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## HEDONISM

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## GLOSSARY

**ancient hedonism** A term for the normative views of the Cyrenaic and Epicurean philosophers. The Cyrenaics flourished in the fourth century B.C.; the Epicureans in the two centuries following that one. Both groups prescribed pleasure as the goal of life, but they held different views about the essence of pleasure and about the best way to obtain it.

**axiological hedonism** A theory of intrinsic value, with two core components: first, all pleasure is intrinsically good; and second, nothing but pleasure is intrinsically good.

**ethical hedonism** The thesis that the moral rightness of an act derives from the pleasure the act produces. It comes in two main versions: hedonistic ethical egoism; and hedonistic act utilitarianism.

**extrinsic value** Such value is possessed by a thing owing to its relations to other things of value. For instance, a thing has extrinsic value if it results in, or is a means to, something else of value. Unlike intrinsic value, extrinsic value vanishes if the thing in which it resides is viewed in total abstraction from everything else. (Here and elsewhere, “thing” has its broadest meaning. It extends not only to tables and chairs, but also to pleasure, pain, knowledge, justice, and so forth.)

**intrinsic value** The value a thing possesses insofar as it is valuable in itself, taken in abstraction from everything else, including its effects, its accompaniments, and the ends it promotes. Intrinsic value contrasts with extrinsic value, but the two do not exclude each other. A single thing can have both kinds of value.

**nonhedonists** Those who reject hedonism. The term usually stands for those who reject axiological hedonism. Some of the latter are monists: they think there is a single intrinsic good, a good that is not pleasure. Others are pluralists: they think there are two or more intrinsic goods, at least one of which is not pleasure. Possible intrinsic goods include (in addition to pleasure) life, justice, beauty, and knowledge. Some prominent nonhedonists are Plato (428–348 B.C.), Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), T. H. Green (1836–1882), F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), and G. E. Moore (1873–1958).

**psychological egoism** The view that human beings are so constituted that every purposive human act ultimately derives from self-interest. Whenever a person acts, her ultimate aim is only to promote her own survival, or her own pleasure, etc.

**psychological hedonism** A version of psychological egoism. It asserts that every purposive human act ultimately springs from the agent's desire for pleasure—specifically, his own pleasure.

**qualitative hedonism** A form of axiological hedonism according to which the intrinsic value of a pleasure increases with the quantity and quality of the pleasure, not merely with its quantity alone.

**quantitative hedonism** A form of axiological hedonism according to which the intrinsic value of a pleasure varies directly, and solely, with the quantity of pleasure.

**HEDONISM** derives its name from the Greek word “hedone,” meaning pleasure. It comes in three major versions: axiological hedonism, according to which pleasure is the only thing of intrinsic value; psychological hedonism, according to which every purposive act derives ultimately from the desire for pleasure; and ethical hedonism, according to which the moral rightness of an act is a function of the pleasure the act produces. Each version has distinguished proponents. For example, all three versions were held by Aristippus (435–356 B.C.), Epicurus (342–270 B.C.), Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). For reasons stated in Section II, this article touches only briefly on ethical hedonism; it concentrates on axiological hedonism and psychological hedonism. It begins, however, with a few words about hedonism in ancient times.

## I. ANCIENT HEDONISM

The term “ancient hedonism” refers to the normative views of the Cyrenaic and Epicurean schools of philosophy. The Cyrenaics flourished in the fourth century B.C.; the Epicureans in the two centuries following that one. The members of these schools not only accepted axiological, psychological, and ethical hedonism, but held detailed views about the best way to achieve a pleasurable life. The Cyrenaics were followers of Aristippus, a student of Socrates who broke with his teacher's philosophy to establish his own school in Cyrene, on the coast of North Africa. The Cyrenaics not only prescribed pleasure as the goal of life, but recommended intense, physical, immediate pleasures as those especially worthy of pursuit. (There were exceptions, however. One of them was Hegesias, who stressed the avoidance of pain rather than the active pursuit of pleasure.)

