

Hedonism

Its Powerful Appeal

Happiness and Intrinsic Value

If you are like me, and like everyone else I know, you've spent a fair bit of time thinking about how your life can go better. You may be doing pretty well already, or may be very badly off, or somewhere in between. But there is always room for improvement.

To know how our lives can be better, we first need to know how they can be good. In other words, we need a standard that will tell us when our lives are going well for us. That standard will help us determine our level of *well-being*, or *welfare*.

Many things can improve our well-being: chocolate, sturdy shoes, vaccinations, a reasonable amount of money. These things pave the way to a better life—they help to make it possible, and may, in some cases, even be indispensable to it. Philosophers call such things **instrumental goods**,¹ things that are valuable because of the good things they bring about.

If there are instrumental goods, then there must be something they are good *for*, something whose value does not depend on being a means to anything else that is good. Such a thing is worth pursuing for its own sake; it is valuable in its own right, even if it brings nothing else in its wake. Philosophers call such things **intrinsically valuable**. Instrumental values are things that are good precisely because they help to bring about things that are intrinsically valuable.

1. All terms and phrases that appear in **boldface** are defined in a glossary at the end of the book.

When asking about what makes a life go better for us, we will of course want to know which things are instrumentally valuable, so we can get our hands on them. But when we take a philosophical step back and ask *why* (for instance) going to the dentist, or making money, makes us better off, we will need to have some grasp of what is intrinsically good for us—something whose presence, *all by itself*, makes us better off.

A natural way to start thinking about this is to consider some clearly good lives, ones that definitely qualify as being good for the people who live them. My top ten wouldn't include those of anyone you'd ever heard of. Instead, I'd pick the lives of certain of my friends and acquaintances, people who are deeply invested in their exciting work, secure in their love for others, physically healthy and active, and possessed of modest but real self-esteem and self-respect. But there is no need to be limited by my choices. Think about your own top candidates, and then ask yourself this question: What makes each of those lives so good? Is there a single feature that each of them shares, something that explains why they are as good as they are? If so, what is it?

The most popular answer is just what you'd expect: happiness. On this view, a good life is a happy life. This means something pretty specific. It means that happiness is necessary for a good life; a life without happiness cannot be a good life. It also means that happiness is sufficient for a good life: When you are happy, your life is going well. The happier you are, the better your life is going for you. And the unhappier you are, the worse off you are.

On this view, there is only a single thing that is intrinsically good for us: happiness. Everything else improves our lives only to the extent that it makes us happy. Likewise, there is just one thing that is intrinsically bad for us: unhappiness. Unhappiness is the only thing that directly reduces our quality of life.

There is a name for this kind of view: **hedonism**. The term comes from the Greek word *hēdonē*, which means "pleasure." According to hedonists, a life is good to the extent that it is filled with pleasure and is free of pain.

Before we can assess hedonism, we have to recognize that there are two fundamental kinds of pleasure: physical pleasure and attitudinal pleasure (enjoyment). The first kind is the sort we experience when we taste a delicious fall apple, or when we let the jets from a hot tub dissolve the tension in our backs. These very different kinds of pleasurable feelings usually make us happy, at least for the moment. But such feelings are not the same thing as happiness.

As the hedonist understands it, happiness is attitudinal pleasure: the positive attitude of enjoyment. It can range in intensity from mild contentment to elation. Being happy does not necessarily feel like anything; there is no special sensation or physical quality associated with happiness. I can enjoy a home-team victory or a beautiful painting without experiencing any physical pleasure.

In order to be at all plausible, hedonism must be understood as the view that enjoyment, rather than physical pleasure, is the key to the good life. This may come as a surprise, since we nowadays think of hedonists as those who are always pursuing sensual pleasures. But we must abandon that picture, and fix our sights instead on the view that identifies the good life as one that is full of sustained enjoyment, containing only minimal sadness and misery. That is the hedonist's model of the best life for human beings.

Happiness, understood from now on as enjoyment, is indeed a good candidate for an intrinsic value.² It's not like a vaccination or a chocolate bar. If such things generate no benefits—if, say, the vaccination fails to protect you from disease, or if you hate chocolate (I've heard of such strange people)—then there is nothing valuable about them. They are good, when they are, only because of the benefits they bring about. Thus they are only instrumentally good. Happiness isn't like that. It is worth pursuing for its own sake. It is valuable in its own right.

