if both all y are x (i.e., y is a sufficient condition of x) and only y are x (i.e., y is a necessary condition of x). That is to say, the definiens must be both a necessary and sufficient condition of the definiendum. The claim is that pleasure fails as a definiens of goodness both as a sufficient and a necessary condition, in the following manner.

First, pleasure fails as a sufficient condition because not all pleasures are good; for example, wicked pleasures are bad. The weakness of this claim lies in our failure to understand the nature of temptation and our falling to it. If temptation is an influence to do something bad, the implication is that the bad thing is not something we would choose on its own, on account of its being bad. So, for any temptation to be effective, it would itself have to be something good to attract us. So, the expression ‘wicked pleasure’ would really have to designate a promise of something good in association with something wicked. That something good would be a pleasure, which has unfortunately been associated with something evil in such a way as to encourage our embracing the evil.

Consider ammonia as the analog of something bad. Fortunately, ammonia both tastes and smells bad; which is a good thing, because it reduces the chance that anyone would be tempted to drink it and be harmed. But suppose ammonia were made to taste and smell good, like lemonade. Then that would be bad, because associating something good with something bad in order to encourage the embrace of the bad is itself a bad thing.

Secondly, critics claim that pleasure fails to be a suitable definition for goodness because not only pleasures are good: there are other things we consider good that are not pleasures. Among such things in particular are unpleasant things, apparently divorced from any noticeable connection to pleasure, such as knowledge of bad news, or “ugly truths”.

This is where the flexibility of hedonistic theory shows up: many things which do not count as intrinsically good because of their own unpleasantness may be counted as extrinsic goods because the experience of them may lead to greater future pleasure. Hedonists speak also of constituent evils, evils which are component parts of complex pleasures and so should not be judged as negative values in those contexts.

It may also be the case that psychologically, there is an intrinsic pleasure in coming to know something, no matter how bad the news or how ugly the truth.

A third case often made against hedonists, often by the less informed, is that hedonism will lead us to overtly immoral choices: choosing partying over study and service to self rather than to neighbor, etc. But although selfishness and short-term thinking do in fact lead, in the opinion of most, to overtly immoral choices, they have no conceptual connection to hedonism. A hedonist can pursue pleasure non-selfishly, i.e., agent-impartially, just as a hedonist can be focused on long-term rather than short-term outcomes. We might in fact be hard-pressed to notice the differences between the decisions that that such “responsible hedonists” – those both agent-impartial and considerate of longer terms – make and those of their non-hedonist counterparts.

Here are four arguments that I think get at the core of what is wrong with hedonism, the consideration of which will lead us toward non-hedonism.

**I. The Contemplation Argument**

1. If hedonism is true, then pleasure is the greatest good.

2. The greatest good is that the contemplation of which in itself is the most rewarding.

3. But the contemplation of pleasure itself apart from its object is not the most rewarding, and

is possibly not rewarding at all.

C. Hedonism is not true.

**II. The Intrinsic Worth Argument**

1. If hedonism is true, then 1a. living things are not endowed with intrinsic good or worth, while

pleasures are so endowed.

2. If hedonism is true, then 2a. the moral virtue to which we are obliged is to maximize net

pleasure.

3. If hedonism is true, then 3a. pleasure is the greatest good of all being.

4. The moral virtue to which we are obliged is ultimately for the sake of what is intrinsically

good.

5. Pleasure has no other reality apart from its service to living things

6. If 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, and 5, then 6a. the greatest good of all being and the moral virtue to which we

are obliged is to be of service to things that are of no intrinsic worth.

7. But 6a. is absurd and therefore must be counted as false.

C. Hedonism is not true.

**III. The Defining Principle of Moral Agency Argument**

1. If hedonism is true, then the defining principle of moral agency is to pursue pleasure and avoid

pain.

2. Anything whose activity exemplifies the defining principle of moral agency is a moral agent.

3. The activity of brute animals exemplifies the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain.

4. All moral agents are morally liable, capable of being considered blameworthy for their

choices.

5. Brute animals are not morally liable.

C. Hedonism is not true.

**IV. The Joy Argument**

1. If hedonism is true, then joy is not categorically distinct from pleasure as a greater good, but

rather is reducible to it.

2. If hedonism is true, any experience of pleasure is abated by the concurrent experience of

non-constituent pain\*.

3. But the experience of joy is boundless and unabatable, even in the concurrent presence of

great non-constituent pain.

C. Hedonism is not true.

\*Constituent pain is pain which is a component of a complex pleasure.