The Epicurean school, founded by Epicurus in Athens, identified pleasure with peace of mind and freedom from physical pain; it also held that the Cyrenaic mode of life was not the best way to obtain pleasure. The Epicureans recommended moderation, rational self-control, and the avoidance of all vain (as opposed to natural) pleasures, especially those likely bring pain or the loss of mental tranquility. They recommended these things not as an alternative to seeking pleasure, but as the best way to achieve a genuinely pleasant life. Clearly, the Epicureans were not “epicureans” in the modern sense. Their lives tended toward the ascetic, not toward pleasure seeking as we usually conceive it.

## II. ETHICAL HEDONISM

According to ethical hedonism, whether an act is morally right is a function of the pleasure the act produces (where the function is such that morally right actions ultimately promote, rather than diminish, pleasure). This thesis comes in different forms, depending on how the function is specified and on whose pleasure is relevant. The most common forms are hedonistic ethical egoism, according to which an act is right if and only if it produces at least as much pleasure for the agent who performs it as any other act available to him; and hedonistic act utilitarianism,

according to which an act is right if and only if it produces at least as much pleasure—never mind whose pleasure, just pleasure, period—as anything else the agent could do instead.

The first of these views has far fewer adherents than the second. To many it seems obvious that what is morally right is not always the same as what maximizes personal pleasure. The second of the two views, hedonistic act utilitarianism, is a serious contender among moral theories. In this article, however, it will receive no further discussion. This is because utilitarianism receives attention elsewhere in this encyclopedia and because in recent decades the word “hedonism” has served mainly as a label for psychological hedonism and axiological hedonism.

### III. AXIOLOGICAL HEDONISM

#### A. The Components of Axiological Hedonism

Axiological hedonism is not a theory about what makes an act right or wrong, although it figures centrally in many such theories. It is a theory about intrinsic value, with two main components:

- (1) Every pleasure has intrinsic value.
- (2) Nothing but pleasure has intrinsic value.

The word “pleasure” has a broad meaning here; it includes the absence of pain.

Many axiological hedonists, those called quantitative hedonists (e.g., Bentham), add a third component:

- (3) The greater the quantity of pleasure, the greater the intrinsic value of the pleasure. More precisely, the intrinsic value of a pleasure varies directly, and solely, with the quantity of pleasure.

However, other axiological hedonists (e.g., J. S. Mill) reject (3), maintaining that intrinsic value increases according to the quantity and quality of the pleasure, not according to its quantity alone. These hedonists are called qualitative hedonists.

A thing has intrinsic value just in case it is valuable in itself, taken in abstraction from everything else, including its results, its accompaniments, and the ends it promotes. Money has value, but its value is extrinsic rather than intrinsic. It has no value in itself, taken in abstraction from the things we can buy with it and from the satisfaction many receive from acquiring it. In fact, most things of value have only extrinsic value—this is an uncontentious claim that few would deny. Axiological hedonists go a step further and contend that only one thing, namely pleasure, has intrinsic value. They add to this that all pleasures have intrinsic value, including, say, sadistic ones. No doubt sadistic pleasures are normally bad, for they contribute to deeds that are pleasure-diminishing for one or more people. But this simply means that they are bad extrinsically; it does not refute the claim that they are good in themselves, taken in abstraction from everything else. A pleasure can be extrinsically bad while also being intrinsically good.

#### B. Common Mistakes about Axiological Hedonism

We must avoid five common errors about axiological hedonism. The first is that of assuming, rather than arguing, that axiological hedonism is about happiness—that is, that it asserts that happiness alone has intrinsic value. The latter thesis is the same as axiological hedonism only if happiness is the same as pleasure. Many philosophers argue that the two are not the same. For

instance, pigeons no doubt feel pleasure, but they most likely do not experience happiness. Happiness would seem to require cognitive capacities of a sophisticated sort, capacities that pigeons are unlikely to have. Pleasure, on the other hand, can be experienced by any creature capable of having pleasant physical sensations.

