

What Makes Us Happy, and Can We Ever be Happy? An Attempt at Vindicating Hedonism

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ABSTRACT

Happiness. Often construed as the purpose of life is a much-debated topic. With different theories emerging from different parts of the world as early as 3000 years ago, cultivating happiness is an old-age puzzling question. However, all these theories and debates can be boiled down to certain branches, one of which is hedonism about happiness. Though most people would refer to it as a dying theory, much of its criticisms, I believe, can be vindicated.

Introduction

To argue about being happy, one must be able to define happiness. For centuries the definition of happiness has been argued about. Some define it as "net positive balance of intrinsic occurrent attitudinal pleasure" (Feldman, 2010, p. 137), while others as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being" (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 52). Despite the jungle of competing theories growing under the shade of happiness, there are two schools of thought that receive significant attention in their definitions of happiness. The first one perceives happiness as synonymous with a fulfilling or good life, or well-being, often known as prudential happiness. The other group boils down happiness to merely favorable psychological states of mind, often known as psychological happiness. The latter will not be of much concern in this paper since I will focus on prudential happiness. In particular, I will be focusing on one proposed account of prudential happiness: hedonism about prudential happiness.

Throughout this paper, I will seek to vindicate hedonism about prudential happiness by analyzing three seemingly significant problems for the theory. First, I will propose a modification to hedonism's prevailing formulation, clearing it of the problem of the necessity of pain. I will then consider the problem of Haydn and Oyster, questioning Mill's solution to a synonymous problem, and proposing my own solution to the same. Finally, I'll outline the Experience Machine problem and explain Baber's solution to the problem. In doing so, I will point out that Baber's solution misses the mark and that the experience machine remains a problem for hedonism about happiness. As such, this paper can be seen as offering a partial vindication of hedonism.

Happiness

The concept of happiness has been long argued about not only by philosophers but also psychologists. We can mean any number of things by happiness. However, the layman's popular use of the term suggests it is nothing more than a profound state of mind. It is referred to as a short-lived state of a person, frequently a feeling of contentment, something like "I'm happy, I got an A on the test" or "I'm happy to have won this game." In somewhat more heartfelt moments, it might be referred to as a condition of the soul or spirit. We might say a person is happy when we think he is leading a good life; on other occasions, we may use happiness merely to describe his mood.

In this labyrinth, we can broadly categorize philosophical discussions about happiness by defining happiness as either: (1) consisting in a good/fulfilling life, often called prudential happiness; or (2) as having specific favorable psychological properties or states of mind, often called psychological happiness. Our focus, in this paper, will be on

prudential happiness. On this view, saying someone is happy is essentially the same as saying he had a good life or a life with a high level of welfare or prudential value.

Theories of prudential happiness are concerned with happiness as encompassing the whole life; we could say that a person was having a happy life even if that person was in fact in pain at that moment.

Even once we conceive of happiness as living a good life, there are piles of debates over what is required for a good life. Our center of interest in this heap of debates will be on hedonism, or more precisely, hedonism about happiness, popularly known as prudential hedonism.

Hedonism

Hedonism comes long back from ancient times, with its Greek root from the word 'hedone,' translating to pleasure. Hedonism has been a center of debate for a long time, with philosophers like Aristippus, Democritus, and Epicurus defending it from the attacks and criticisms of Plato, amongst others.

As construed by hedonists, happiness reduces completely to a subject's balance of pleasure over displeasure: it is merely the condition of having a favorable balance of pleasure over displeasure. Of course, there are many ways in which one might want to spell this out exactly. However, on its most naïve conception, hedonism asks for an abundance of pleasure and the complete absence of pain for one to lead a good life.

Hedonists consider both physical and mental events in terms of pleasure and pain. Meaning, getting a perfect score on the SAT and dreaming of getting a perfect score on SAT are both regarded as pleasurable, while reading a tragedy and suffering from a tragedy itself are both considered painful.¹ With these massive sets of elements included, hedonism as a theory about what makes a good life might sound appealing.

