

Hedonism

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1 Three views about the importance of pleasure and pain

Bentham says

‘Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.’

In this passage Bentham seems to endorse three claims. The first is a claim about what in the world is good and bad:

Hedonism

Pleasure is the only basic good, and pain is the only basic bad. Other things are only good or bad derivatively, depending on whether they tend to bring about pleasure or pain.

Why might one hold this view? An intuitive example: someone who has lots of money but it brings him or her no pleasure.

The second is a claim about what we ought to do:

Utilitarianism

We should always perform the action which will lead to the most pleasure and the least pain.

Utilitarianism is the combination of Hedonism with the following claim:

Maximizing consequentialism

We should always perform the action which will lead to the most goodness and the least badness.

Notice that you could be a hedonist without being a consequentialist, so you could be a hedonist without being a utilitarian.

The last claim that Bentham endorses is not a claim about what we should do, but rather a claim about how we in fact do act:

Hedonistic psychological egoism

People always act to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their own pain.

2 Some intuitive counterexamples to utilitarianism and egoism

Our main focus is going to be on hedonism. But it is worth pointing out that, while both may seem initially plausible, there are intuitive counterexamples to both utilitarianism and hedonistic egoism.

Apparent counterexamples to utilitarianism: (1) cases involving rights violation (the surgeon, trolley cases) and (2) cases involving unequal distribution (ordinary inequality, the utility monster).

Apparent counterexamples to egoism: heroic self-sacrifice and ordinary altruism.

3 The experience machine

Nozick designs his example of the experience machine to show that egoism is false. To think about this example it is worth focusing on a thesis which is plausibly a consequence of hedonism:

Hedonism about well-being

One's life is good or bad in proportion to the amount of pleasure or pain it contains.

When we ask about well-being, we are asking what makes a good life. The hedonist gives a straightforward answer.

If this answer is correct, then one has a better life in the experience machine than outside it. Is this true? Some questions to ask yourself:

- Would you plug into the experience machine? Should you?
- Would you plug your child into the experience machine? Should you?
- Would you plug someone into the experience machine who begged you not to? Should you?

Suppose one answers ‘no’ to one or more of these questions. Does this show that hedonism about well-being is false?

If hedonism about well-being is false, what might determine how well one’s life goes? Two possible answers: (i) the extent to which one’s desires are satisfied, (ii) some ‘objective list’ of goods.

4 Moore on objective value

G.E. Moore gives a different kind of argument against hedonism:

‘Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire — mountains, rivers, the sea; trees, and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us, for whatever reason, and the whole, as far as may be, without one redeeming feature. Such a pair of worlds we are entitled to compare . . . The only thing we are not entitled to imagine is that any human being ever has or ever, by any possibility, can, live in either, can ever see and enjoy the beauty of the one or hate the foulness of the other. Well, even so, supposing them quite apart from any possible contemplation by human beings; still, is it irrational to hold that it is better that the beautiful world should exist than the one which is ugly? Would it not be well, in any case, to do what we could to produce it rather than the other? Certainly I cannot help thinking that it would; and I hope that some may agree with me in this extreme instance.’

Is Moore right that one of these worlds is better than the other? What should the hedonist say about this case?