However, this is not to say that “pleasure” refers merely to such sensations. Many philosophers, including many axiological hedonists, would argue that it extends also to pleasant experiences or to the hedonic tone—the pleasantness—of such experiences, where neither the experiences nor their pleasantness can be reduced entirely to physical sensations. Also, axiological hedonists treat the absence of pain as a form or component of pleasure. They do so by stretching the word “pleasure” just enough to include the absence of pain. In their view this is only a slight stretch, because pain is the opposite of pleasure, just as east is the opposite of west.

The second error consists of assuming that axiological hedonism is our sole option if we have a scientific outlook—that is, that any other view of intrinsic value is unscientific or unempirical. The view that desire-satisfaction has intrinsic value fits well with a scientific outlook (partly because desires have a place in the explanatory apparatus of some social sciences), but it conflicts with axiological hedonism. To satisfy a desire is simply to bring about the state of affairs the desire has as its object. Often, but not always, the satisfaction of the desire produces pleasure, but even when it does it is not identical to pleasure. Hence, the thesis that desire-satisfaction is intrinsically good differs from the thesis that pleasure is intrinsically good. The general point here is that a person can have a scientific outlook while holding a nonhedonistic theory of intrinsic value.

The third error is that of charging axiological hedonists with the view that our chief aim should be to produce pleasure. The claim that pleasure alone has intrinsic value entails no position about what our chief aims should be. Even if we assume that our aims should be tailored to bring pleasure into the world, axiological hedonism does not imply that we should make the production of pleasure our chief aim. Perhaps the best way to bring pleasure into the world is to put pleasure out of our minds and strive directly for such things as peace, knowledge, and friendship. This view is compatible with axiological hedonism.

The fourth error is that of thinking that axiological hedonism is about the sources of pleasure. According to axiological hedonists, it is not the sources of pleasure—the sip of cognac, the weekend at the beach, and so on—that have intrinsic value. Rather, it is pleasure alone, whatever its source, that has such value.

The fifth error consists of thinking that according to axiological hedonism, nothing but pleasure has value. Axiological hedonists grant that many things besides pleasure, including many painful things—tonsillectomies, for instance—have value. They insist, however, that such things have only extrinsic value, that pleasure alone has intrinsic value. A tonsillectomy has value because it contributes to the absence of pain, which is a species or element of pleasure.

### C. Arguments for Axiological Hedonism

The following four arguments are typical of those used by axiological hedonists. They are arranged in order of increasing plausibility.

*First Argument for Axiological Hedonism* (adapted from Bentham):

- (1) The words “good” and “pleasurable” are synonymous; thus, the statement “Pleasure, and pleasure alone, is intrinsically good” means the same as “Pleasure, and pleasure alone, is intrinsically pleasurable.”

- (2) Obviously, the only intrinsically pleasurable thing is pleasure itself. In other words, pleasure, and pleasure alone, is intrinsically pleasurable.
- (3) Therefore, pleasure, and pleasure alone, is intrinsically good.

This argument fails because its first premise is false. The word “good” does not mean “pleasurable.” Nor does it mean “productive of pleasure.” Those who say “Fairness is good, even when it produces no pleasure” are not guilty of a contradiction or a misuse of language. Perhaps they are guilty of an error, but that’s a different point.

*Second Argument for Axiological Hedonism* (adapted from J. S. Mill’s *Utilitarianism*):

- (1) Happiness is the only thing that people desire for its own sake.
- (2) If happiness is the only thing that people desire for its own sake, then we have sufficient proof that happiness is the only thing capable of being desired for its own sake.
- (3) “Capable of being desired” means the same as “desirable.” Hence, rather than saying that happiness is the only thing capable of being desired for its own sake, we can say that happiness is the only thing that is desirable for its own sake. This in turn means that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically desirable.
- (4) “Desirable” and “good” are interchangeable. Thus, rather than saying that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically desirable, we can say that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good.
- (5) Therefore (from (1) through (4)), happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good.
- (6) Happiness is nothing other than pleasure.
- (7) Therefore (from (5) and (6)), pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

This argument contains at least two doubtful premises: the first and the sixth. Even if we ignore those premises, the argument contains falsehoods unless “desirable” has a different meaning in the fourth premise than it has in the third. In premise (3) it means “capable of being desired.” However, in (4) it means “worthy of being desired”; otherwise it is not interchangeable with “good.” But if “desirable” has a different meaning in (4) than it has in (3), the argument is invalid.