The Attractions of Hedonism

Hedonism can trace its origins in the West to the ancient Greeks. Epicurus (341–270 BCE), the first great hedonist, argued that pleasure was the only thing worth pursuing. Yet he was not calling on us to pursue carnal pleasures. Epicurus argued that the most pleasant condition is one of inner peace. The ideal state of tranquility comes largely from two sources: moderation in all physical matters, and intellectual clarity about what is truly important.

2. Many who reject hedonism still believe that happiness is the key to a good life. The disagreement is about what happiness really is. Hedonists insist that it is a kind of experience we have—the experience of enjoyment. Others, such as Aristotle, claim that happiness is much more than this; it is, in particular, a combination of enjoyment, intelligence, virtue, and activity. The sort of happiness that we discuss in this chapter and the next is the one that hedonists have in mind—namely, enjoyment.

Philosophy is the path to such clarity. Philosophy can reveal the false beliefs that cause so much unhappiness—specifically, as Epicurus saw it, our beliefs that death is bad for us, that the gods are mean-spirited and easily angered, and that sex and money are key ingredients in the good life. Philosophy can help explain the error of such popular ways of thinking, and thereby ease us along the path to happiness.

Skip ahead a couple thousand years, and consider the view of English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), perhaps the most famous hedonist since Epicurus. Mill's critics claimed that hedonism was a "doctrine of the swine," because it advised us to live like animals, gaining as much brute pleasure as possible. Mill argued that pleasures come in different levels of quality, and that the best pleasures for human beings were those that come only through hard work—especially the work of the mind. Intellectual and artistic pleasures topped his list; physical pleasures were at the bottom. Mill thought that people who have enjoyed both physical and intellectual pursuits always prefer the intellectual pleasures. That was good enough for him, since he also thought that the true test of something's value was the approval of those with knowledge and experience.

As you might expect from a view whose popularity spans thousands of years, there is a great deal to be said on behalf of hedonism. Here are the most important reasons that have won it so many fans.

There Are Many Models of a Good Life

There are a variety of ways to live a good life, and hedonism explains why this is so: there are many paths to happiness. Can woodcutters, professional athletes, or musicians live very good lives? Not according to Plato (427–347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who thought that philosophical contemplation was essential to a truly good life. Nowadays we are likely to reject such views as narrow-minded and elitist. We think that people from all walks of life have the potential to be well-off. This democratic view about the prospects for the good life fits comfortably with the hedonistic outlook. Because the sources of happiness vary quite widely, and happiness is the key to a good life, there are many ways to live a good life.

Hedonism offers us a kind of flexibility that some of its competitors lack. Many of these competitors identify a kind of activity, such as doing philosophy, as the greatest good. They then say that those who don't pursue it, or who pursue it badly, are unable to lead a good life. Hedonism rejects all such approaches. The best activity for human beings is the one that

brings us the greatest happiness. But what makes me happy needn't make you happy. So my recipe for the good life may be very different from yours.

Personal Authority and Well-Being

This diversity of good lives has an interesting implication: hedonists provide each of us with a substantial say in what the good life looks like. And that seems a plus. What makes us happy is largely a matter of personal choice. As a result, we each get plenty of input into what makes our lives go well.

So long as we really do know what will make us happy, hedonism supports the resistance we feel when others try to tell us how to live our lives. And when others counsel us, *for our own good*, to give up happiness and to pursue a less enjoyable way of life, hedonism assures us that such advice is deeply mistaken.

In one sense, however, hedonism does not allow us to have the final say about what is good for us. If hedonism is true, then happiness improves our lives, whether we think so or not. According to hedonists, those who deny that happiness is the sole thing that is intrinsically good for us are wrong, no matter how sincere their denial. In this way, hedonism follows a middle path between approaches to the good life that dictate a one-size-fits-all model and those that allow each person to decide for herself exactly what is valuable.

Misery Clearly Hampers a Good Life; Happiness Clearly Improves It

Hedonists tell us that misery takes away from a good life, and this is hard to deny. To test this claim, imagine a life full of sadness, with no compensating enjoyments. Surely this life is bad for the person who leads it. It may be good in other respects—the very sad person might, for instance, be a brilliant artist or a mathematical genius. But we are not asking whether the life is good in any way at all. Rather, we are asking about whether the life is going well for the person living it. Specifically, we are asking whether a really miserable person can have a high level of well-being. This is hard to accept, and hedonism explains why that is.

Hedonists also claim that happiness improves one's welfare. To test this, imagine two people leading identical lives, with only one difference: the first person enjoys his life, and the second doesn't. Surely the first person is better off. If we were to choose between these lives solely on the basis of what would be best for us, we'd select the first, without question. That is precisely what hedonism would recommend.

