

# HEDONISM

*Arguments for and against and the role of pain*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of hedonism. I will touch upon many of its most prominent proponents and critics and analyze their arguments using theoretical tools offered by Daniel Michael Weijers. My aim is to answer the following three research questions:

- ***What are the main arguments for and against hedonism?***
- ***What is the difference between the hedonism of Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill?***
- ***What is the role and value of pain according to the main proponents of hedonism?***

I aim to use the theories or categories of hedonism identified by Weijers to analyze what sort of hedonism the three main proponents of the theory, Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, are arguing for. They are an invaluable diagnostic tool in order to understand the multiple aspects and nuances of hedonistic theories.

Once I have explored the three main hedonistic theories using Weijers' tools, I will delve into comparisons of how they approach the topic of pain and what they deem its role is in living a good hedonistic life. That segment will be aided with additional insights into the role of pain from Christianity, Callicles and Nietzsche.

Finally I will engage with some criticisms of hedonism. First I will take a brief look at some arguments from the scientific field of *Happiness Studies* and then I will consider Robert Nozick's famous *Experience Machine*.

## Ágrip

Í þessari ritgerð mun ég rannsaka hedonisma en nautnahyggja eða sældarhyggja hafa verið notuð á íslensku yfir þá stefnu. Ég mun taka fyrir nokkra af helstu talsmönnum kenningarinnar og gagnrýnendum hennar. Ég mun nota greiningartæki sem ég hef þegið frá Daniel Michael Weijers til að rannsaka sældarhyggju. Markmið mitt er að svara þremur eftirfarandi rannsóknarspurningum:

- **Hver eru helstu rök með og á móti sældarhyggju?**
- **Hver er munur á sældarhyggju Epikúrusar, Jeremy Bentham og John Stuart Mills?**
- **Hvert er hlutverk og gildi sársauka í kenningum helstu talsmanna sældarhyggju?**

Markmið mitt er að nota sjö gerðir sældarhyggjunnar, eftir Weijers, sem greiningartól til að meta hvernig sældarhyggju þrír helstu talsmenn kenningarinnar (Epikúrus, Jeremy Bentham og John Stuart Mill) boða.

Greiningar Weijers á hinum sjö gerðum sældarhyggjunnar verða notaðar til þess að greina þrjú megin tilbrigði kenningarinnar. Þær eru ómetanlegt tól til þess að skilja og meta margbreytileika og litbrigði sældarhyggjunnar sem og þau rök sem hafa verið sett fram gegn stefnunni.

Þegar ég hef lokið yfirferð yfir sögu sældarhyggjunnar og þessara þriggja mismunandi sældarhyggjukenninga með þessari greiningaraðferð, þá mun ég bera þær saman og sjá svo hvernig þær nálgast sársaukahugtakið á mismunandi vegu, sbr. hvert er hlutverk og tilgangur sársauka í hinu góða sældar-lífi. Sá kafli mun fá aukalega innsýn inn í hlutverk og gildi sársauka frá kristni, gríska heimspekingnum Kallíkles, sem er persóna í verkum Platóns, og þýska heimspekingnum Friedrich Nietzsche.

Að lokum mun ég svo kljást við nokkur rök gegn sældarhyggju, fyrst frá vísindalegum grunni hamingjurannsókna og svo að lokum tek ég fyrir reynsluvél heimspekingsins Robert Nozicks.

## **Forewords**

The topic for this thesis used to be very different when I started out. Originally I was writing on the philosophy of happiness. My aim was to offer a sort of guide on how to use the theories of classical philosophers as a tool in order to obtain happiness. It was a bold and ambitious undertaking that finally proved to be somewhat overwhelming and unfocused. My best and most coherent effort in that piece was my segment on analyzing and comparing the role of pain in different theories of happiness set forth by classic philosophers. I became increasingly interested in this notion of pain and how it can be seen in radically different ways when it comes to theories of happiness.

Should pain be avoided altogether, used as a tool, embraced as an experience, appreciated for highlighting pleasure, utilized to build character? There were numerous takes on the topic and when I really got down to comparing these various theories of happiness, I realized that the fundamental difference between them was how they approached the topic of pain. What its role and value was in the pursuit and sustainability of happiness.

As I ventured on in this task of researching happiness, the different versions of hedonism caught my interest above other theories and I decided that my energy would best be spent by focusing my efforts on really getting into the deep end of hedonism, its proponents and critics with a special focus on the role of pain within hedonist theories.

That way I could focus my efforts on getting a deep and critical insight into a compelling theory that was not far removed from my former topic of general happiness. I hope that this proves to be an interesting and enjoyable read that will hopefully present valuable insights into hedonism, its proponent and critics and illuminate the discussion on the role of pain for hedonists.

Enjoy.

## Introduction

This thesis is a study of hedonism. I will touch upon many of its most prominent proponents and critics and analyze their arguments using theoretical tools offered by Daniel Michael Weijers. My aim is to answer the following three research questions:

- ***What are the main arguments for and against hedonism?***
- ***What is the difference between the hedonism of Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill?***
- ***What is the role and value of pain according to the main proponents of hedonism?***

I aim to use the theories or categories of hedonism identified by Weijers to analyze what sort of hedonism the three main proponents of the theory, Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, are arguing for. They are an invaluable diagnostic tool in order to understand the multiple aspects and nuances of hedonistic theories, which will be utilized as our tools for all further analysis into the various hedonistic theories and the arguments of their proponents.

This will then be followed by a historical overview on the theory of *hedonism*, from its origins and how it evolved and changed throughout the ages. I will then give an account of the various types of hedonism that have emerged and compare their differences.

Once that is done we will have the tools to look closer at the writings and opinions of the main proponents of hedonism, those of Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and analyze their arguments for the merit of hedonism as a guide to happiness and the good life.

I will analyze and compare their theories in some detail before focusing on their particular views on the role of pain. For extra insight into how the topic of pain can be approached I will add three non-hedonistic accounts of pain, one from the Christian scriptures, one from the ancient Greek philosopher Callicles, as he is portrayed in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, and finally one from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

At last I will delve into the writings of the most prolific critics of hedonism, present and engage with their arguments. These critics are among others Robert Nozick and Evan Kreider who have both offered compelling arguments against hedonism.

In closing I will hopefully have a concise insight into the arguments for the merits of hedonism as well as the arguments against it and hopefully having answered the question of what the role of pain is (or should be) according to hedonist theory.

## On hedonism

Hedonism comes from the Attic-Greek word ἡδονή (*hēdonē*), meaning simply “pleasure.”

Hedonism is usually seen as a theory of value. It is the theory that pleasure and pains are the *only* two factors of intrinsic value or dis-value for human life.<sup>1</sup> Other things that are seen as valuable for human life are seen as having only instrumental value. That’s it, there are in the end no other qualifications for a good life than having the right balance of pleasure over pain.<sup>2</sup> This may seem simple, simplistic even, but as we shall see, this little principle is remarkably varied and allows for a rich variety of interpretations and nuance. It invites all manner of questions and further prodding like “what is pleasure?,” “what is pain?” “how do the two relate?,” “how do pleasures differ from one another or from person to person?” These are questions of immense depth that can and do touch upon multiple fields of study as we shall see.

It is hard to say when hedonism began exactly, especially since this principle of preferring pleasure over pain seems like second nature to humans so we see glimpses of hedonistic attitudes in various ancient societies throughout history. Yet it is not as common that we find actual written sources from these cultures that outright advocate for the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. Even though we assume that people have at all times and in all places preferred pleasure over pain, it is not often that it is stated directly. The wording of the hedonistic principle has a rather jarring ring to it that might make it seem selfish or ignoble. Most ancient theories of virtue, be they philosophical or religious, seem to shy away from the brazen pursuit of personal pleasure in pursuit of some “higher” goals. This negative attitude towards the hedonistic principle of seeking pleasure above all other things can be identified in the writings of Aristotle in the 4th century B.C.E. He writes in his thesis on ethics:

*[J]udge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life -- that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Hanlon Bremner, *Theories of Happiness: On the Origins of Happiness and our Contemporary Conception* (Bonn: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, 2008), 98.

<sup>2</sup> This is the theory at its core, but as we shall see, none of the main proponents of hedonism actually argued for this stripped down basic version of the theory.

<sup>3</sup> Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 938.