*Third Argument for Axiological Hedonism* (based on a second, more charitable, look at Mill’s *Utilitarianism*):

- (1) Happiness is the only thing that people desire for its own sake.
- (2) Although principles about what is (or is not) intrinsically good cannot be proved in a strict sense, they can be shown to be reasonably acceptable, meaning acceptable to reasonable and honest people. It is reasonable to accept the principle “*X* is intrinsically good” if and only if we sincerely desire *X* for its own sake.

- (3) Thus, given (1) and (2), it is reasonable to accept the principle that happiness is intrinsically good; it is not reasonable to accept the claim that things other than happiness are intrinsically good. In short, it is reasonable to accept this assertion: “Happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good.”
- (4) Happiness is nothing other than pleasure.
- (5) Therefore, given (3) and (4), it is reasonable to accept the principle “Pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.”

This argument does not equivocate on any key terms; in that sense it improves on the argument that precedes it. However, it contains at least two questionable premises: (1) and (4).

*Fourth Argument for Axiological Hedonism* (attributable to Ralph M. Blake [1889–1950]):

- (1) Surely some pleasures are intrinsically good. Or if “surely” is too strong a word here, at least this is true: Some pleasures appear, upon reflection, to be intrinsically good, and we have no reason to think that appearances deceive us here.
- (2) It is plausible to think this: We can account for the apparent lack of goodness in some pleasures without denying that they have intrinsic goodness. It is plausible to think this because we find upon reflection that whenever a pleasure appears to lack value, this appearance changes if we carefully abstract the pleasure from its origins, effects, and accompaniments. For instance, sadistic pleasure seems to lack value, but when we isolate such pleasure from everything that usually goes with it, including the sadistic deeds to which it is connected, it then seems to have value. The evil that seemed to reside in the pleasure drops aside in the process of abstraction, because it actually resides not in the pleasure itself but in things that produce, result from, or otherwise relate to the pleasure.
- (3) It is also plausible to think this: We can account for the value of things other than pleasure (truth and beauty, for instance) without assuming that things other than pleasure have intrinsic value. It is plausible to think this because we find upon reflection that whenever a thing other than pleasure appears to be valuable, this appearance fades when we carefully abstract the thing from the pleasures that accompany or result from it. For instance, beauty appears to have value, but this appearance entirely fades when we consider beauty itself, in abstraction from every pleasure—past, present, and future—that might accompany or result from beauty. The value that seemed to reside in beauty actually resides elsewhere: in the pleasures to which beauty contributes.
- (4) Given (1) through (3), it is reasonable to conclude that every pleasure, and nothing but pleasure, is intrinsically valuable.

Although this argument is stronger than the previous three, its second two steps are disputable. Together, they essentially say that reflection supports axiological hedonism, where “reflection” refers to thought experiments about pleasure and value. Whether such thought experiments make axiological hedonism plausible depends on the particular person doing the experiments;

thus, the fourth argument for axiological hedonism falls short of establishing its conclusion. By the same token, anti-hedonistic arguments that rest on thought experiments do not disprove axiological hedonism. This is one of the key points made by proponents of the fourth argument.

#### D. Problems and Questions for Axiological Hedonists

I will mention four of these. The first problem, obviously, is that of producing a compelling argument for axiological hedonism, an argument that can persuade nonhedonists. No one has done so, but axiological hedonism has a surface plausibility that invites further attempts. The second problem is that of establishing the reality of intrinsic, as opposed to merely extrinsic, value. Some philosophers, including John Dewey (1859–1952), Sidney Hook (1902–1989), and Monroe Beardsley (1915–1985), have argued that all value is extrinsic, that nothing has value in abstraction from everything else. The third problem is that of quantifying pleasures. The question, Can pleasure be quantified, and if so, how?, has produced plenty of thought but little consensus, even among quantitative hedonists.