The Limits of Explanation

The claim that happiness is intrinsically beneficial seems about as obvious as anything in ethics. And the value of everything else seems easily explained by showing how it leads to happiness.

If hedonism is true, then happiness directly improves one's welfare, and sadness directly undermines it. Just about everyone believes that. Indeed, how could we even argue for something as basic as this? This is where thinking in this area *starts*. Perhaps no claim about well-being is more fundamental than the one that insists on the importance of experiencing happiness and avoiding misery.

When we undertake something that is painful or difficult, it makes sense to ask why we'd do such a thing. Suppose, for instance, that you spot me red-faced, huffing and puffing, as I make my way around a track. Why am I willing to suffer so? To get in shape. Why is that important? To be healthy. Why is that important? Because it makes me happy. That's where all such lines of questioning seem to end. If being healthy only made me miserable—not easy to imagine, but possible—then what good would it do me? True, it might make me more attractive, or allow me to live longer, or make me a better athlete. But if *those* things didn't make me happy, it is hard to see how being healthy would make me better off.

It is perfectly sensible for us to ask about how we'd be better off by studying hard, playing by the rules, dieting, or telling the truth. We can defend the value of such things if we can show that they make us happier. But that shows only that they are instrumental goods. By contrast, we don't need to show that happiness leads to anything else in order to show that it is valuable. We recognize that to be happy is already to be in a desirable state. This supports the hedonist's claim that happiness is intrinsically valuable.

Rules of the Good Life—and Their Exceptions

Hedonism can justify the many rules for living a good life, while at the same time explaining why there are exceptions to these rules.

Almost all of us are better off if we manage to be free of manipulation, crippling illness, enslavement, constant worry, unwanted attention, treachery, and physical brutality. Remove these burdens, and you immediately improve the quality of life. The hedonist's explanation is simple and plausible: in almost every case, eliminating these things reduces our misery.

On the positive side, we can improve our lives by making sure that they contain interesting work and hobbies, trustworthy friends, a giving and understanding sexual partner, and a commitment to causes we strongly believe in. Why? Because such things usually add enjoyment to our lives.

These lists are not complete, and I'm not concerned to argue for any specific item on either one. The lists are meant to reflect common sense. And the point is that hedonism can explain why common sense says what it does. Certain things reliably damage our welfare, because they almost always bring misery in their wake; other things just as reliably improve our quality of life, because they are a source of enjoyment.

Hedonism can also explain why there are exceptions to these rules. Some people enjoy being humiliated or manipulated. For them, we must put these experiences on the positive side of the ledger. Others, such as certain masochists, delight in experiencing various kinds of physical pain. So pain *adds* to their quality of life, while diminishing it for the rest of us.

Recall that hedonism, as I understand it here, does not say that *all* pleasure enhances our quality of life—only enjoyment does that. Likewise for physical pain: usually, it lessens our well-being, because we don't enjoy it. But in unusual cases, when a person actually likes it, physical pain can improve that person's welfare.

Hedonism thus explains why it is so hard to come up with universal, iron-clad rules for improving our lives. Such rules hold only for the most part, because increasing our welfare is a matter of becoming happier, and some people find happiness in extremely unusual ways. Hedonism honors both the standard and the uncommon sources of happiness; no matter how you come by it, happiness (and only happiness) directly makes you better off.

Happiness Is What We Want for Our Loved Ones

I have two children, Max and Sophie. I love them very much. I have a very strong desire that they be happy, and an even stronger desire that their lives contain as little misery as possible. This makes perfect sense if hedonism is true.

That's because parents who deeply care for their children want what is best for them. I, like so many other parents, want my children to be happy. That shows that happiness is what is best for them. Right?

Not necessarily. Consider the words of Philippa Foot, a contemporary philosopher who rejects hedonism:

I recall a talk by a doctor who described a patient of his (who had perhaps had a prefrontal lobotomy) as “perfectly happy all day long picking up leaves.” This impressed me because I thought, “Well, most of us are not happy all day long doing the things we do,” and realized how strange it would be to think that the very kindest of fathers would arrange such an operation for his (perfectly normal) child.³

What Foot is suggesting here is that parents who really care about their children would want things for them *other than* their happiness. If happiness is of paramount importance, and if a lobotomized person experiences more happiness than the rest of us, then why shouldn’t a loving parent sign up her child for such an operation? But the thought is absurd. And the reason, apparently, is that happiness is not the only thing that improves the quality of life. In Foot’s example, parents quite reasonably give greater priority to their children’s ability to develop their talents, and to pursue worthwhile activities—even those that bring them less happiness.