Naive Hedonism

Hedonism about happiness, as construed as the claim that the best life is one in which we attain a maximum of pleasure and avoid pain, is often called naive hedonism. It has been attacked by a lot of philosophers, the Epicurean school of thought being a prominent attacker. However, this section is not about epicurean claims.

To demonstrate the problem with happiness hedonism, let's look at Bentham's definition, according to which the more pleasantness one can jam into one's existence, the better, and the more pain one faces, the worse. (Bentham, 1780/1780)

I, contrary to Bentham, argue that pleasure cannot exist without pain, and without pleasure cannot exist happiness. Hence, pain is as essential as pleasure in creating happiness, or in turn, a good life. Consider this scenario that I like to call Harshad's Realization:

Harshad, a young college student, is walking through his campus for the one last time before his graduation ceremony. As he strolls, taking in the beauty, he feels the moist air caressing his cheeks, the light from the warm sun tingling inside, and the thumping of students running late to their classes. As he is immersed in the moment, suddenly heavy rainfall starts, and he runs to find shelter under the nearby shed. While sitting there, half wet, it strikes him.

Would he have ever been able to feel the wetting water on his skin if he hadn't felt how his skin felt while dry? Would he have been able to feel the moist air through his cheeks if he hadn't felt the dry wind? Would

¹ While the distinction between the nature of pain and pleasure is not quite rigid in happiness hedonism, in all likelihood the amount of pain experienced from an actual tragedy will be higher than merely reading about one.

he have been able to sense the thumping of running students if he hadn't felt what it was like without thumping? Would he ever have been able to feel the pleasure of a nice comfy couch if he hadn't felt the pain of the rusty shelter bench?

Through a collection of these small acts around him, Harshad realizes the dependency of the opposites on each other, pain and pleasure included. It comes to him that for him to be able to feel pleasure, he must have experienced pain.

This thought experiment stands against the hedonists who hold that pleasure is the only intrinsic good that counts towards a person's well-being. It demonstrates that long before it was argued by Mill, Bentham, Democritus, and other pioneers, hedonism was somewhat corrupted at its core. It makes a strong case that the sheer absence of pain doesn't mean an abundance of pleasure, but rather the absence of pleasure too. It shows that pleasure is of no use without pain and alone cannot possibly bring happiness to anyone.

As pleasure can only be experienced when accompanied by pain, and alone is no use for one wouldn't be able to identify it as pleasure, a more appropriate definition for prudential hedonism would be: happiness consists in the appropriate mix of pain and pleasure. There must be a threshold amount of pain in one's life to be able to experience pleasure. In this appropriate mix, pleasure and pain are considered equally important, contrary to the previous definitions.

While redefining prudential hedonism, it may be worth noting that hedonists understand that pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain in the short term is not the best way to achieve the desired long-term balance of pleasure over pain. Hence, they avoid the experiential avoidance argument by the Epicurean school of thought.²

Oyster/Swine Problem

Hedonists, despite wrongly formulating happiness hedonism, have defended it for a long time. Adding to his definition of prudential hedonism, Jeremy Bentham thought that all pleasures were of equal value; they only varied in terms of intensity and duration (Bentham, 1780/1780).

Bentham spent a lot of time working on the Felicific calculus, also known as hedonic calculus. He believed through his hedonic calculus that he could measure the amount of pleasure derived from an act by using variables such as:

Intensity: how intense is the pleasure?

Duration: how long will the pleasure last?

Certainty or uncertainty: how likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?

Propinquity or remoteness: how soon will the pleasure occur?

Fecundity: the probability that sensations of the same kind will follow the action.

Purity: the probability that sensations of the opposite kind will not follow it.

Extent: how many people will be affected?

² One of the most prominent arguments against Hedonism by Epicureans is that Hedonism is self-defeating, since it treats gathering pleasure and the avoiding of pain as the goal of life.

Though, it should be noted that for a person, only intensity and duration have inherent worth. Purity, fecundity, certainty, and propinquity are of secondary importance as means of working out of expected intensity and duration of pleasures from actions.