Before considering the fourth problem let us note that we should not overestimate the third problem. Even if we cannot quantify pleasure and thereby determine whether one pleasurable thing is, say, exactly twice as pleasurable as another, we often can compare the two things and see that one of them is more pleasurable than the other. Comparison does not always require quantification or the use of a calculus.

Just as we should not overestimate the third problem, we should not underestimate it by thinking that we can easily solve it by embracing qualitative hedonism. Qualitative hedonists do not deny that the intrinsic value of a pleasure varies with its quantity; their point is simply that quality enters the picture as well. Also, qualitative hedonism has problems of its own. For example, E. F. Carritt (1876–1964) compares the qualitative hedonist to the person who says that although he values nothing but money, he would not come by it dishonestly. Such a person clearly values honesty as well as money. Likewise, Carritt contends, if a person says that given two pleasures of the same quantity, the one with the higher quality is the more intrinsically valuable of the two, that person implies that pleasure is not the sole thing of intrinsic value.

The fourth problem is that of answering the question, What exactly is pleasure? This problem is complicated by the hedonist's use of "pleasure" so that it extends not only to pleasure as it is usually conceived, but also to something quite different, namely, the absence of pain. That these two things differ, that pleasure and pain are not on par like east and west, is reflected in ordinary language. It makes sense to say "I'm in pain," which invites the question "Where does it hurt?" However, it makes no sense to say "I'm in pleasure"; the appropriate expression is "I'm experiencing pleasure" or "I find this to be pleasant." And neither of those statements invites the question "Where does it feel good?" A person who takes pleasure in skydiving cannot locate the pleasure in question, indicating that pleasure either is not simply a feeling, or is not a feeling on par with pain.

A natural reply here is that we can revise axiological hedonism as follows:

Exactly two things are intrinsically good, neither of which reduces to the other. The first is pleasure, whatever its kind or source; the second is the absence of pain.

This thesis avoids the charge that it puts pleasure and pain on par. The problem, however, is that it makes axiological hedonism a pluralistic, rather than a monistic, theory of intrinsic value. This is a problem because most axiological hedonists see monism not only as a key element of their theory but as one of its greatest advantages. If we can account for all value in terms of just one thing of intrinsic value, then we can easily compare the values of widely different

experiences—or so it is natural to think. However, comparisons become difficult if two or more incommensurable things have intrinsic value.

## IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONISM

### A. The Thesis of Psychological Hedonism

The term “psychological hedonism” traditionally refers to the view that every act is motivated, ultimately, by the agent’s desire for his own pleasure (where pleasure is taken to include the absence of pain). I say “traditionally” rather than “always” because the term sometimes extends not only to the view just stated but also to various others. An example is genetic hedonism, the view that each of our present desires arose originally from our desire for pleasure. This view differs from the initial one. Genetic hedonists can admit that many of our desires are neither egoistic nor concerned with pleasure. Genetic hedonism is specifically about the origin of desires, not about their objects or content.

From here forward, “psychological hedonism” has its traditional meaning. It refers to this thesis:

Human beings are so constituted that the sole ultimate motive of every purposive human act is the agent’s desire for pleasure—specifically, her own pleasure.

Psychological hedonism is a version of the following thesis, known as psychological egoism:

Human beings are so constituted that the sole ultimate motive of every purposive human act is a self-interested desire—for instance, a desire for the agent’s own survival or for his own pleasure. In short, everyone is actuated, ultimately, by nothing but self-interest.