I think that there is definitely something to Foot’s observation. But it is possible to make a common mistake when thinking about it. The error lies in assuming that the following is a surefire test for becoming better off:

(T) If someone knows you very well, loves you, and for your own sake wants you to have X, then X makes you better off.

Most parents know their children very well, love them, and, for their sake, want them to be happy. If (T) is correct, this shows that happiness makes them better off.

But (T) is not correct, because even the dearest friend or parent can be mistaken about what will increase another person’s welfare. Consider a father who loves his daughter and wants what is best for her. But he truly believes that a woman’s welfare is a matter of how well she serves her husband. Suppose that his daughter has married someone who is physically and emotionally abusive. Such a father might advise his daughter to remain with her abuser, *for her own good*. Or consider parents whose son has told them that he is gay. They are appalled. They may really love him, and want him, for his own sake, to marry a nice young woman. But marrying a woman is not going to make this man better off. The cares of those who love you are not always a reliable indicator of where your self-interest lies.

3. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 85.

Hedonism can explain why this test, (T), fails. If hedonism is true, then there is a different, and perfectly reliable, test of when well-being is improved:

(H) If something makes you happier, then it promotes your well-being; if something fails to make you happier, then it fails to promote your well-being.

The hedonist’s test will sometimes conflict with (T). Staying with an abusive husband will not promote a daughter’s happiness; marrying a woman will not promote a gay son’s happiness. Therefore (H) tells us that such actions will not improve their well-being. And that is correct. (T) gives us the wrong results in these cases. (H) gives us the right ones.

But there is a nagging suspicion that more needs to be said. Although (H) provides the right answers in these cases, it does seem to get things wrong in the specific case that Philippa Foot described. After all, we don’t want our children lobotomized, even if they’ll be happier as a result! That seems to show that happiness is not the be-all and end-all of a good life. Let’s now see whether that’s so.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between intrinsic value and instrumental value?
2. What is the difference between physical pleasure and attitudinal pleasure? Which kind of pleasure do hedonists claim is always intrinsically valuable? Why do you think that hedonists make this distinction, rather than claiming that all pleasure is intrinsically valuable?
3. In what sense does hedonism “give us a say” in what the good life looks like? Do you think that this is an attractive feature of hedonism? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. Can you think of any case in which experiencing pleasure fails to contribute to a person’s well-being? If so, consider what a hedonist might say in order to undermine such a case.
5. Imagine someone who chooses to sacrifice his or her own happiness in order to help others, and claims that this is the best sort of life to live. Would the existence of such a person be a problem for hedonism? Why or why not?
6. What is the point of Foot’s comments about lobotomies? How do you think a hedonist might respond to Foot’s challenge?
7. Given the arguments of this chapter, do you think hedonism is correct? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 2



Is Happiness All that Matters?

You probably already knew this, but just in case you didn't: no philosophical theory worth its salt is free of difficulties. As a result, you aren't going to get, in this chapter or any of the others, a decisive, knockdown argument for one theory or another. Brilliant minds have developed the theories we consider in this book. And equally brilliant minds have failed to climb on board.

So it should come as no surprise that hedonism, a perennial contender for "Best Theory of Human Welfare," should also have its critics. They have been busy. Here are the major concerns that they have identified.

The Paradox of Hedonism

"Mankind does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Hedonism had become entrenched in certain philosophical circles in mid-nineteenth century England, and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was never shy about poking fun at his philosophical contemporaries. He despised hedonism, but this quote does not, by itself, express a critique of the view. After all, Englishmen (and other hedonists!) might well reply that even if many people don't in fact strive for happiness, they *should* do so, and *would* do so if they knew what was good for them. If something always makes us better off, then it seems reasonable to try very hard to acquire it, doesn't it?

With happiness, however, this completely backfires—those who try really hard to make themselves happier almost never succeed. Philosophers call this the *paradox of hedonism*.

The paradox reminds me of an embarrassing poster I had hanging on my bedroom wall as a child. It showed a butterfly and, not far away, a man sitting in a meadow. The caption read: "Happiness is like a butterfly—the more you pursue it, the more it eludes you. Be still and let it come to you."

We can use this distressing vignette to develop an argument against hedonism. Let's call it the *Paradox of Hedonism Argument*:

1. If happiness is the only thing that directly makes us better off, then it is rational to single-mindedly pursue it.
2. It isn't rational to do that.
3. Therefore, happiness isn't the only thing that directly makes us better off.

This argument is valid.¹ Its logic is perfect: *if* both premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. But we also need to know whether both premises really are true. If they are, then hedonism is sunk.