Consciously and actively seeking your own personal pleasure and going to great lengths to shy away from pain has for the longest time left a bitter taste in the mouth of those who advocate pursuing the good life through more “noble” means. In very few societies has hedonism been publicly applauded for being especially noble. It has even been demonized and (wrongfully) characterized as a life of vice and excess in base pleasures and in some cases the word *hedonist* has been used as an insult to label a person with little restraint, poor moral judgment and lack of principles.<sup>4</sup>

### **Weijers’ Seven Theories or Categories of Hedonism**

There are many different ways of labeling and categorizing the various kinds of hedonism and they vary greatly in what elements are thought to be fundamental to the theories. I have decided to use Weijers’ analysis from his Ph.D. thesis *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*<sup>5</sup> as he goes to the greatest length of distinguishing the different aspects of hedonism and in that task he has divided hedonistic theories into seven different schools of thoughts, or categories. These distinctions will be my primary diagnostic tools for all further analysis of hedonism in this thesis.

They analyze every incremental difference in how a hedonist perceives pleasure and its relation to himself, his psyche, ethics and the good life. These categories are the most precise tools for analyzing small deviations in hedonistic theories and arguments that highlight the small subtle differences in the various approaches to hedonism. Identifying these differences will be of great importance for furthering our understanding into hedonism as a whole and give us a clearer picture of the grand scheme of hedonistic thought. Having the precise analytical tools to measure and engage with the building blocks of the various hedonistic theories might even give us clearer insight into the points of contention between hedonistic theories as well as make us better equipped to engage with critical arguments against hedonism with more lucidity. The seven categories of hedonism are as follows:

*Folk Hedonism,*

*Value Hedonism,*

*Prudential Hedonism,*

*Motivational Hedonism,*

*Normative Hedonism,*

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Michael Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice* (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2012), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*.

*Hedonistic Egoism and  
Hedonistic Utilitarianism.*

Weijers begins by addressing the stereotype of the hedonist, which is akin to what we described above, the indulgent, ignoble glutton and labels that idea as *Folk Hedonism*. According to Folk Hedonism, someone is a hedonist if he seeks out pleasure for himself or herself without any regard for human well-being, his or her own or others. Folk Hedonism is a category that takes on hedonistic theory as a whole and misrepresents it in an unflattering light of arguing for a life filled with excess, greed, instant-gratifications, harmful/unhealthy habits in pursuit of short-sighted sensual pleasures. It has little to do with actual hedonism as a philosophical theory of pleasure and pain, but more on how we've come to *use* the word in casual conversation. Folk Hedonism is due to the misrepresentation of hedonism by non-hedonists throughout the ages. Especially medieval Christians and Jews who set out to demonize Epicurus, the first systematically hedonistic philosopher, as a great sinner and a preacher of wicked or base values. His name became synonymous with disrespect, sacrilege and atheism in medieval Jewish circles and the 12th century Italian Christian poet Dante Alighieri goes so far as to place Epicurus in the 6<sup>th</sup> circle of hell, where the heretics lie, in his epic poem *Dante's Inferno*.<sup>6</sup>

Weijers' Folk Hedonism is, therefore, not a version of hedonism per se, but a category that deals with recognizing and dismissing a common and non-philosophical misrepresentation of hedonism as well as addressing the confusing issue of how the word has taken a different meaning in today's usage that is far removed from the precepts of the theory.<sup>78</sup> This category exists only so we have a name for this false representation of hedonism that no major proponent of the theory argues for. The other categories all specialize in one small aspect of hedonism that build on one another. Folk Hedonism is not a part of that analytical framework, it serves only as a concise tool for easy dismissal of non-representative versions of hedonism.

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<sup>6</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Divine Comedy*, 60 [Canto X]

*"And he to me: "They all will be closed up  
When from Jehoshaphat they shall return  
Here with the bodies they have left above.  
Their cemetery have upon this side  
With Epicurus all his followers,  
Who with the body mortal make the soul."*

<sup>7</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> See also, Veenhoven's study on *Hedonism and Happiness* [2003] in the empirical happiness studies field. As soon as hedonism is analyzed in a non-philosophical context, it is seen as the theory which advocates shortsighted gluttony and excess in immediate instant gratifications. The very ideal of Weijers' Folk Hedonism.

*Value Hedonism* is the next category. Here we aren't battling strawmen like in Folk Hedonism but assessing the theory on its own terms. When we speak of Value Hedonism we are referring to its precepts of saying that only pleasure has *intrinsic value* and only pain is *intrinsically dis-valuable*.<sup>9</sup> But what does that mean though? It means that pleasure is the only thing in the world that has value for its own sake and vice versa for pain. Pleasure, and pleasure alone, is the one thing that is pursued for its own sake and never as a means to an end. It is always an end in and of itself. Weijers contrasts this to all other goods which only have *instrumental value*, which means that they are merely means to an end and that end being pleasure, or happiness. Money, for example, has only *instrumental value*, because it is only a tool. It can be used to buy things that bring you pleasure so they are merely a stepping stone to that final goal. Pleasure however is never experienced as a means to something else, the way money is earned in order to be used for further ends.<sup>10</sup> Value Hedonism is the core and foundation of all hedonistic theories. It is what all of the other categories build upon.

*Prudential Hedonism* builds on *Value Hedonism* and takes the theory further. We have now seen what is of value according to the theory and how value should be classified into *intrinsic* and *instrumental value*. Prudential Hedonism is the category about well-being. It defines how the hedonistic principles can be applied to live a good and happy life. In many hedonistic theories, "pleasure" becomes a synonym for "happiness," but Prudential Hedonism takes a bit more nuanced way to connect the two. Happiness, according to this theory, is the state of being where relative pleasure outweighs your relative pain. So it is a matter of having surplus pleasure compared to your pain. This category covers the part where hedonism applies Value Hedonism in order to lead a good life. We now have these two elements in life that we have identified as intrinsically valuable and intrinsically dis-valuable and Prudential Hedonism is the category that *applies* those values in order for us to lead good lives. It simply states that we must have a balance of pleasure over pain in order to be happy. This, like many other simple principles of hedonism, has remarkably varied approaches and executions. We will discuss this notion further when we look at Jeremy Bentham's *hedonistic calculus*.

This approach to the theory of hedonism states that to live a good life one must recognize the intrinsic value and dis-value of pleasure and pain and be guided by the two in order to live a good life. This balance of seeking more pleasure and avoiding pain in order to lead a good and happy life can vary greatly in execution between persons depending on their own preferences and long term goals. As a *Prudential Hedonist* I might either choose to partake in the pleasure of eating a big slice of cake or I may forego it in my pursuit of the long-term pleasure of getting into shape. I only forego one pleasure in pursuit of another whom I deem

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<sup>9</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 17-18.

more valuable but in either case, pleasure is master. We will explore that subject in more detail later.<sup>11</sup>

*Motivational Hedonism* is the theory that pain and pleasure are our strongest motivator for all our behavior. It is sometimes referred to as *Psychological Hedonism*. Some philosophers have even opted to categorize hedonism in only two categories, that of Psychological Hedonism and *Ethical Hedonism*,<sup>12</sup> but I've found that Weijers system gives more clarity to the various aspects of the theory.

*Motivational Hedonism* argues that pain and pleasure are already our main (and even only) driving factors for all our behavior. Adhering to Prudential Hedonism, that desiring pleasure above pain, is only consciously acting according to our natural urges with no pretense to other things that do not have *intrinsic value*. When we consciously act out actively pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain we are merely getting our actions in sync with our mind. It is of course a matter for behavioral psychologists to figure out if this claim is true or not, (therefore, the name) and not a matter for armchair philosophy. Yet, this argument about our nature is of great importance to the legitimacy of hedonism as a theory of well-being. There are of course different interpretations and nuances on this precept that we are only guided by pleasure and pain which assert that statement with various levels of certainty and confidence. Weijers distinguishes between two kinds of Motivational Hedonism, the weak kind which states that "the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain often or always has *some* influence on our behavior"<sup>13</sup> and the strong kind which is more assertive and says that *all* behavior is governed by the instinct to seek pleasure and avoid pain. That, and only that, is the prime motivator and ultimate master of all our behavior.

The strong version of this theory has not stood the test of time and is widely regarded as wrong in the fields of behavioral psychology<sup>14</sup> but it is hard to deny that this principle of seeking pleasure, avoiding pain has deep roots in our psyche, so the weak version of Motivational Hedonism carries a lot of weight and is almost futile to deny. Especially since a large scope of behaviors can be interpreted as fitting into that paradigm. For example, should this principle be refuted by a monk whom has vowed to abstain from pleasures in his search for higher things, then I as a *Motivational Hedonist* could simply restructure his arguments to say that he is still seeking pleasure in his ascetic lifestyle, he has merely decided that the pleasures of meditation, rituals, solitude and prayers outweigh the pleasures of the flesh that he has left behind. So instead of abstaining from pleasure, he has simply made a judgment

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<sup>11</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Andrew Moore, "Hedonism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/>

<sup>13</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

call and prioritized his pleasures to fit his particular needs and inclinations. We have wrestled with this question of what drives us as humans to act for as long as we've had any sense to speak of such things, so this is one of humanities' timeless questions regarding ourselves. Whether knowingly or not, everyone from Socrates to the TV series *Friends* have wrestled with this same question.