Let us note that psychological hedonism implies none of the following: (i) people do nothing that benefits others; (ii) people receive no pleasure from benefiting others; (iii) people desire nothing but pleasure; and (iv) people are aware that their deeds spring ultimately from a desire for pleasure. Psychological hedonism does not imply (i) or (ii) because although it says that our ultimate goal is pleasure, it says nothing about how we try to further that goal or about what brings us pleasure. No doubt some people receive pleasure from helping others. Psychological hedonism does not imply (iii) because it accommodates the fact that people have subordinate (as opposed to ultimate) desires for things besides pleasure. Perhaps Beth wants to help Seth, but it’s also true (according to psychological hedonists) that if Beth were perfectly insightful about her motives she would see that she wants to help Seth as a means of obtaining pleasure. Her desire to help Seth is subordinate to her desire for pleasure, the latter being her only nonsubordinate, or ultimate, desire. Finally, psychological hedonism does not imply (iv) because it accommodates the view that people often deceive themselves about their ultimate desires.

### B. Arguments for Psychological Hedonism

Although psychological hedonism is attractive to many people, it is hard to establish. There are two common arguments for it, neither of which succeeds.

*First Argument for Psychological Hedonism:* Each of our actions comes with at least a slight amount of pleasure. That is, whenever we successfully complete an act we obtain

some pleasure. Hence, it is reasonable to think that our ultimate goal in acting is to obtain pleasure.

*Second Argument for Psychological Hedonism:* Psychological egoism is true, and psychological hedonism is the most plausible form of psychological egoism. Hence, we should accept psychological hedonism.

The first argument fails because its premise is false. Contrary to that premise, I do not always receive pleasure from a successfully performed action. Instead, I receive some desire-satisfaction. Owing to this, it is easy to think that I myself receive some satisfaction, meaning that I receive some pleasure. But there is a confusion here between two different things: satisfying a desire; and satisfying the person who has the desire. To satisfy a desire—to “receive some desire-satisfaction”—I need only bring about the state of affairs my desire has as its object. For instance, if I want to die by electrocution, or more precisely, if I want it to be the case that I die by electrocution, my desire will be satisfied if that state of affairs is brought about. However, I will experience no pleasure when that happens.

Even if the premise were true it would not support psychological hedonism. The premise says that whenever I complete an action I receive some pleasure. This does not imply that whenever I perform an action, I do so to receive pleasure. Think of it this way: Whenever James goes home for a visit he receives a lecture from his mother (on why it’s important to attend church on Sunday and to brush his teeth regularly). This does not imply that whenever James goes home for a visit he does so to receive a lecture from his mother.

Let us examine the second argument for psychological hedonism. The problem with it is that its first premise—that psychological egoism is true—is highly questionable. Not one of the usual arguments for it succeeds. Here are those arguments:

*First Argument for Psychological Egoism:* If we reject psychological egoism we must accept psychological altruism, which is a naïve, unrealistic theory of human nature. If we are not self-deceptive, if we accept reality, we must grant that people are not angels—and that means accepting egoism.

*Second Argument for Psychological Egoism:* Every student of economics knows that (rational) people are expected utility-maximizers: they behave in ways that maximize expected utility—specifically, their own expected utility. This means that people are egoistic. In other words, to deny psychological egoism is to deny that people are utility maximizers, which is to deny a key assumption of economics. To do this is grossly unscientific. Thus, if we are scientifically minded we will accept psychological egoism.

*Third Argument for Psychological Egoism:* Even if we have fundamental desires for the survival, well-being, and so on, of other people, those desires exist only because they benefit our genes. (In this respect they are no different from our other fundamental desires.) Owing to those desires, we often act in ways that help other people, thereby inclining those people to reciprocate our actions. This means that those people are disposed to feed us when we are starving, rescue us when we are drowning, and so on. This contributes to our survival and well-being, and thus increases our potential to leave offspring. And this, in turn, furthers the replication our genes, including the genes that account for our desires for the survival and well-being of others. In other words, it increases the chances that those genes will copy themselves into future generations. This sort of thing has been going on for millions of years, and accounts for the fact that we have fundamental desires for the survival, well-

being, and so forth of other people. But of course if this is why we have those desires, then the deeds that result from them (as well as the desires themselves) are not truly unselfish. After all, if what explains an action is that it ultimately issues from a desire, where that desire exists only because it serves our own genes, then the action is selfish, despite any appearance to the contrary. Thus, our actions are fundamentally selfish.