I think the second premise is pretty plausible. The icky sentiment on my childhood poster is correct. Those who seek only happiness, and fixate on acquiring it, are bound to be disappointed. Aiming directly for happiness is not the best way to get it. You'd do far better to seek a partner you love and respect, to develop an exciting hobby, or to find a career you can be proud of. Doing any of these things is a much surer route to happiness. So the second premise looks good.

And the first premise also seems plausible. If happiness is really the only thing that is valuable in its own right, then you should go for it. But this premise is suspect, precisely because the direct pursuit of good things sometimes prevents us from getting them. Think of the professional golfer in the midst of a slump. She desperately wants to regain her swing. But the more she focuses on this, the harder it becomes. Or consider the immature student who wants more than anything to be well liked, and so tries, way too eagerly and very annoyingly, to be pals with his classmates. Such behavior is self-defeating. He'd be much better off trying less hard.

1. See the discussion of validity and logical reasoning in the Introduction, pp. 9–15.

The bottom line is that even if happiness is our greatest good, it may be irrational to aim for it directly. And if that is so, then premise 1 is false. As a result, the paradox we've just considered, while surprising, does not pose a serious threat to hedonism. It doesn't challenge the idea that happiness is the only thing of intrinsic value. It just tells us that aiming directly for happiness is not a smart way to get it.

Evil Pleasures

Some people take great delight in doing the most awful things. Think of supposed friends who tempt others into addiction, or a powerful boss who betrays a vulnerable employee. These tawdry people may really be enjoying themselves. But when such enjoyment comes at someone else's expense, it hardly seems a good thing, much less the best thing.

We can build another anti-hedonist argument around this point. Call it the *Argument from Evil Pleasures*:

1. If hedonism is true, then happiness that comes from evil deeds is as good as happiness that comes from kind and decent actions.
2. Happiness that comes from evil deeds is *not* as good as happiness that comes from kind and decent actions.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

This argument fails, and it's instructive to see why. There is a confusion contained within it, and it's one that is easy to fall prey to.

When we say that happiness that comes from one source is as good as happiness from any other source, we might mean that each is *morally equivalent* to the other. When we read premise 2 and nod our heads approvingly, this is probably what we have in mind.

But this is not what hedonists have in mind. They don't think that each episode of happiness is as morally good as every other. Rather, they think that the same amount of happiness, no matter its source, is *equally beneficial*. According to hedonism, happiness gained from evil deeds can improve our lives just as much as happiness that comes from virtue. In this sense, happiness derived from evil deeds *is* as good as happiness that comes from virtue—each can contribute to our well-being just as much as the other. Hedonists therefore reject premise 2.

And aren't they right to do so? Think about why the happiness of the wicked is so upsetting. Isn't it precisely because happiness benefits them, and we hate to see the wicked prosper? If happiness doesn't make us better

off, why is it so awful when the wicked enjoy the harms they cause? And for those who share my vengeful streak: Why is it gratifying to see the wicked suffer? Because misery always cuts into our well-being, and we think it right that the wicked pay for their crimes. Hedonism makes perfect sense of these feelings.

The Two Worlds

Within philosophical circles, one of the most famous objections to hedonism originated with W. D. Ross (1877–1971), a British philosopher whose ethical theory is discussed in chapter 16. Ross invites us to consider two worlds that contain identical amounts of happiness and misery. In one of these, the people are all virtuous; in the other, they are all **vicious**.² Hedonism tells us that these worlds are equally good. No one believes this.

Ross anticipates the hedonist's response: virtuous people are those who reliably make others happy, while vicious people tend to make others miserable. So the situation we are being asked to imagine is impossible. The virtuous world would contain a lot more happiness than the vicious one.

Ross will have none of this. There are nonhuman sources of happiness and misery, such as disease. So imagine, in the virtuous world, that its extra happiness is offset by greater misery resulting from disease. Still, the virtuous world is better than the vicious one.

Ross thinks that this thought experiment allows us to see that virtue is good in its own right, wholly apart from any happiness it brings about. Since hedonism rejects this, hedonism is mistaken.

We can turn Ross's objection into an argument. Call it the *Two Worlds Argument*:

1. If hedonism is true, then any two situations containing identical amounts of happiness and unhappiness are equally good.
2. Some such situations are not equally good; some are better than others.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

I think that Ross is right about premise 2. It is better that virtue, and not vice, be rewarded by happiness. Even if virtue is its own reward, it is

2. When philosophers talk like this, they don't mean that a person is cutthroat and bloodthirsty, but only that he has many vices. In this sense—the one used throughout this book—being vicious is the opposite of being virtuous.

better that it be rewarded by happiness as well. And if we have to choose, it is far better that good people be happy than that bad people enjoy themselves. So even if good and bad people are equally enjoying themselves, the situations may not be equally good.