For Socrates, it was in his conversations with Plato's brother, Glaucon. There they argued against Motivational Hedonism, although the theory didn't have a name yet. Glaucon postulates that it is true. People's morals are a social construct that dissipate once the consequences of our unethical or selfish behavior are removed. Meaning that we only really value our own pleasure and avoidance of pain, as the theory states, but society keeps those urges in check lest man loses his reputation and standing among his fellow men. Socrates argues that it is not true for even if a man found a ring that could turn him invisible, granting him the power to fulfill his natural urges without consequence he would still not only be guided by the selfish pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain for there are many other things a man values above those, like honor, justice, virtue and truth.<sup>15</sup>

In the popular TV series *Friends*,<sup>16</sup> the character Joey argues that there are no unselfish good deeds and the plot revolves around Phoebe trying to disprove that point by performing various good deeds that give her no pleasure and fails to do so on multiple occasions and by proxy admitting that the prime motivator of good deeds is the pursuit of pleasure they bring. This continues to be an open debate to what extent the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain influences our behavior, but the idea is central to almost all variations of hedonism.

*Normative Hedonism* is where we introduce ethics into the picture. We have seen what hedonism thinks is of intrinsic value, what constitutes happiness and what we are inclined to pursue and avoid. Yet all of this is still ethically neutral. We have seen that Socrates believes that man left only to his inclination of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain is a dangerous wolf, a savage, selfish man lacking in principles and one that is not guided by the love of virtue and justice. Our first category of Folk Hedonism seems to agree with him and it is no secret that the word *hedonist* has often been used as a derogatory term by ethically minded people throughout history. So where does ethics come into hedonism?

As we shall see, most forms of hedonism are very concerned with ethics and especially in reframing the debate on ethics. This is where Normative Hedonism comes in. It is the theory that has to do with the question of *what ought we do?* Whether you believe that you are naturally predisposed to pursue pleasure and avoid pain or not is not really relevant for that

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by Paul Shorey (London: Harvard University Press, 1969), 359c-360d.

<sup>16</sup> *Friends*, Season 5 episode 4. *The one where Phoebe hates PBS*. 1998.

question. Whether you believe that any form of Motivational Hedonism is correct is irrelevant, for this approach is asking you to make a conscious decision to *act* as though Motivational Hedonism were correct, for ethical reasons. Because even if it wasn't true and pain and pleasures are not the only (or overwhelmingly strong) factors influencing your behavior, then you ought still act in accordance with the hedonistic principle for ethical reasons. Normative Hedonism states that happiness should be pursued.

The ethical premises for doing so are argued as follows. If pleasure is, as Value Hedonism argues, the *only* thing that has intrinsic value, then it is the highest good and should be actively sought out and promoted for all. The same goes for pain. If it is the only thing that is intrinsically bad then it should be avoided and discouraged for all in all cases. The history of ethics is replete with things we are supposed to value and treasure and actively pursue, often at a great personal price, that isn't really palpable or even corporeal at times. Ethicists say we must pursue purity, forgiveness, justice, beauty, truth, some rigid principles, enlightenment, virtue etc. Yet, many of these are just metaphysical constructs or vague terms or values that don't seem to improve the quality of your life in any discernable way.

Normative Hedonism has come to dispel all of these ethical illusions. The martyr who inflicts pain upon himself in order to pay for some indiscernible crime of primordial-man at the behest of an invisible deity is exactly the man that Normative Hedonism wants to save from himself. There is no sin except for pain. Inflicting pain upon others or yourself is the only sinful act a man can commit. We will engage with John Stuart Mill's argument regarding this point in further detail later. This is a remarkably radical idea when compared to conventional ethical theories. It even dismisses virtues that don't actively bring anyone pleasure.

Abstinence, purity of mind, needless discipline or and incessant love of truth, just to name a few examples of virtues that hedonism has no real use for. It really does not matter how you label your actions, the only thing that matters is whether they produce more pleasure than pain for yourself or others. If you ever deny yourself any pleasure which would have produced no pain for anyone involved and you do so for ethical reasons, then you have been ethically misled by peddlers of invisible virtues. The same goes for pain. If you choose to inflict or experience any pain that does not produce any pleasure as a direct cause of it and you do so for ethical reasons, you have, for the very same reasons, been ethically misled. Normative Hedonism aims to cut out all the fat of conventional ethics and ask:

*What is really good?*

*What really improves my quality of life?*

Is it the approval of invisible gods, the love of truth, some code of conduct, service to an ideal or is it not any high minded socially constructed ideal, but the very feeling of pleasure that

adds to your quality of life? There is no real virtue, no sin, no ideals. There is only pleasure and pain. Whatever is done that produces more relative pleasure than pain is a “virtue” and should be promoted on ethical grounds and every action that involves more relative pain than pleasure should be actively discouraged on ethical grounds. That is the broad blanket statement that Normative Hedonism wants to make.<sup>17</sup>

Things do of course become a lot more complicated and nuanced once that statement has been made and we will explore that further later on. Issues like what is relative pain and relative pleasure, for whom and who is capable of measuring and comparing that? First let’s explore the two sub-categories of Normative Hedonism, which Weijers identifies, that of *Hedonistic Egoism* and *Hedonistic Utilitarianism*. These two schools of thought deal with the issue of how one should measure the pain and pleasure of one’s actions in order to judge if they are ethical or not. In short, it can be said that the former argues that you should first and foremost measure the ethical merit of your actions according to the consequences to *your* pain vs. pleasure while the latter argues that for an action to be ethical you must weigh the pain vs pleasure of all of those concerned. Hedonistic Egoism is the farthest removed from conventional ethical theory of all varieties of hedonism. Not only does it partake in the radical premises of Normative Hedonism, it also argues for a very self-centered version of those principles. What is an ethically right action is whatever will produce the most pleasure for *you*. It argues that *your* pain vs pleasure ratio is the only thing that measures the ethical validity of your actions. You are not obligated to take the pleasure or pain of others that are affected by your actions into the equation. Each man’s pleasure and pain are his own responsibility. There is a good reason Hedonistic Egoism never really caught on and remains very unpopular in philosophical circles to this day.<sup>18</sup> Its premises are often seen as offensive to the ethical sensibilities of most people, even the ones who might agree with hedonism in general. Weijers argues that within this framework a man would have an ethical duty to steal food from a hungry child since *your* pleasure is all that counts and the pain you inflict on others is not in the equation.<sup>19</sup> Yet this can be refuted by the fact that such an act might cause guilt and remorse or even anxiety about repercussions or revenge might reduce your pleasure vs pain levels in such a way that it would not be worth doing and therefore not ethical.<sup>20</sup> Weijers further argues that if one were to live by Hedonistic Egoism then a small investment of time and pain in order to desensitize you to the suffering of others would be a very viable way to maximize your pleasure.<sup>21</sup> If your empathy is reduced or numbed, then it would open up a whole world of ethical pleasure seeking that could devastate the lives of others around

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<sup>17</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

you. A sociopath might end up scoring highest in a world where Hedonistic Egoism was the yardstick for ethical merit.

*Hedonistic Utilitarianism*<sup>22</sup> is the theory that ethics should be central in the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, but for one's actions to be ethical the relative pain vs pleasure of all involved must be taken into account. This is the theory argued for by Jeremy Bentham and then refined by John Stuart Mill. It has similar precepts as Hedonistic Egoism but it differs in that it is not only *your* relative pleasure over pain that makes an action ethical, it is the relative pleasure over pain levels of *all* affected by said action. "All" here means all human beings and even all sentient being.

These two theories are both *consequentialist* theories, which means that they focus solely on the consequences of your actions to determine if they are ethical or not. Your motives do not matter if the intended consequences do not adhere to the pleasure principle. If you can predictably foresee the consequences of your actions as in how much pain or pleasure they will bring about for yourself and others than that is all that matters.

The utilitarian view is that one must weigh the pleasure and pain of all involved, that means all those affected, directly or indirectly by your actions. That is the core prerequisite for an action to be deemed ethical. That also means that this is an ethical theory that requires rational thought and foresight. This theory was summed up in *the greatest happiness principle* coined by Jeremy Bentham, which states as follows:

*"The ethical principle that an action is right in so far as it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number of those affected".*<sup>23</sup> This has become the most popular and prevailing of all hedonistic theories and it is usually this Hedonistic Utilitarianism that is addressed when modern thinkers engage with hedonism in order to promote or criticize it.<sup>24</sup>

Now that we have briefly broken down, summarized and explained hedonism in all of its aspects we have the necessary tools to delve into the main proponents of hedonism and engage with their theories and arguments in a coherent way.