*Fourth Argument for Psychological Egoism:* Whenever a person acts, her act springs from a desire. But whose desire? A desire of her own, of course. For example, if she gives to charity, she does so because she herself wants to; her deed is in the service of one of her own desires. Thus, at bottom, she is always looking out for herself. In sum, people are always acting selfishly, even when they seem to be doing otherwise.

The problem with the first of these arguments is that the antithesis of psychological egoism is not altruism, but simply nonegoism. Nonegoism asserts that some of our deeds ultimately derive from nonselfish desires, meaning desires that are not for our own pleasure, our own survival, and so on. One way to establish nonegoism would be to show that people sometimes act maliciously. That is, they act from a desire to hurt others, and not simply as a means of satisfying a more basic, self-directed desire. The ultimate aim of a genuinely malicious deed is the injury of another person. If such deeds occur, psychological egoism is false.

The second argument misunderstands the notion of utility. When economists say that people are utility-maximizers they do not mean that there is an obtainable thing or feeling called “utility,” and that a rational person strives for as much of it as possible. They mean, roughly, that people act according to their preferences, and preferences can be numerically measured. This is where utility (as economists understand it) enters the picture. Utility is a measure of preference: one thing has a higher utility than another if the relevant person prefers it to the other. Hence, when economists say that people are utility-maximizers they mean, roughly, that people do what they most prefer to do. This is consistent with the view that many fundamental preferences are unselfish.

To see the flaws in the third argument for psychological egoism, consider the premise expressed in its penultimate two sentences. The gist of that premise is that if a desire exists only because the acts that ultimately spring from it further the replication of the agent’s genes, then those acts are selfish. This premise could mean either of two things:

- (A) If a desire exists only because the acts that ultimately spring from it further the replication of the agent’s genes, then those acts are “selfish” in this sense: they ultimately spring from a desire that has as its object the agent’s own survival, or the agent’s own pleasure, or the agent’s own gene-reproduction, etc.
- (A’) If a desire exists only because the acts that ultimately spring from it further the replication of the agent’s genes, then those acts are “selfish” in this sense: they ultimately spring from a desire which, *via* the acts that ultimately spring from it, furthers the replication of the agent’s own genes.

Proposition (A) is clearly false. From the fact that a desire exists only because it contributes to a particular consequence (e.g., the replication of the agent’s genes), it does not follow that the object of the desire is that consequence. The object of a desire is one thing; what maintains the existence of the desire is another.

Thus, the premise we are examining, if it is not clearly false, is equivalent to (A'). But then the third argument for psychological egoism fails. To see this, note that the conclusion of that argument—that our actions are fundamentally selfish—could mean either of the following:

- (B) Every act is motivated, ultimately, by a desire that has as its object the agent's own survival, or the agent's own pleasure, or the agent's own gene-reproduction, etc.
- (B') Every act is motivated, ultimately, by a desire that serves the agent's own genes—i.e., a desire which, *via* the acts that ultimately spring from it, furthers the replication of those genes.

If the conclusion of the third argument is short for (B), the argument fails to support its conclusion. Premise (A') fails to support (B) even when combined with the further, two-part premise that (i) every act ultimately springs from a desire and (ii) every desire exists only because the acts that ultimately spring from it further the replication of the agent's genes. From (A') and this supplementary premise it follows, not that (B) is true, but that every act ultimately springs from a desire which, *via* the acts that ultimately spring from it, furthers the replication of the agent's own genes. This, in essence, is proposition (B'), not (B).