The **contemplation argument** argues for the psychological untenability of hedonism. If pleasure is the greatest good, then pleasure itself rather than its object should be that whose direct contemplation satisfies us most. But the contemplation of pleasure apart from its object is arguably a feat we cannot accomplish, or at best one not yielding rewards as great as contemplation of the object of the pleasure. This may be because hedonism is an explanatorily backward theory: pleasure may be the result of our contemplation of goodness, not goodness itself.

The **intrinsic worth argument** elaborates on the oddity of not considering living things as endowed with intrinsic worth even though hedonism directs our entire moral service toward them, or at least a subset of them, as the only beings that can experience pleasure. It borders on absurdity that our entire moral service be directed toward things of no worth on their own. The best sense we can make of this is that living things are empty vessels the filling of which with pleasures makes them good. But this hardly explains the imperative of why a worthless empty vessel ought to be filled in the first place. Even the empty cups in my cupboard have some intrinsic worth to them, as I notice most when I mourn their loss after breaking them; my sadness is not just on account of losing household liquid-carrying capacity, but the particular value of the vessel itself: its structure, materials, history, etc. All the more so, then should we be startled by this aspect of hedonism when considering the loss of much greater “vessels”: is my mourning for the loss of a fellow human being reducible to mourning the loss of collective pleasure-carrying capacity?

The **defining principle of moral agency argument** moves from the consideration that our awareness of goodness is our call to action as moral agents. But if awareness of pleasures and pains is our call to moral action, then, since many other organisms experience pleasure and pain, they should be moral agents as well, though they clearly are not.

Although a case might be made for an incipient moral awareness in other organisms – for animals do, in fact make decisions optimizing their own survival convenience within their immediate survival contexts. But such decisions fail to be moral because they are guided by organismic convenience rather than truth. Pleasure-optimizing itself seems much more akin to the convenience-optimizing occurring in organismic awareness rather than to truth-oriented moral reasoning. For it is immediate and non-problematic calculating, whereas moral reasoning is problematic and laden with controversy.

Finally, the **joy argument** builds on the apparent irreducibility of joy to pleasure. If joy is pleasure, then it is by far the greatest pleasure, perhaps infinitely so. Joy is boundless, incalculable, defying the quasi-arithmetic nature of hedonist theory. Unlike other pleasures, joy is not procurable or reliably conjurable; nor subsiding upon satisfaction of a desire. It is unfading in the face of unrelated agonies, even those felt acutely. More pointedly, those seeking pleasure

often find empty pleasure, regardless of how great the pleasure is; whereas joy always fills the heart. Those seeking pleasure usually find it, whereas joy is not obtainable by direct pursuit.

Where this all leads us is not to any rejection of the notion that pleasures are good, or in the direction of stoicism to a denial that pleasure defines goodness. It makes better sense to say that pleasure is the cognitive response to recognition of goods of any kind; from which point it is circular to claim goodness to be defined as pleasure.

But what else, if not pleasure, is that by which goodness can be defined? I say life. Life is good.

Goodness is to be defined as life; life of all kinds, whether physical or spiritual.

And it is not that pleasures are not good. It is in fact my conviction that pleasures are good that makes me notices that if such is the case, then life must be good as well, since pleasure is a service to life, and plays various roles important to life. Even its very pleasantness has its value

as an embellishment of life.

If someone asks me, “why life?”, my first answer is “why not life?” What else is there to be good if not life? If we say, “being”, that might do, but it blurs the picture, since non-living things are not capable either of being helped or harmed or even caring about the help or harm of others, and morality is about help and harm. I do not harm a rock by breaking it, except extrinsically if it is of some use to living things, in which case the harm done is really to those living things.

To be sure, it can reasonably be ventured that all organisms have some awareness of and care about what is helpful and harmful to life; but their response to it is immediate without any review of the infinite backdrop of possibilities to their experience, something to which they are blind and therefore cannot be motivated to explore. It is only rational beings who possess this awareness and are deputized by it to deeper moral reflection, thus constituting truth-oriented moral awareness. The initial impetus of this comes in the form of the basic axiomatic awareness that life is good. If life is good, then whatever is helpful to life is to that extent good and whatever is harmful to life is to that extent bad. As creatures endowed with this dual awareness: truth-oriented rational awareness operating upon our organismic awareness, we can no longer return, even by choice, to brute animal reasoning, for even the choice whether or not to make such a return would already be a moral choice. We could do our best to deny the “moral content” of our thinking, but the fact that we have to ignore it proves its enduring presence.