Hedonism and Other Theories of the Good/Prudential Value

We believe that in ordinary circumstances one is better off being alive than dead, healthy than sick, wealthier than poorer, more knowledgeable than more ignorant, and free than coerced. A “theory of the good” attempts to explain what it is about life, health, wealth, knowledge, freedom, and other goods that makes them valuable. We’re tacitly relying on some such theory whenever we make judgments about what is good for/bad for people, what is harmful/beneficial, what is/isn’t in a person’s self-interest, and what a “prudent” person would choose.

Hedonism is the theory of the good that holds that pleasant mental states alone have intrinsic prudential value. If something like health has value, then it valuable only as a means to getting pleasure or avoiding painful/unpleasant mental states; it is instrumentally, not intrincally, valuable.

According to classical hedonism, we can assign a positive cardinal value to any pleasant mental state (e.g. excitement) and a negative cardinal value to any unpleasant mental state (e.g. boredom). The more intense and/or the longer lasting a pleasure or pain is, the larger the positive or negative cardinal value assigned to it. These values can then be summed. Suppose that if I drink two bottles of wine now, I get 20 units of positive value (a couple of hours of mirth and merriment with friends) followed by 30 units of negative value (I get sick to my stomach, experience nausea, and then a hangover that lasts several hours). In that case the total hedonic value of getting drunk on the two bottles of wine is -10. If there’s anything else I could have done that would have produced a hedonic value greater than -10, then I would have been better off doing it instead, according to hedonism.

If things like freedom and health have a positive hedonic value for just about everyone, then they are goods for everyone. But there are some things that have a positive hedonic value for some people and a negative hedonic value for others. If you find raw oysters delicious while I’m repulsed by the mere thought of them, then they are good for you (assuming they’re not unhealthful) but bad for me.

Let’s call the pleasures that people derive from the stimulation of their sensory organs through eating, having sex, drinking, massages, sitting in spas, etc., “carnal” pleasures. The pleasures that people derive from activities that require imagination, judgment, or any use of their “higher” faculties—such as solving crossword puzzles, playing checkers, or even watching soap operas on TV—are “cerebral” pleasures. The popular understanding of “hedonism” is that it tells us to devote our lives to the pursuit of carnal pleasures. But most of the philosophers who defended hedonism as the correct theory of the good (e.g. Epicurus in ancient Greece, Jeremy Bentham in 19th century England) rejected such a view. Most of them thought that a life devoted to the pursuit of “low grade” carnal pleasures is likely to have a lower hedonic value than one devoted to the pursuit of “high grade” cerebral ones.
Hedonism implies that life *per se* is *not* intrinsically valuable. Rather, life is worth living only if the remainder of it is likely to have a positive hedonic value. Suppose that I’m terminally ill and suffering; pain medications eliminate some but not all of my pain and anguish. In that case hedonism implies that I am *better off dead*. (The hedonic value of being dead is neither positive nor negative, but zero). Does that mean that it’s morally okay for me to commit suicide? Not if we construe hedonism as a theory of the good rather than a theory of the right. Suppose that killing myself would do great harm to others. In that case if the *act utilitarian* theory of what is morally right/wrong is correct, then it would be wrong for me to commit suicide, because great harm to others outweighs a smaller benefit to myself. Suppose that killing myself would benefit both me and others. In that case suicide would be right if act utilitarianism is correct but wrong if a *sanctity of life* ethic is true. A sanctity of life ethic says that it is always wrong intentionally to cause the death of an “innocent” human being (oneself or another), because it infringes on God’s dominion over life.

Although hedonism is, strictly speaking, only a theory of the good and not a theory of the right, there is a possible theory of the right in which hedonism plays a central role. This theory identifies right action with rational action, and rational action is identified with action that maximizes one’s own good. Combine that with the idea that hedonism provides the correct account of one’s good, and you get the theory the right/rational action is whatever maximizes one’s hedonic score. The latter is hedonism as a theory of the right.

“So if committing murder will maximize my hedonic score, then doesn’t hedonism as a theory of the right imply that I ought to do it?” Maybe so, but Epicurus, who wants to defend hedonism both as a theory of the good and as a theory of the right, denies that committing an injustice ever will maximize one’s hedonic score. Epicurus is convinced that at least on average, people who have the virtues of temperance, courage, justice, etc. lead lives with higher hedonic scores than people who are not virtuous. In Principal Doctrine #35, Epicurus claims that the reason why we should avoid injustice is that it leads to fear—an unpleasant mental state—that we might be discovered and then punished for our injustice.

Hedonism as a theory of the good and hedonism as a theory of the right are both normative views. There is another hedonistic doctrine that is nonnormative, namely, *psychological hedonism*. This is the view that the only thing that anybody *in fact* desires for its own sake is pleasant mental states/“feeling good.” It is a version of *psychological egoism*, because it says that the only pleasures that we in fact desire for their sake are our own. (Hence, if I risk my life to save yours, I do so only because I know that it will make me “feel good about myself”). Psychological hedonism purports to be a description of human beings and what makes them tick. It does not make any value judgments.

One objection to hedonism as a theory of the good is that it incorrectly implies that “false” pleasures (pleasures that depend on false beliefs) have as much value as “true” ones. Robert Nozick’s “experience machine” thought experiment presents this objection.
The two main competitors to hedonism as a theory of the good are first, the many varieties of preference satisfaction theories, and second, “perfectionist” or “objective list” theories.

According to preference satisfaction theories how well off someone is depends on her level of preference (or desire) satisfaction. If the only thing that anyone ever desired for its own sake were pleasure (that is, if psychological hedonism were true), then there would be no difference between these theories and hedonism. But on the assumption that we do desire other things besides pleasure for their own sake, the two theories will diverge.

Here’s one objection to a simple version of the preference satisfaction theory. Suppose that my strongest preferences are altruistic ones for small children. I see 3 small children trapped in a burning building. I know that if I rush in I can save them but I will suffer severe, painful burns over much of my body. In that case I achieve increased preference satisfaction by saving the children, but surely I do not benefit from my action. Rather, I sacrifice my own good for the good of those children.

An objective list theory says that some things have intrinsic prudential value apart from their being desired or found enjoyable. Consider the following example. Suppose that Joe obtains 20 units of hedonic value every day from counting the blades of grass in his back yard. If we force him to go to art school for one week, he will lose interest in grass counting and become an excellent sculptor. But he will also become a self-critical artist who is never fully satisfied with his achievements. He only obtains 19 units of hedonic value each day as an artist. According to hedonism forcing Joe to go to art school was bad for him; he was better off as a blades of grass counter. According to most versions of the objective list theory, mindlessly counting blades of grass is a pretty worthless activity while creating excellent works of art is valuable. They imply that Joe leads a better, more flourishing life now than before. (Does that mean that a defender of such a theory must approve of our forcing him to attend art school? Again, the answer is “no” if the objective list theory is a theory of the good and not a theory of the right. There’s no inconsistency in thinking that even though the coercion benefits Joe, it remains morally wrong because a violation of his right to liberty).