The second premise, then, is actually pretty plausible. But hedonists can reject the first. Their view is not about what makes *a situation* or *a world* good, but rather about what makes *a life* good for the person who lives it. Hedonism, as it stands, doesn't tell us how to determine the value of a world. And so it is not committed to the view that two worlds containing equal amounts of happiness must be equally good.

Hedonism does not try to tell us about every way in which things can be good or bad. It tells us only about what directly makes us better off. So long as hedonists do not say that the only value is individual welfare, they can easily allow that such things as biodiversity, beautiful objects, and morally admirable actions add to the overall value of a world. Thus hedonists can (and should) reject the first premise of the Two Worlds Argument.

False Happiness

Imagine a woman who is happy in her marriage, partly because she trusts her husband and believes that he has been completely faithful. Suppose her belief is true. Now imagine another woman who is as happy as the first, and for the same reasons. But in this case, her belief is false—her husband has been cheating on her without her knowledge. It seems that the first woman's life is going better for her. And yet these two women are equally happy.

This story provides us with the basis of an *Argument from False Happiness*:

1. If hedonism is true, then our lives go well to the extent that we are happy.
2. It's not the case that our lives go well to the extent that we are happy; those whose happiness is based on false beliefs have worse lives than those whose happiness is based on true beliefs, even if both lives are equally happy.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

This is in one way like the Argument from Evil Pleasures, since both claim that the *source* of happiness determines how beneficial that happiness is.

Critics say that if happiness comes from immoral action, or false belief, then it makes us less well-off than otherwise.

Hedonists deny this. Happiness is happiness, regardless of its source. So hedonists must reject the second premise.

But it is harder to do so here, when it comes to false beliefs. The late Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick (1938–2002) tried to show this, in a thought experiment involving an “experience machine.”³ Imagine that there is an amazing virtual reality machine that lets you simulate any experience you like. Suppose you program it for a lifetime of the very best experiences. Once you plug in, you think that you are in the real world, and have no memory of life outside the machine. Your entire life from then on is lived in the machine, and you are as happy as can be, believing yourself to be doing all of the things you truly enjoy.

Compare this with a case in which someone actually *does* the things and enjoys the experiences that the plugged-in person only dreams of. It seems clear that the second life—the real one—is more desirable. Yet both lives contain the same amount of happiness.

This example is meant to show that happiness is not the sole element of well-being. A good life is one that is happy, yes, but not only that. Our happiness must be based in reality. A pleasant life of illusion is less good for you than an equally pleasant life based on real achievement and true beliefs.

The Importance of Autonomy

One of the other things we want from life is to make our own choices about it. We resent it when other people manipulate us, even if they mean well. Sometimes we even prefer the definite prospect of sadness to a more pleasant life that is forced upon us without our consent. In short, we want **autonomy**—the power to guide our life through our own free choices—even if it sometimes costs us our happiness.

Not only do we want autonomy, but we also think that a life without it cannot be fully good. Consider the inhabitants of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Huxley created a fictional society in which war, poverty,

3. The example, and Nozick's discussion of it, can be found in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45.

and emotional distress have all disappeared. How have such things been achieved? The rulers have introduced a pacifying drug, called *soma*, which all citizens must take. Books and shows that may upset people have been banned. Close relationships are forbidden, so as to prevent the heartache that comes from the loss of a friendship or a loved one. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? Not in this society.

The citizens of this brave new world have become complacent animals, obedient to the political masters who are intent on manipulating them. Though this society might well be a happier one than ours, it seems clear that something valuable is missing. That something is autonomy.

We don't need to seek out imaginary tales to appreciate the importance of autonomy to a good life. When we go to the doctor's office, we don't want to be lied to—even if we would be happier were we deceived. Many dying patients turn down the offer of pain medication, because it can interfere with their ability to make rational decisions. Such patients prefer to face their end in a clear-eyed way, even if it means that they are more miserable as a result.

Autonomous choices don't always lead to happiness. Things go wrong. We make free choices that lead to damaged relationships, financial disaster, missed opportunities. Still, we need only imagine a life without autonomy to see what a tragedy it would be. Read the reports of Soviet psychiatrists who systematically drugged and tortured critics of the regime.⁴ Many of these critics went insane; others were reduced to bowing and scraping before their white-coated masters.