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to note the distinction in terms here. I will use Hedonistic Utilitarianism when I am referring to or engaging with this category of hedonism as put forth by Weijers as a diagnostic tool to analyze hedonistic theories. When addressing the theories of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, I will simply use the term *utilitarianism*.

<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 278.

<sup>24</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 22-23.



## History and Main Proponents of Hedonism

As I stated earlier, it is hard to tell when hedonism started as a systematic theory that was actively promoted by any group of individuals or a society. As Motivational Hedonism states, the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain is a huge part of human nature so the premises of hedonism have not been completely alien to any society. Many cultures have seen these hedonistic instincts as something to be discouraged and have done so through religious teachings, promoted cultural values and ethical theories. Man must aim for some *higher* ideals than pleasure. It is not clear why men have had such a deep rooted fear of promoting, or at least approving, man's natural instinct to pursue his own pleasure and avoid pain, but it is clear that the hedonistic ideal has been seen (and in many cases is still seen) as triggering and offensive to people's sensibilities. It may seem counterintuitive to all our ethical inclinations and seem selfish and simple. Even so, it is hard to deny that hedonism has proved very effective in dispelling ethical myths and ideals that have no intrinsic value the way that pleasure has intrinsic value. We will take a look at Mill's treatment of sacrifice later in this thesis to illustrate the point.

Weijers traces the origins of systematic hedonism back to the Hindu Cārvāka tradition in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>25</sup> When you examine their works and poetry it becomes very clear that these are proponents of hedonism in its purest form. Here is a small snippet from the works of the Cārvāka master, Sarva Siddhanta Sangraha:

*The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste... while moksha is death which is cessation of life-breathe... the wise therefore ought not to take pains on account of moksha.*

*A fool wears himself out by penances and fasts. Chastity and other such ordinances are laid down by clever weaklings.*<sup>26</sup>

Even though it can be said that the Cārvāka tradition definitely advocates classical hedonism before any other written Western source that we know of, it is hard to tell whether it had any direct influence on the Western<sup>27</sup> development of hedonism. In all likelihood these cultures were too far apart to have any real influence by the time Epicurus spearheaded the Western hedonist movement a few centuries later. We do see traces of it in the east however in the whimsical poetry of the Persian philosopher mathematician Omar Khayyām in the 12<sup>th</sup> century where he subtly mocks traditional Islamic values in order to promote a very similar

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<sup>25</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Billington, *Understanding Eastern Philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 1997), 44-45, verses 9-12.

<sup>27</sup> I.e. ancient Greek.

hedonistic world view of both this life and the next. Here is an excerpt from his classic poem, “The Rubaiyat”:

*To all of us the thought of heaven is dear  
Why not be sure of it and make it here?  
No doubt there is a heaven yonder too,  
But 'tis so far away—and you are near.*

*Men talk of heaven, there is no heaven but here;  
Men talk of hell, there is no hell but here;  
Men of hereafters talk, and future lives,—  
O love, there is no other life but here.*

*Look not above, there is no answer there;  
Pray not, for no one listens to your prayer;  
Near is as near to God as any Far,  
And Here is just the same deceit as There.*

*But here are wine and beautiful young girls,  
Be wise and hide your sorrows in their curls,  
Dive as you will in life's mysterious sea,  
You shall not bring us any better pearls.*

*Old Khayyám, say you, is a debauchee;  
If only you were half so good as he!  
He sins no sins but gentle drunkenness,  
Great-hearted mirth, and kind adultery.<sup>28</sup>*

Here we again see a very clear promotion of hedonistic values, those of pursuing pleasures rather than chasing high minded religious ideals. Firmly tongue in cheek, at the expense of traditional Islamic values. But let us move on to the first, and most influential, Western promoter of philosophical hedonism, Epicurus.

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<sup>28</sup> Omar Khayyám, *Rubáiyát* (New York: Illustrated Editions Company, 1859), 42-43.

## Epicurus

“I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us” ~ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William Short, 31 October 1819.<sup>29</sup>

The philosopher Epicurus was born on the Greek island of Samos, 341 BC. He showed early signs of having interest in philosophy and sought answers to life’s great questions far and wide. He would study philosophy under various masters before completely denying their influence and education and proclaim that he was self-taught, a natural born philosopher. He would eventually gather a group of followers and disciples that would live by his new philosophy, *Epicureanism*. This philosophy argued for atheism, empirical science, the study of atoms and most importantly, for hedonism. He did not leave much writing behind that is accessible to us. Only three letters and a handful of collected sayings in addition to various second hand sources.<sup>30</sup> That is not to say that sources are sparse compared to what we have on contemporary thinkers, because these writings in addition to the second hand ones have given us a fairly comprehensive idea of Epicurean thought on the topics that were most important to him and his followers. In addition to that Epicurean scholars are in the unique position of having a relatively steady flow of new fragments of writing being assembled and ready for study even to this day.<sup>31</sup>

Epicurean philosophy has from its very inception been seen as radical on many fronts and garnered mixed reactions from both its contemporaries and modern readers. On one hand it can be said that it is a very modern secular philosophy that argues for human freedom from the whims of gods and fate, religious doctrines and authority and the crushing weight of oppressive ethics. On the other hand it has certainly garnered criticism for its materialism and lack of ethical prudence where there supposedly is little difference made between men and swine.<sup>32</sup> What matters to us though is not so much Epicurus’ atheism, materialism, atomism or anything not directly related to his ideas of pleasure and pain. Epicurus promoted what we, following Weijers, would label as Normative Hedonism, which is, as we might recall, the form of hedonism that asks us *what ought I pursue?* It is the ethical take on hedonism. It is not so much a question whether you are inclined to pursue and promote pleasure over pain or not, it is what you *ought* to do, for ethical reasons.<sup>33</sup> Epicurus also

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “To William Short, with a Syllabus Monticello, October 31, 1819”,

<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl259.php>

<sup>30</sup> James Warren, *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 24.

argues for Motivational Hedonism (Psychological Hedonism), the theory that man is motivated by pleasure and pain in all cases and that those two masters guide all our actions.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore in our best interest to not go against our fundamental natures in denying our most fundamental instinct of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.<sup>35</sup> A man in constant struggle against himself is a miserable creature. One is reminded of Jesus' argument when he says "*And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.*"<sup>36</sup>

Here is where Epicurus' atheism comes in because it is due to his teaching that there either are no gods, or that if there are, they care nothing of the actions of humans. That means that there are no higher values or virtues we must strive for like piety, sacrifice, fasting, prayer or anything of the sort. A world without gods and objective goods and virtues is a world where a man's own personal pleasure and pain are the only relevant measurement of goods and ills. Now that we have established that Epicurus argues that human nature is hedonistic at its core and there are no higher virtues to strive for in this world other than the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as well as that we have an ethical duty to follow these hedonistic principles, let us see how he proposes we do so.

Epicurus is remarkably nuanced and thoughtful in his execution of the hedonistic principles. The tenants of his philosophy of pleasure and pain might be simple, but their optimal execution is complex and well thought out. As we saw at the very start of this chapter, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, the misrepresentation of Epicurus and his philosophy has been extremely pervasive throughout history.<sup>37</sup> The core principles of Epicurus' hedonism is not really to maximize your pleasure while minimizing your pain, it is more of a delicate balancing act. He throws the idea of desire into this equation which makes the whole thing more complicated. The fundamentals of Epicurean hedonism are first and foremost to get rid of pain. To be without bodily pain (*aponia*) and without mental pain (*ataraxia*).<sup>38</sup> That is key. For to be free of those two types of pain is pleasure in and of itself. There is great pleasure in being alive and without pain. It is a pure sort of pleasure because it has no potential to corrupt your well-being and produce pain, like many other misguided pleasures might. Once you succeed in your first mission of being without pain, then you should tread very carefully in pursuing further pleasure, other than the mere pleasure of being free of pain, because that search is a minefield of pitfalls and traps. Be ambitious in getting rid of pain, but stay that ambition and think carefully when taking the next steps.

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<sup>34</sup> Tim O'Keefe, *Action and Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 149.

<sup>35</sup> Raphael Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

<sup>36</sup> Mark 3:25.

<sup>37</sup> We will recall that Jefferson complains about „imputed“ Epicurean doctrines, which are not representative of his actual doctrines.

<sup>38</sup> Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire*, 158.