Bentham's work on hedonic calculus, contrary to his beliefs, was highly criticized. He was heavily criticized for reducing all human experience to simple pleasures. It was criticized upon the feeling that there isn't a single type of pleasure running through all of the diverse activities, such as skydiving, reading tragedy, or sex. One of these critics was a Victorian philosopher, Thomas Carlye, who was agitated by Bentham's quantitative view and definition, in particular, that all pleasures were of equal value. Thomas Carlye thought that this was the philosophy of swine.

Carlye attacked hedonism for placing all pleasures on a par, whether they be the lowest animal pleasures of eating or the highest of artistic appreciation. This meant that humans had no higher purpose in life than the mere pursuit of pleasure. Carlye argued that if pleasure is the only intrinsic good, then the life of a well-kept pig would be as good as, if not better, than the life of your average human. So everyone should prefer to be a pig, but we don't prefer that; we all prefer to be humans.

A somewhat similar argument was made centuries earlier by Aristotle while defending his concept of eudaimonia. He argued that those who believed a good life to be limited by wealth and pleasure were living life basically no better than a dog. It may also be worthwhile to note that eudaimonic happiness is also constructed around contributing to well-being.

To make the problem clearer, consider the following example from Roger Crisp. Imagine that you are a soul in heaven ready to be assigned a life. When it's your turn, you are offered the option of choosing between two lives: that of musician Joseph Haydn or that of an oyster. In addition to creating beautiful music and influencing the formation of the symphony, Haydn will achieve fame and distinction during his lifetime, be joyful and popular, travel, and love field sports. In contrast, the Oyster would have a considerably less interesting life, enjoying only moderate sensory pleasure (Crisp, 1997: 24).

Using Haydn and the Oyster, Crisp argues that whether a life was happy or not, cannot be solely evaluated on a quantitative basis. Crisp does so by showing that even though the Oyster (living until eternity) will theoretically surpass a human's pleasure, most people would still choose the human's life. Here, the main insight against prudential hedonism is that not all pleasures contribute equally to happiness, and sometimes certain pleasures are of less value than others.

Through his work on utilitarianism, Mill replied to the swine problem, in particular, by saying that humans are capable of other pleasures than swine. Prior to the swine problem, Mill also thought of happiness as defined as pleasure and the avoidance of pain and that their intensity and duration could measure each. But to respond to this criticism, he introduced another dimension to measuring pleasure and pain: quality. Mill argued that pleasure can be yet divided into two categories: Higher Pleasures and Lower Pleasures, writing that "some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others" (Stuart Mill, 1861: 11). Mill, with this, departed from the simple 'quantity of pleasure' view and developed a qualitative view of happiness.

Mill further explained that lower pleasures are bodily, the ones that we share with other animals, such as fulfilling appetites or having sex. Higher pleasures are concerned with the mind, unique to humans, such as aesthetic appreciation. Adding to his response, Mill said that a small sum of higher pleasure would be worth more than a bigger sum of a lower pleasure. He further explained that a higher pleasure is the one that is preferred over some other pleasure, even if some discomfort accompanies it. Finally, according to Mill, you're qualified to choose which of two pleasures is the higher one only if you've experienced both. In this scenario, we have assumed oysters as inferior beings capable of only lower pleasures and human beings as superior beings capable of experiencing both.

The problem is, when thinking about the Swine problem, Mill responded by introducing a qualitative aspect to the problem, concluding that a human's life would be better than that of an oyster simply because it cannot experience higher pleasures. Contrary to Mill, I believe that to think that an animal's life will not be pleasurable because it experiences only 'lower pleasure' is simply absurd. Who is to say that I wouldn't choose the life of an oyster, swine, or dog over that of a human.

Furthermore, as defined by Mill, only a person who has experienced both pleasures can distinguish between them. In this case, Mill's argument is vulnerable to speciesism. We cannot compare and categorize the pleasures of these two species as higher and lower since doing so requires having experienced both, which is not possible. So, on his own grounds, Mill fails to provide us with reason to believe that the experiences of swine are lesser than ours. For Mill, to simply assume so without any backing scientific data is nothing but narcissistic. As such, Mill has not convincingly avoided the problem of swine or Haydn and the Oyster.