These doctors caused appalling unhappiness. But that is not the only harm they did to their victims, and in some cases it is not the worst of the damage done. Even if drugs had kept the dissidents happy, the actions of these doctors would still have been a horrendous crime, because of the way in which they tried to crush the independence of their victims.

A searing picture of how the loss of autonomy undermines well-being can be found at the conclusion of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Its hero, R. P. McMurphy, is a free spirit with contempt for rules and for the authorities who enforce them. McMurphy is committed to a mental institution and slowly broken, eventually being forced to submit

4. A couple of accessible places to start are Harvey Fireside, *Soviet Psychoprisons* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), and Peter Reddaway and Sidney Bloch, *Soviet Psychiatric Abuse: The Shadow over World Psychiatry* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984).

to a lobotomy that leaves him an empty shell. (Recall Foot's anecdote of the previous chapter.) That this is all supposedly done for his own good only makes the tragedy greater. At the end, he may be happier, having at this point only a childlike capacity to understand the world. But it hardly seems that he is better off as a result. And the explanation is simple: preserving our autonomy is vitally important, even if it doesn't always make us happier.

It's a good thing to be able to exercise autonomous choice, and this explains what is objectionable about **paternalism**—someone's limiting your liberty against your will, but for your own good. A society of arranged marriages, forced career choices, anti-gambling legislation, and motorcycle helmet laws might lead to greater happiness. In some cases, these restrictions might really be justified. And yet even so, there is something to regret. We lose the opportunity to take chances, to risk our happiness, to exercise real freedom. Manipulation and paternalism, even when done in a way that gains us happiness, are still objectionable to some extent. And that is because they sacrifice something of intrinsic value: autonomy. Happiness is not the only thing that is important in its own right. Autonomy is, too.

Here we have the makings of another argument against hedonism. Call this the *Argument from Autonomy*:

1. If hedonism is true, then autonomy contributes to a good life only insofar as it makes us happy.
2. Autonomy sometimes directly contributes to a good life, even when it fails to make us happy.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

The first premise is clearly true. The central claim of hedonism is that happiness is the only thing, in itself, that makes us better off. All other things (e.g., autonomy, virtue, true knowledge) improve our lives only to the extent that they make us happier.

So everything hinges on the second premise. It seems plausible. When we consider the lives of those who have been deprived of their autonomy, we see the absence of a great value, something that, by itself, appears to make a life a better one. Given a choice between drug-induced contentment and plotting our own risky course through life, we prefer the latter path. We want our lives to be authentic, to reflect our own values, rather than those imposed on us from the outside—even if we are not always happier as a result. Hedonism cannot account for that.

Life's Trajectory

If hedonism is true, then those whose lives contain the same amount of happiness and unhappiness must be equally well-off. But this seems false.

Consider the sad case of Delmore Schwartz, a brilliant writer and conversationalist, who served as the basis of the title character in Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift*. Schwartz earned many awards early in his career, and taught at Princeton and Harvard for several years. But his last decade was spent in increasing frustration and isolation. Addicted to alcohol and drugs, and experiencing increasingly severe paranoia and mental illness, he died alone in a seedy hotel in Times Square, the promise of his early years left unfulfilled.

It is impossible to say just how much happiness and sadness filled Schwartz's life. But imagine a person whose early life was all heartache and hardship—Jane Eyre or Oliver Twist, for instance, or, from real life, perhaps someone like Mary Karr, whose terrific memoir, *The Liars' Club*, portrays a childhood about as miserable as can be. In such lives, the suffering eventually yields to happiness, and many years of satisfaction and pleasure.

When we compare lives with such different trajectories, it is hard to resist the thought that a life that begins badly but continually improves is better than a life that starts out with a bang and goes slowly, steadily downhill—even if there is no difference in the total amounts of happiness contained in each life. We can fashion this thought into the *Trajectory Argument*:

1. If hedonism is true, then the overall quality of a life depends entirely on the amount of happiness and unhappiness it contains.
2. The overall quality of life depends on at least one other factor: whether one's life reflects an "upward" or "downward" trajectory.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

To make this criticism stick, we need to be sure that we are not sneaking in extra happiness on the part of the fortunate person whose life ends better than it began. The total happiness and unhappiness within the lives being compared must be the same. The only difference must be in the timing of the happiness and misery. If we take care to respect this requirement, I think we still feel that equal amounts of happiness and misery may not yield lives of equal well-being. If that is so, then something other than happiness and misery determines how good a life is. In this case, it is not

autonomy, but rather the "shape" of a life. Continual improvement makes for a better life than one that has long been sliding downhill, even if both lives contain the same amounts of happiness and misery.