## **Epicurus on Desire**

*“The Wise Man’s desires are kept within Nature’s bounds”*

~ Cicero’s defense of Epicurus

Desire can be a toxic, misguided tool in our quest to pursue pleasure for many reasons. Desire unfulfilled is pain in and of itself so that alone ought to make us wary of it. Even if we chase our desires and manage to fulfill them, they will not stay sated, but demand more of us. We simply set the bar higher once we achieve our desired ends. There is no winning when it comes to desire. Chasing it will always be a losing battle in the long run in the *pleasure vs pain* -game. Men should therefore strive to be free of desire and not chase after luxuries, honors and titles and such. Luxuries will only fuel the desire for further luxuries. Titles will only make you crave the one above you and so on and so forth. It is the reason even kings are not satisfied and invade their neighbors in order to increase their lands, wealth and power. There are no winners in the game of desires, except for those who refuse to play.<sup>39</sup> Epicurus makes a strong call for independence. When you rely mostly on yourself and do not need much from the outside, the more control you have over yourself, your life and your happiness. When we are highly dependent on our surroundings then we are powerless and truly pawns of fates and fortune. When we are independent and relatively free of desire, we disarm the world to cause us harm. What can the world take away from us when we have made it so that we require relatively little from it? This is a tool in order to empower us and allows us to take more direct control over our own well-being.<sup>40</sup>

This does not mean however that we should necessarily romanticize some manner of an ascetic lifestyle, similar to those of monks. There is nothing inherently pleasurable about the lack of luxury either. Not possessing luxury is merely the safest way to not fall into the pitfalls of desire. This means that when we have grown accustomed to any sort of lifestyle and its luxuries, then it is painful to be without it, should you be forced to leave it behind. Losing luxuries of which you’ve grown accustomed to is both the generator of unnecessary pain which would not have manifested itself if you had never grown accustomed to those luxuries, as well as it undermines your independence. When you pile on the circumstantial luxuries on your daily life then the smallest breeze can topple that mountain. You become more highly dependent on your surroundings and fates and fortune in order to maintain your luxuries. These are all bad things and a source of unnecessary pain according to Epicurus.

Even so, there is nothing *inherently* wrong with luxuries. It is all a matter of how you approach them. A strong and independent mind can very well enjoy luxuries if he takes the

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<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire*, 159.

<sup>40</sup> O’Keefe, *Action and Responsibility*, 148.

greatest care to not be consumed and corrupted by them in any way. They ought to be enjoyed as a man enjoys a sunny day. They are not actively pursued, they just fall into your lap occasionally and it is folly to mourn the setting sun or run to the horizon chasing it. That is how an Epicurean might approach and enjoy occasional luxury.<sup>41</sup>

### **Epicurus on Pain**

As we have established, Epicurus argues for a life devoid of mental and physical pain and that in and of itself is pleasure. Presumed pleasures above that, such as needless luxury, lust and desire for honors and titles, can be dangerous and leave one permanently unsated. One fulfilled desire only goes on to open the door for another. For as Epicurus says: “The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain”,<sup>42</sup> therefore, I argue that all other pleasures on top of that are not of intrinsic value according to him. Only freedom from pain, which is “the magnitude of pleasure”, has intrinsic value. But what of pain? Pain for Epicurus is completely useless.<sup>43</sup> Pain is not a tool for you to contrast with the good times in order to better appreciate them, it’s not to shape your character and make you grow as a person nor does it contain any kind of life lesson. It is simply the absence of pleasure. You cannot have both at the same time and there is no *neutral* state where one neither has pleasure nor pain for the absence of pain is pleasure and may even be interpreted as the highest pleasure.<sup>44</sup>

The sources of pain can be many. Epicurus addresses some of those and tries to tackle them. He does not focus on the mundane pains we face in everyday life but rather one those that we create ourselves through our own folly and those pains which can be dispelled with mere argumentation. A man is well suited to avoid simple pain using his own reason and common sense. You don’t need a philosopher for that. You take care of your health, avoid injury and make sure your basic needs are provided for. Seems simple enough. What we might need some philosophical help with, is our self-destructive pain. I may need guidance to help me avoid making choices that might continuously set me up for future pains. I might need some rationale to help with my dependence on luxury or my short term thinking that might sabotage my long term pleasure seeking goals, like measuring a fatty meal to my goal of being in shape, for example. These pains are still in the sphere of common sense, but clear philosophical articulation on the remedies of these pains never hurt so he addresses these, but a large bulk of his writings goes into tackling another sort of pain.

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<sup>41</sup> Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire*, 160.

<sup>42</sup> Epicurus, *Principial Doctrines*, line 3.

<sup>43</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire*, 158.

We have established that Epicurus makes a distinction between two kinds of pain: bodily pain (the anti-*aponia*) and mental pain (the anti-*ataraxia*).<sup>45</sup> It is primarily the mental pain, the anxiety of the soul, which needs a philosophical remedy. So he goes on to construct some of the most coherent and timeless arguments in the history of philosophy against two of the greatest sources of mental anxiety of his day: the fear of death and the fear of the gods. I will not recount these as it is not the topic of this paper, but it is important to note that he makes these arguments in a very unique way. That is to say, they come from a very distinct place as they are not there to simply promote the cause of atheism or to dispel notions of an afterlife, although it may appear as such. He does not promote atheism for atheism's sake, but only to reduce mental anxiety. I believe that a correct understanding of the nature of his arguments is only to remedy the mental anxiety that comes from the fear of divine judgment, not from any personal ideological commitment to atheism as a world view.

Epicurus seems more ambivalent and agnostic on the subject of whether there is a God or not. His main focus is this: Does the idea of a God create more pleasure or pain in humans? See *Principal Doctrines*, line 1: „*A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being*” and *Letter to Menoeceus*, paragraph 2: “*First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind.*” These affirmations allow at least an interpretation of Epicurus as an agnostic or even a deist with a non-interventional deity. It is my interpretation that matters of theology were only relevant to him in as how much pleasure vs anxiety the theological world view produced.

Even though pain may seem a rather simple concept for Epicurus, he does have a rather unique way of approaching it when looking at the big picture of his hedonistic theory. He seems to see nothing beneficial to it in any way, but surely some pain must be endured for a greater good? Here is where we hit a snag, for to be without pain is a good. It is the greatest good, in fact. So given that, the reasoning for suffering pain for a greater good becomes very obscure. It is only in cases of where you choose to suffer pain for a short amount of time in order to be painless for a greater amount of time. There really is not much to bargain for with the suffering of pain when the only thing you would desire in turn was the abolition of pain. Other ethical theories might describe various scenarios where it was virtuous and ethically right to suffer pain for various noble ends, but within Epicureanism it is very problematic since all noble ends entail the abolition of pain. Therefore, any Epicurean bargain of pain would have to exchange pain for a greater amount of freedom from pain. There are no other bargaining chips.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 158.

## **Epicurus on Virtue**

Here we work further with our analytical tools. We have established that Epicurus promotes Value Hedonism, which claims that the only thing that has intrinsic value is pleasure and the only thing that has intrinsic dis-value is pain. These two are the only things which we pursue or avoid for their own sake and never as a stepping stone to other things. He does not promote *Prudential hedonism* because he does not advocate that happiness is the balance of pleasure over pain. Meaning, that only if you have relatively more pleasure than pain then you are happy. He argues that pleasure and pain cannot coexist. There is only pain or pleasure, for pleasure is the absence of pain. He does promote Motivational Hedonism (in the strong sense), that pleasure and pain influence all of our actions and are our primary motivators. Yet we still have free will to oblige or deny this instinct.<sup>46</sup>

But what of ethics? We've seen that he does promote Normative Hedonism, in that he says that we *ought to* seek pleasure and avoid pain as a matter of principle and ethics, but in what way? Does he promote Hedonistic Egoism, that *your* pleasure and pain are all that matter, or Hedonistic Utilitarianism, that the pleasure and pain of all involved matter? He is somewhere in between the two and it might come down to interpretation, especially in his notion of friendship. It is my understanding of his teaching that *my* freedom from pain trumps yours and vice versa, but altruism is still very important for a good life. Let's explore that further. Epicurus does not advocate that we simply hang around idle once we have abolished pain from our life. We can and should take great pleasure in friendship. It is both one of the best sources of pleasure as he says: "*Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship*"<sup>47</sup> as well as the best defense against the evils of this world "*in the limited evils of this life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.*"<sup>48</sup> When we value friendship as one of the greatest instrumental goods, then we are by principle good friends to others. It is a matter of common sense that in order to procure good friendships and all the value that they bring to our Epicurean hedonistic life, that being a good friend is of fundamental importance. Obtaining the friendship of others means having their interest at heart as well. So when our world-view considers pleasure and pain the only things of intrinsic value/dis-value, then the pleasure and pain of our friends becomes of great importance to us. This is an indicator that Epicurus does not advocate Hedonistic Egoism if any form of conventional friendships are to take place in our lives. Although this does not exclude a friendship between two *Hedonistic*

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<sup>46</sup> Woolf, *Pleasure and Desire*, 149.