However, if the conclusion of the third argument is short for (B') rather than (B), then even if the argument is sound it does not support psychological egoism. Proposition (B'), far from asserting psychological egoism, is compatible with nonegoism. From the fact, if it is a fact, that the ultimate source of any action is a desire that furthers the replication of the agent's own genes, nothing follows about the propositional content of that desire—that is, about what the desire has as its object. For all we know, its object could be the well-being of another person, in which case psychological egoism is false. To oppose this observation by insisting that the desire would not exist unless it contributed to the replication of the agent's own genes is simply to miss the point. The point is that psychological egoism and its antithesis, nonegoism, are not about what explains the existence of the desires at the root of our actions. They are about the content of those desires, about the states of affairs those desires have as their objects. Psychological egoism asserts, and nonegoism denies, that those desires are always self-directed, that they have as their object nothing but, say, the agent's own pleasure or survival. Statement (B') does not imply this thesis; hence, to defend (B') is not to support psychological egoism.

Let us examine the fourth argument for psychological egoism. Its conclusion, that people always act selfishly, could mean either that (a) everyone always acts from a selfish desire, or that (b) everyone always acts from a desire of her own.

If we read the conclusion as (a), the argument is invalid. The fact that each of my acts springs from one of my own desires, meaning a desire that belongs to me, does not imply that every such act springs from a selfish desire—for instance, a desire for my own pleasure. Perhaps I have desires for the misery or happiness of others, and such desires cause much of my behavior. This comports with the claim that I always act from a desire of my own. The general point is that from the fact that my deeds spring from my own desires, nothing follows about the objects of those desires, and hence about the aims of my actions.

Perhaps we should read the conclusion of the argument as (b). This makes the argument valid, for its conclusion now merely restates its key premise. However, the argument is no better than before, for its conclusion no longer warrants the name “egoism.” It is now compatible with the claim that people sometimes act from nonselfish desires, which is the thesis of nonegoism. That is, to read the conclusion as (b) is to allow the possibility that although people always act from their own desires, many of their ultimate desires have as their object something other than the agent's own pleasure, survival, or the like.

In response to this objection, it will not do to redefine psychological egoism as position (b), the view that everyone always acts from a desire of her own. Such a response merely stretches the term “psychological egoism” so that it extends to virtually every view of human motivation, including the one known as nonegoism. It amounts to ignoring the contrast between egoism and nonegoism, which is very different from refuting, or even challenging, nonegoism.

We have been considering the second argument for psychological hedonism, a premise of which is that psychological egoism is true. We have considered four arguments for that premise, none of which succeeds. Unless better arguments exist, psychological egoism lacks support, and hence the second argument for psychological hedonism, like the first, is no good.

## V. IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLIED ETHICS

Axiological hedonism clearly has implications for applied ethics. Indeed, so numerous are those implications that it is difficult even to begin listing them. For example, many familiar moral arguments about abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and health care policy rest partly on a rejection of axiological hedonism. That is, they rest on the assumption that one or more things besides pleasure, particularly human life, have intrinsic value. These arguments are unsound if axiological hedonism is true.

Psychological hedonism is relevant to applied ethics owing to its possible implication that truly moral behavior never occurs. I say “possible implication” because whether psychological hedonism actually has this implication depends on the essential elements of moral behavior, and on that topic there is much debate. However, many would agree that moral behavior essentially involves acting, at least sometimes, from fundamental motives that are not self-interested. If, as psychological hedonism implies, human nature is such that acting from such motives never occurs, then there is no point in encouraging such behavior. Similarly, if, as psychological hedonism implies, it is not psychologically possible for Alf to do his part in preserving the environment, alleviating world hunger, and so forth except insofar as he sees such behavior as a means to his own pleasure, then there is no point in trying to persuade Alf to do those things. At least, there is no point in trying this except through arguments to the effect that such deeds will bring Alf pleasure. Unfortunately, such arguments may not be available or successful.

In short, if psychological hedonism (or more generally, psychological egoism) is true, then some of the things that (some) applied ethicists do are pointless. Perhaps it is fortunate, then, that we have seen no compelling reason to accept psychological hedonism or any other brand of psychological egoism.

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