Unhappiness as a Symptom of Harm

Consider an Olympic marathon runner who is poised to bring home gold. She has trained for years for this event. Suppose that she pulls a hamstring the day before the race, and is unable to compete. All that work, to no end. She's devastated.

Why does this reaction make sense? It seems well explained if we assume that the development of our talents is important in its own right. This athlete sees that something terrible has happened, and *that is why* she is unhappy. What's most regrettable in her case isn't her unhappiness. It's the destruction of her talents. (After all, would everything be fine if someone slipped her a soma pill?)

When is it rational to feel miserable about how your life is going? Simple: when something really bad happens to you. On the face of it, this can include a huge number of things—losing a leg in a car accident, being jilted by someone you love, missing the opportunity of a lifetime, etc. Each of these rightly causes great sadness. If hedonism is correct, however, this short list, and the much longer one we could undoubtedly put together, are basically mistaken, for there is only one truly bad thing that can happen to you, and that is to experience sadness. Things can harm you only if they cause you to be unhappy.

If hedonism is true, then as long as we remain alive and greet each day happily, our lives cannot go badly. A stiff upper lip—or a soma pill, or genuine indifference—is enough to protect against harm.

So, for those who want to be immune from harm, here is the recipe. They must become either emotionally blank or permanently upbeat. Those who are never sad are never harmed. Their talents might go to waste; their limbs might atrophy; their senses deaden, friendships break, curiosity dim—if hedonism is correct, none of this will undermine their well-being, so long as they are not saddened by it.

Perhaps unhappiness always makes us worse off. But other things might do so as well. Consider how reasonable it is to be saddened, say, at a failed chance at love, or at the death of a dear friend. Such things diminish our happiness. But they do so only because our happiness, in these and so many other cases, depends on our appreciating what has value in

its own right. If loving relationships didn't by themselves make us better off, it wouldn't be so clear that their loss is our loss. We mourn because we have been deprived of someone whose presence has directly made our lives richer.

Hedonism runs into trouble when trying to account for this. Here is an argument that shows how. Call it the *Argument from Multiple Harms*:

1. If hedonism is true, then you can be harmed by something only because it saddens you.
2. You can be harmed in other ways.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.

The first premise is clearly true. And the second also seems plausible. Tragedies don't disappear just because their victims are reconciled to them. The unhappiness we experience is bad for us. But it can also be a *symptom* of the loss of something that, all by itself, matters to our well-being. Our misery in such situations is evidence that things other than happiness can directly make a difference to our well-being. If that is so, then hedonism is mistaken.

Conclusion

Hedonism has always had its fans. And, as we have seen, there are many good reasons for its popularity. It explains why there are many paths to a good life. It strikes a balance between a view that imposes just one blueprint of a good life and a view that allows anything to be valuable so long as you think it is. It provides a ready explanation for why misery so clearly damages a life and why happiness so clearly improves it. Hedonism offers a natural stopping point for explaining what is intrinsically valuable. It accounts for why the rules of a good life allow for exceptions. And happiness is what we want for our loved ones—what better evidence that happiness truly contributes to a good life?

And yet hedonism is not problem-free. I think that hedonists have good replies to the paradox of hedonism, the worry about evil pleasures, and Ross's Two Worlds objections. But things become trickier when we consider the value of a happiness that is based on false beliefs. Further, hedonists cannot allow for the intrinsic value of autonomy. They can't make sense of the idea that, of two lives containing the same amount of happiness, the one that continually shows improvement is better than the one that has gone steadily downhill. Hedonists also fail to appreciate that

unhappiness is often a symptom that something intrinsically valuable—something other than happiness—has been lost.

Perhaps happiness is not, after all, the key to our well-being. Let's now consider an alternative approach—one that tells us that getting what you want is the measure of a good life.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the paradox of hedonism? Do you think the paradox gives us good reason to reject hedonism? Why or why not?
2. If you had a chance to get into the "experience machine" for the rest of your life, would you do it? Why might the idea of the experience machine pose a challenge for hedonism?
3. What are "evil pleasures" and why do they seem to be a problem for hedonism?
4. What is autonomy? Can hedonism account for the value of autonomy? Defend your answer.
5. What is false happiness? Construct a case of your own that provides an example of such happiness, and then assess its impact on the plausibility of hedonism.
6. What does it mean to talk about the "shape of a life"? Are some lives better than others simply in virtue of their "shape"?
7. Of all of the objections to hedonism presented here, which do you think is the strongest? Do you think that the hedonist has a convincing reply? Why or why not?