<sup>47</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, line 27.

<sup>48</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, line 28.



*Egoists* where they enter into some sort of agreement that their own pain and pleasure is only of value and their friendship serves only as a contract to assure mutually beneficial treatment of those ends, but I find that reading more unlikely of the two and against the general tone of Epicurus' theory.<sup>49</sup>

There are other values that are good as well. Friendship is one of them. Justice, wisdom and honor are the other three mentioned. The greatest of these is wisdom, but the three are an unbreakable trinity that must come as a package deal if one is to live pleasantly. This is an unexpected add-on to his hedonism that adds to the formula that one must simply eliminate pain in order to produce pleasure. For *to live pleasantly*, you must possess these three virtues. Epicurus says:

*It is not possible to live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly. Nor can one live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. But those who for any reason do not live wisely, honorably, and justly cannot possibly live pleasantly*<sup>50</sup>

and in another place he says:

*Now, the beginning and the greatest good of all these things is wisdom. Wisdom is something more valuable even than philosophy itself, inasmuch as all the other virtues spring from it. Wisdom teaches us that it is not possible to live happily unless one also lives wisely, and honestly, and justly; and that one cannot live wisely and honestly and justly without also living happily. For these virtues are by nature bound up together with the happy life, and the happy life is inseparable from these virtues.*<sup>51</sup>

These are additional requirements, for the guide to the happy life offered by his hedonistic theory. They seem to come out of nowhere and it is not obvious how exactly they relate to the pleasure and pain paradigm. What happens when *justice* comes into conflict with *pleasure*? This might be a matter of priorities. It is clear that the freedom from pain is central and should be your first and primal focus, for that is pleasure. Therefore, that is what you do and *ought* to desire for both psychological and ethical reasons. Then there is friendship for it is the primary source of joy and safety from pain. Don't sacrifice freedom from pain in order to promote or secure friendships, because suffering for a friend is trading something of intrinsic value for something of instrumental value.

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<sup>49</sup> Eric Brown, *Politics and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 187, argues that Epicurus' *Egoistic Hedonism* can not sustain true friendship because of the conflict of interest in your own pain vs pleasure paradigm compared to the same interests of your friends. This reasoning is all backwards I believe because it is Epicurus' heavy focus on the value of true friendship that *causes* his hedonism to not be egoistic. I have seen no real arguments for an egoistic reading of his theory, while there are numerous altruistic values promoted that make it appear *Utilitarian* in nature, such as friendship.

<sup>50</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, line 5.

<sup>51</sup> Epicurus, *Letter to Menoceus*, paragraph 9.

Lastly, there is the formation of character. The love of wisdom and *sober reasoning*, for from them comes knowledge and awareness on these precepts of how to live well and what is of value.<sup>52</sup> Without understanding the Epicurean philosophy, it is impossible to live by it. Justice and honor are required to maintain friendships and be a person of worth and good repute. Honor is not meant as a title or as something that gives you power over others, but only that you are regarded as someone of value and integrity. Practicing these virtues will earn you favor among men and make you see yourself in a positive light. Self-respect is both a virtue and an instrumental pleasure that does not corrupt or cause any pain and Epicurus seems to regard this trinity of traits as the foundations of living a good life.

It is clear that Epicurus thinks that your own freedom from pain is crucial and should not be traded away lightly,<sup>53</sup> but he also promotes a host of various altruistic values that we have touched upon that clearly holds the pain and pleasure of others<sup>54</sup> in high regards. An Epicurean hedonist is not an *Egoistical Hedonist*, by any stretch of the imagination, but a rather altruistic, empathetic and virtuous person that cares deeply about the well-being of others. Albeit one who has clear boundaries when it comes to his or her own freedom from pain.

If *Egoistic Hedonism* and *Utilitarian Hedonism* were a scale where the former would be to the far left and the latter to the far right, I believe that the Epicurean hedonist would be relatively far right of center,<sup>55</sup> having deep altruistic regards for the suffering of others, especially the suffering of friends, without sacrificing *your own* hedonistic well-being.

It is high time to turn to modern hedonism and I will begin with the lawyer and philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who rekindled the torch of hedonism in modern philosophy.

## Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham was born in 1746 in London to a wealthy conservative family. He would grow up to take Epicurus' mantle as the prime proponent of philosophical hedonism. There is of course a huge noticeable gap in between the two in time which deserves addressing. Hedonism had never really been that popular even in Epicurus' prime because of its radicalism and what was seen as its base nature.<sup>56</sup> Hedonism was not in favor with

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<sup>52</sup> According to the Epicurean theory.

<sup>53</sup> For there is nothing of equal value to gain for such a trade.

<sup>54</sup> Not the least of all the pain and pleasure of our friends.

<sup>55</sup> Note that we are using the term *Utilitarian Hedonism* in the Weijers way, as a tool to analyze hedonism as defined in chapter 1, not in the broad Bentham/Mill way.

<sup>56</sup> See Aristotle's criticism of "mere" pleasure, for example: McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 938.

philosophers, mostly due to the way it flipped all of the philosophical and religious values which the Hellenistic age had preached and refined for generations on its head. Even though there was a flourishing community of hedonists surrounding the Epicurean movement it did not last long as the empire's new Christian values became more dominant through the 4<sup>th</sup> century and through the Middle Ages.<sup>57</sup> Christianity is not compatible with hedonism in the slightest, at least if Christian values are taken at face-value. So we can imagine how hard it would be for an openly hedonistic movement to flourish (or even survive) in such an environment when their core precepts can be labeled as sinful and evil by the dominant ethical world view. Therefore, we take a large leap through history and continue our analysis of the proponents of hedonism with Jeremy Bentham in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century. To study Bentham I will, among other things, use Mill's essays on Bentham but Mill was both a follower and a critic of Bentham.

Bentham as a hedonist is in many ways similar and in many ways different to Epicurus. Bentham's primary interest with regards to hedonism was law, not life.<sup>58</sup> He thinks more as a policy maker, than an individual. This is the fundamental aspect of his approach that would come to shape nearly all his hedonistic theory. We will return to this point later. Bentham is very much a *Value Hedonist*. He believes that only pleasure and pain have *intrinsic value* and *intrinsic dis-value*. He is also a *Prudential Hedonist* since he believes that pleasure *ought* to be pursued and pain avoided.<sup>59</sup> So far he is completely in line with Epicurus, yet here is where he begins to differ in a small way. Bentham is a *very strong Motivational Hedonist*. Meaning, that he believes that the human psyche has only these two motivators for all our actions: Pain and pleasure. They are not only our primary motivators (and deterrents) but our *only* motivators. This is *strong Motivational Hedonism* in a nutshell which has been widely discredited by behavioral psychologists in modern times.<sup>60</sup> <sup>61</sup> Bentham says explicitly in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislations* that:

*“Mankind 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”*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> As we saw in Dante's *Inferno*, Epicurus and his followers were placed in the 6th circle of hell as a warning to others for their promotion of pleasure as the highest good.

<sup>58</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> Weijers, *Hedonism and Happiness*, 19-20.

<sup>61</sup> Ryan Hanlon Bremner, *Theories of Happiness: On the Origins of Happiness and our Contemporary Conception* (Bonn: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, 2008), 97.

<sup>62</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 14.

It is in his Normative Hedonism, his approach on the combination of hedonism and ethics where he really starts to differ from Epicurus. As we have established, Epicurus was a complex and nuanced thinker where hedonistic principles of pleasure and pain intermingled with notions of the value of friendship and the three virtues of wisdom, justice and honor in a delicate ideological ecosystem that was designed to guide man to live a good and ethical life. Bentham, in comparison, is somewhat ham-fisted and calculated in his approach of making a hedonistic theory. That definitely has its strengths and weaknesses. The strength of his approach is that it is logical and coherent. There are no gray areas left for interpretation in his core precepts, like in Epicurus' thought.<sup>63</sup>

Let's see what this coherent theory is advocating. Bentham wants to promote a *Utilitarian Hedonism* that advocates that the relative pleasure and pain of *all* involved are what matters, for everyone and in all cases. His greatest happiness principle states clearly that you should always do that which creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.<sup>64</sup> This is of course a very simple little soundbyte; his actual theory is a bit more complex than that as we shall see.