Moving forward, I propose my own solution to both these problems, based on my theory that pleasure, over time, diminishes in its contribution to well-being because of the limited number of acts or experiences it is derived from. Or, more precisely, experiences diminish in their contribution to pleasure. Let's look at this in respect to Crisp's conclusion to the problem of Oyster and Haydn. Crisp concludes that we would choose less pleasurable human life over that of Oyster's life with unlimited pleasure. According to my theory of diminishing value of pleasures, I believe that human life would be more pleasurable, and that is why we choose it. This is because, despite the mass of experiences the Oyster might have from their many years alive, not all of these contribute to producing pleasure.

Consider this scenario that I like to call 'Harshad's Birthday.'

On his birthday, Harshad, a young college student, decides to give all his friends a treat and takes them to a place that supposedly makes the best pizza in the world. Excited, he, along with his friends, decides not to eat anything and save his appetite for dinner. When they all arrive at the place, starving, and eat the first slice, they are filled with extreme pleasure and feel that it is the best pizza in the world. As they all keep on eating, they slowly start to get less pleasure from each subsequent slice. After eating seven of them, Harshad doesn't feel like eating anymore, but remembering the Oyster example, he becomes greedy and keeps on eating for 'pleasure.' After the twelfth slice, he feels nauseated. He then ends up vomiting after the thirteenth slice.

This scenario above is a classic example of the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility. As consumption units of a commodity, in this case, pizza slice, increases, the marginal utility derived from each additional unit declines and sometimes even goes on to become negative.

Now, compare the pizza slice to experience or time alive and hunger satisfied as the pleasure. After a point, the continuous units of experience in the Oyster's life will, instead of producing pleasure, thereby contributing positively to a good life for the hedonist, turn the ropes and go on declining after a certain equilibrium/threshold.³ Going long enough, an eternity, in this case, the declining units of pleasure would lead to the very opposite of a good life. In Oyster's case, experiences would contribute to pleasure in a diminishing manner, making a human's life, in an overall sense, more pleasurable than the Oyster's life. As such, hedonism will come to the intuitively correct verdict that the human's life is not less good or less happy than the Oyster's.

Also, it might be worth noting that it is because of the pleasure derived from a single act/commodity that it goes on diminishing. The gist of the above scenario is to demonstrate that pleasure doesn't keep on accumulating forever if experienced from the same set of acts or experiences. I claim that it is the first experience of an act that gives you the most pleasure. The following repetitive acts tend not to give you the same amount of pleasure. Take, for example, skydiving. When skydiving for the first time, your adrenaline-filled body would find it very much pleasurable, but when you do it for the fifth time, you won't feel the same pleasure you did the first time. After skydiving for a hundred times, you might even start to feel disgusted, taking into play the theory of diminishing value of experiences.

³ Despite varied views, there is a default stance of hedonists on how to measure pain and pleasure. They regard one unit of pleasure (Hedon) as comparable to one pain unit (Dolor) but opposite in value. Though, several Hedonistic have argued that a unit decrease in pain should be favored over a unit increase in pleasure.

It's the different types of experiences that count, and the longer you live, the more you run out of these 'new' experiences that give you the most pleasure. After a certain point, there comes a time when the flow reverses, and having experienced all these 'pleasurable acts,' they start to contribute negatively towards a good life.

It must be noted that my response to the problem of swine, or the oyster problem, has some limitations. Principally, I am assuming that any species can have only a limited number of experiences in its lifetime and that the way other species – such as swine or oysters – get pleasure from experiences is similar to that of a human, in that they get less pleasure from the repeated experiences found in a very long life, for example. However, it is possible that other species derive pleasure from experiences in a very different manner to humans. As such, my theory would fail to explain why an oyster's life is not better or happier than a human's. This is a question that needs to be left to science to decide.