### **Bentham's Defense of Hedonism**

After the long hiatus of hedonism since the days of Epicurus, there was much to be done in order to reinstate the theory into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It had to be reintroduced to the public and intellectuals alike from scratch, because even those who were somewhat familiar with the theory, they most likely held a skewed or misrepresented view of it due to borderline systematic slander of it through the Middle Ages. Bentham set out to prove the merits of hedonism yet again and applied the strategy that offense was the best defense. He would set out to attack all other competing theories and reduce them to being nothing more but misapplied theories of hedonism when all was said and done. It is important to note for clarity that Bentham uses the word *utility* in all cases where he means *hedonism*. I will continue using *Utilitarian Hedonism* only in those cases where I am referring to the ethical theory that the pain and pleasure of all involved must be measured and valued equally.<sup>65</sup>

As a lawyer and a great pioneer in the study and shaping of jurisprudence, Bentham was very suspicious of all things that did not conform to the laws of conventional logic and had real-world tangential effects. Which means that all things which elude to some transcendent

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<sup>63</sup> Such as, what happens when there is a conflict of interest of justice and great personal pain or between my pleasure and the pleasure of a dear friend of mine.

<sup>64</sup> This might very well apply to sentient creatures, as in, all animals with the capacity to feel pain.

<sup>65</sup> As per Weijers' seven categories of hedonism.

values or metaphysical claims ought to be done away with. So when confronted with an ethical theory which states that one must act so and so for a “*greater good*,” Bentham would ask what that meant? What is a *greater good*, *virtue*, *purity* etc? Any values which cannot be reduced to either pleasure or pain are meaningless in Bentham’s mind. There are no natural rights, no God-given rights, values or standards. All such things must rest on a solid foundation of *utility*. That is to say that it must prove to have some real world application as it relates to the principles of pleasure and pain.<sup>66</sup> He thought it was futile to *prove* hedonism because hedonism was the all-encompassing theory that would be used to disprove all rival theories of the common good. Whatever theory opposed it would in the end have to appeal to the utility of pleasure and pain or prove to be meaningless. He argues that if you use the Socratic method of deductive reasoning with questions and answers, then all values will eventually appeal to the hedonistic principles or stand on nothing at all.<sup>67</sup> If that is true, then why do we seem to value other things above pleasure? Things like, duty, honesty, sacrifice, purity, abstinence etc. These are all things that seem to cause a person more pain than pleasure or at the very least can rationally be chosen above some immediate pleasure which might be available by foregoing these principles. If we analyze these substitutes for pleasure, using the Benthamic method of deducing supposedly non-hedonistic values into the pain and pleasure paradigm, it might go something like this:

I could argue that honesty is a virtue only inasmuch as it produces pleasure. The whole point of social etiquette is to protect us from the harm of honesty. If I find my wife’s attire distasteful I balance the supposed “intrinsic” value of honesty compared to the pain I might produce by voicing my opinion. Most rational men would forego offending their wives when there is nothing to gain from it for the simple “*intrinsic*” value of honesty. Being honest for honesty’s sake when there is no pleasure to be gained from it, is not something civilized people choose to do. And even if they do choose to do so, it will hardly be considered ethical, even by fervent opponents of hedonistic theory.

This argument can be inverted to show how we might choose pleasure over honesty, just as we have shown how we choose the absence of pain over honesty. We constantly give little compliments in our everyday interactions with people. It is ingrained into most cultures. “*How nice to see you*,” “*you look great*,” and “*well done*” etc. Most people have no ethical qualms in giving little compliments to people no matter how it affects the virtue of honesty. This is because an insincere compliment produces pleasure at no expense to anyone, honesty be damned. We can also ask: When we seem to choose honesty over pleasure and the avoidance of pain, like if I can no longer sit idly by and say something painful for the sake of

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<sup>66</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

honesty, am I really doing it for the sake of *honesty*? I may allude to the fact that I say these painful things *because I am compelled by honesty*, but is that ever really that case? When I consciously hurt your feelings for the sake of honesty, there is a reason I do so. If I simply “can’t sit idly by” anymore and am compelled to produce pain with my honesty, then there is a reason why I simply “can’t sit idly by” and that reason can be deduced to pleasure and the avoidance of pain. That means that when I speak out and produce pain I am in fact trying to alleviate some pain or seeking something that brings me pleasure by doing so. The reasons I might produce pain with honesty can include: Unburdening my frustration, lashing out, proving my superiority by demeaning you, the carnal joy of engaging in aggression, appealing to nobility by stating that my offences are compelled by honesty and principle etc. All of these things are pleasurable to a varying degree to many people and so they simply trade the pain of their words for one of these pleasures or others of the kind.

One might choose to follow a path of general honesty at the expense of some pain for the principle of it though. That again is to avoid the pain of being perceived as dishonorable and the pleasure of being perceived as trustworthy and honorable through a life of consistent honesty. This is simply the long-term investment in these pleasures and avoidances of pain at the expense of short term, immediate pleasures and pains of foregoing honesty in the moment. Thus, you never really escape the pleasure/pain paradigm by appealing to *honesty*. The same goes for all of these classic virtues that men say that trump the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Even the ascetic, he who sacrifices all pleasures for a life of simplicity and service, he too is making a decision based on pleasures and pains. The former argument can be made that there is pleasure in appealing to virtue<sup>68</sup> for monks, ascetics and martyrs have usually always been highly regarded in their perspective societies. That is one argument, but it usually would not be strong enough on its own. Because to forego all pleasures for reputation alone would seem like a bad deal on the pleasure vs pain scale. That is why, as I argued above, these ascetics always have some other reason for their chosen lifestyle. No one becomes a monk in order to be a monk, that is to say, no one foregoes pleasures simply in order to forego pleasures. These people are seeking something. Their lifestyle is a means to an end because there is not *inherent* value in avoiding pleasures and even seeking pain. Monks seek the pleasure of simplicity, to be unburdened by hectic secular life and the anxiety that it brings with pressures to be successful and get ahead. In that way one might say they are avoiding pain by retreating into their simple cloistered lives.

That may very well be a factor for many and it adds to the pleasure of engaging in virtues and the reputation it brings, but there is usually another greater appeal to such a life. Because

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<sup>68</sup> Note that there is a difference in practicing a virtue and the pleasure of appealing to a virtue. Like the difference between being honest and the pleasure of being regarded as honest by your fellow men.

actively foregoing all pleasures is a very large investment, so there must be something grand that they seek in return if we look at their situations from a hedonistic perspective? Some grand price of immense pleasure in order to justify a life devoid of it? That is what we would expect to find when looking at the reasons people turn to ascetic lifestyles. It just so happens to be exactly what we *do* find. Monks trade their short term pleasures in this life for an eternity of overwhelming bliss in heaven. Buddhist monks may do the same for the promise and pursuit of enlightenment and the eternal bliss that offers. Any good hedonist would make the same choice if that deal was assured. The most selfish glutton of a hedonist, devoid of any classic virtue would be the most devout monk if an eternity of pleasurable bliss in the afterlife was assured, were he possessed of any reason. This would imply that even monks and ascetics, the conventional representatives of the anti-hedonists, *can* in fact be said to be hedonists on a mission of prioritizing their pleasures and pains for the ultimate jackpot of everlasting pleasure.

### **Bentham's *Utilitarian Hedonism***

Here we discuss what makes Bentham's hedonism different from Epicurus'. We have seen how he defends the merits of classical Value Hedonism and *Prudential Hedonism* as he argues that the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain are the only things of *inherent* value and *ought* to be pursued. We have also seen his insights into Motivational Hedonism, on how he believes that the human psyche is driven by pleasure and pain as its prime motivators in all of our actions. So far he and Epicurus have seen eye to eye on most things, but it is in the execution of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain where they differ.

As we recall, Epicurus argues that you should seek *your* pleasure<sup>69</sup> and avoid pain and preferably bring pleasure to others and avoid bringing harm to others if it can be avoided without great pain to yourself. Bentham on the other hand has a colder, more calculated and impersonal approach to this. What Bentham did was to make a calculus where you could judge the relevant factors in your decision making that could estimate whether you *ought* to pursue that action and whether it was ethical to do so. He called this analytical tool *The Felicific Calculus* and it goes as follows:

Take these factors into consideration before you commit to an action that might have any sort of pleasure associated with it and see how it measures up with any other plan of action you

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<sup>69</sup> Even though he argues that freedom from pain *is* pleasures, there are still other pleasures like friendships and sober reasoning that need to be actively pursued.

might pursue instead. The one that comes out scoring the highest on this criterion will be the action you *ought* to take.

1. Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
2. Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
3. Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
4. Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
5. Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
6. Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
7. Extent: How many people will be affected?<sup>70</sup>

This does require some independent thinking and analysis though. The number of people affected might skew the results of this because as a *Utilitarian Hedonist* the relative pleasure of all is what counts. This means that an overwhelming pleasure for yourself compared to the miniscule annoyance of a 1.000 people might tell you to reject the action.

The calculus is meant to give you an oversight of the overall level of pleasure that will be created. You must weigh the relative pleasure as a whole very impersonally. It doesn't matter *who* is affected or how that pleasure will be dispersed. Here we come back to the point made earlier that Bentham approaches hedonism as a lawmaker or a policymaker might: someone who has to think of the common good in very broad impersonal terms.