The Experience Machine

Taking into consideration the lengthy discussions above, it leaves us open to question, "is pleasure the only contributor to happiness?". Contemporary philosopher Robert Nozick proposes the third and final problem for hedonisms: the Experience Machine (Nozick, 1974). Through his experience machine, thought experiment, Nozick asks us to imagine that there is a machine that we could plug into that would stimulate your brain to make you think that you're living the painless and abundant pleasure kind of life venerated by the hedonist. When you're in the machine, you would think that it's the real world, but actually, it's a virtual-reality matrix situation. You forget while you're in there that you decided to live inside the machine. Imagine you could have a better pain to pleasure ratio from your virtual life than you ever could from your real one. Would you plugin? Would the life inside the experience machine be good? If you think that it wouldn't be a good life inside the experience machine, then maybe you would agree with Nozick's conclusion that there's more to the good life or happy life than just pleasure. In a nutshell, Nozick illustrates that we humans would not choose a life of ultimate pleasure – seemingly contra hedonism.

The experience machine has often been taken to be a fatal blow to hedonism. However, recently Harriet Baber has attempted to overcome Nozick's criticism. She believes that "...the thought experiment cannot either confirm or disconfirm hedonism or any other philosophical account of prudential value" (Barber, 2008).

According to Baber, Nozick's argument is founded on intuitions about what we would do or wish in this circumstance. In particular, she claims that the argument against hedonism that Nozick makes with the experience machine looks like the following:

1. You would not choose/desire to enter the experience machine
2. The best life is one you chose/desire
3. Therefore, the life of the experience machine is not the best

In this case, (2) presumes the truth of a competing theory of prudential happiness, namely desire-satisfaction. If Nozick's argument against hedonism involves assuming that a theory that contradicts hedonism is true, then it assumes its conclusion. Hence, it cannot be used to prove that hedonism is false. If this was Nozick's argument, Baber's criticism of the experience machine would be correct, but that simply isn't the case. Indeed, Nozick recognizes that such an interpretation of his work is possible and says:

"Notice that I am not saying simply that since we desire connection to actuality, the experience machine is defective because it does not give us whatever we desire...for that would make "getting whatever you desire" the primary standard. Rather, I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is why we desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn't give us that." (Nozick, 1989: 106).

Nozick isn't claiming (1). Nozick's theory appears to be based on an evaluation about the life in the experience, not on whether we would desire the life in the experience machine. When asked to evaluate the life in the machine, he feels that most people would not consider it to be the ideal existence. It's based on intuition, not on the desire. Nozick's argument doesn't rely on our judgments about what sort of life we'd like, want, desire to choose, but rather simply a judgment about what sort of life is a good one.

This means that, for now, we can defend Nozick's experience machine thought experiment from Baber's criticisms. As such, hedonism about happiness still faces a pressing problem, despite the refinements to the theory presented earlier in this paper. Therefore, I can only offer a partial vindication and highlight that attention needs to be paid to the experience machine.

Conclusion

In this paper, I believe I have attempted to vindicate hedonism about happiness. First, I have demonstrated that to be plausible, hedonism about happiness must be modified to overcome the necessity of pain. Moving forward, I have demonstrated that hedonism about happiness could be saved from two major pressing objections: The Oyster Problem and the Experience Machine. I have argued that we can reject the claim that an oyster or swine's life would be better than a human's by, first, rejecting Mill's two-dimensional approach and accepting the theory of diminishing value of pleasures. Nonetheless, I have also demonstrated that Nozick's experience machine, for now, is a pressing problem for hedonism about happiness, despite recent attempts to overcome it from Harriet Baber.

Diluting all of these theories, arguments, and solutions, I believe that there isn't a clear answer to the question of whether we can be happy. However, it is quite clear that pleasure alone cannot make us happy unless appropriately combined with pain. It is based on the fact that the abundance of anything undermines its value, to the point, it isn't even worth it anymore. While it is true that we can be happy, the formula translating infinite pleasure to infinite happiness isn't.

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