It may very well be a good tool for making an efficient and moral policy or law for society in broad strokes, but I doubt that this is how people make personal decision for their own life. This becomes a bit more complicated because all hedonistic theories are *consequentialist theories*, which means that it is the *outcome* of your actions and not your intentions that matter, since meaning to produce pleasure but accidentally causing pain is still only a creation of pain. If pleasure and pain are the only things that have *intrinsic* values, then how do we judge good intentions that accidentally produce unintended pain instead of pleasure? If I say: "I may have produced pain, but I didn't mean to", it does not change the fact that when we look at the consequences of my actions then there is only pain and in a paradigm where pleasure and pain are the only visible factors to determine the right ethical course, then I am as much in the wrong as if I had intended to produce only pain. This is the nature of *consequential theories*. The utilitarians do account for intention in their ethics, but I argue that their hedonism accounts for it on its own. I argue that Bentham's views on pleasure covers intentions, if we look at his *Felicific Calculus*. If I hurt you accidentally and I produce 10 units of pain I am clearly in the wrong for having caused pain, no matter my intentions.

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<sup>70</sup> Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 31.



Even so, I can say that it is still better than if I do so intentionally and create the same 10 units of pain because of steps 5 and 6.

If I accidentally punch you, I am likely to be sorry and act apologetically, get you some ice and make amends. I will be very motivated to counterbalance my inadvertent creation of pain with immediate pleasure for you. Therefore, step 5 “*Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind*” is not likely if I did not mean to do it. I am likely to be more careful flailing my arms around you after I make amends. Also, step 6: Purity: “*The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind*” is unlikely. The opposite kind of my accidental creation of pain is the first thing on my mind as I apologize and try to mend the pain I caused. If I, on the other hand, created those same units of pain with full intention, then I would merely have succeeded in my mission of causing pain and would be unlikely to follow it up with bouts of pleasure or the diminishing of pain for you. In that way, I would argue that in regards to pleasures and their promotion, Bentham’s *Felicific Calculus* makes intention relevant in an otherwise consequentialist theory.

## **John Stuart Mill**

John Stuart Mill would take up the mantle of Bentham’s Hedonistic Utilitarianism and proceed to defend, critique and refine it. Mill was born in 1806 in Pentonville, England to the Scottish philosopher, historian and economist, James Mill. James became great friends with Jeremy Bentham in 1808, when John Stuart Mill was only two years old.<sup>71</sup> That friendship between his father and Bentham would come to drastically influence Mill’s life, upbringing and education. Bentham and James concocted a plan to turn little John into a philosophical prodigy from a very early age and set to teach the infant the basics of philosophy as early as possible. This resulted in Mill’s childhood being dominated by intense studies of philosophical writings, sitting at his father’s desk as he worked. On top of that rigorous learning schedule from infancy, it just so happened that little John was in fact somewhat of a prodigy, capable of learning things way beyond his years which resulted in him learning to read Attic-Greek at the early age of three years old.

This background is somewhat important because it would come to shape Mill’s own ideas on hedonism and some of his criticisms on Bentham’s ideas that we will explore further. John Stuart Mill wrote on a plethora of topics, including ethics, education, political economy, social policy, individual rights and many more. The one that we will keep our focus on is his

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<sup>71</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 9.

hedonism that he explores in his revised ideas on Bentham's utilitarianism. He was always meant to be a part of Bentham's movement of *Philosophical Radicals* which advocated for the bulk of Bentham's theories and views on various philosophical, ethical and political issues. Hedonistic Utilitarianism was only one part of that, but it is the part we will focus on here. Mill is very much a team player at first but in the later parts of his writings, he begins to criticize Bentham and his views on hedonism quite a bit. However, he never leaves the *Philosophical Radicals* movement or abandons the core precepts of *Utilitarian Hedonism* though.<sup>72</sup>

### **Mill's Criticism of Bentham's Hedonism**

We have explored Bentham's hedonism in some depth, how he approached the theory from a calculating jurisprudence point of view and defended the notion that the impersonal distribution of pleasure of all should be your primary guide when making decisions. This is of course somewhat removed from Epicurus' more personal nuanced approach despite them sharing a common core in Weijers' seven categories of hedonism theory.

Let's begin this analysis by seeing what Bentham and John Stuart Mill share in their perspective approaches to hedonism. It will be fairly obvious that their similarities will outweigh their differences since Mill is for the most part only revising and refining Bentham's theory of utilitarianism.<sup>73</sup> They both adhere to the principles of Value Hedonism, that the only things that are inherently valuable are pleasure, that which is pursued for its own sake and never as a means to an end. They obviously both agree on *Prudential Hedonism* that pleasure *ought* to be pursued, for without those two components then their theory of utilitarianism would fall apart. It is on Motivational Hedonism where things get a bit interesting. Bentham had famously declared that pleasure and pain were the *two masters* which controlled all of our actions<sup>74</sup> and Mill agrees with that up to a point. Mill had a more varied and nuanced approach to the human psyche, one that was hard to define and box into a simple little principle such as that.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>73</sup> Remember that we are using the term "*Hedonistic Utilitarianism*" to refer to Weijers' distinction of the ethical approach to hedonism which states that the pleasure and pain of **all** involved should count equally. Bentham's and Mills' theory of "utilitarianism" will mostly be referred to as their „hedonism“ which is then analyzed using Weijers' distinctions. Unless I am talking about Mills' and Bentham's theory by name, it will simply be referred to as "utilitarianism".

<sup>74</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 14.

He became profoundly depressed at the age of twenty and had years of experience desperately struggling with his own psyche. So if it were as simple as adhering to the *two masters* then Mill would have simply obliged by them to get his mental health balanced in a day or two, which was very far from his experience. He spent a great deal of time and work contemplating his psyche and how it could be remedied and balanced which he finally achieved years later with careful contemplation and self-reflection aided immensely by poetry and appreciation of beauty. This is far removed from the idea of the hedonist as the promoter of excessive sensual base pleasures. The human mind was a vast black hole of complexities and profundities. It wouldn't be summed up in sentence or two. This was indicative of Mill's general disagreement with Bentham on many issues. It was Bentham's brass-knuckled, cold and overly simplified appraisal of complex and nuanced issues.

Mill praises Bentham for being clear minded and concise.<sup>75</sup> There usually is no doubt as to where Bentham stands on the issues he had chosen to write about. There are no ambiguous murky mires to wade through in order to understand his opinions and stances. He is rational and consistent in his writing and thought. He is "admirable as a reformer and a legal systematizer, but entirely useless as a guide for the rest of life".<sup>76</sup> That being said, Mill does concede and agree with that pleasure and pains are a great part of what motivate our actions, but not in the overwhelming mechanical way that Bentham postulates. Mill thinks that the hostility to his and Bentham's Motivational Hedonism is due to misunderstanding,<sup>77</sup> which is probably not helped by Bentham's overly strong phrasing of his opinion that man's psyche is a slave to pleasure and pain only.

Motivational Hedonism does open up for concerns about free will. If we are completely ruled by our desire for pleasure and our aversion to pain, than how can we have free will? We will delve into classic criticism of hedonism later, but let's keep that point in mind. Mill did not, in fact, advocate for Bentham's strong Motivational Hedonism, but for the weak form which is less intrusive and more in line with most peoples experience of their own psyche. Pleasure and pain are *a factor* in most or all of our decisions and influence them *to some degree* in most or all cases. There are many variables here which leave plenty of wiggle room for a person to claim sovereignty over their own minds and free will without excluding or refuting the influence of pleasure and pains on our decisions. We would be hard pressed to find a stauncher protector of free will and the individual rights needed to exercise it, than John

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 44.

Stuart Mill. He practically wrote the book on the subject.<sup>78</sup> Many have argued that Mill's idea of free will and individual rights are of central importance to him and far outweigh any notion of hedonism and utility.<sup>79</sup> So if those two were ever to conflict, it is the doctrine of pleasure and pain that would have to bow before free will and individual sovereignty over one's own mind and body.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, Mill's approach to Motivational Hedonism can be summed up by saying that he finds grains of truth in it at least. Pleasures and pains clearly do influence our behaviors and decision making but never to the extent that it infringes on our free will as rational creatures.

### **Mill on the Quality of Pleasures**

Let's start with a distinction of terms before we move forward. As far as hedonism goes, Mill and Bentham had their differences as we have showcased, but none as decisive as the one they have on the nature of pleasures. Their differences on this particular topic would be so irreconcilable as to split the theory of utilitarianism in two. No longer would Mill promote and promulgate Benthamite hedonism, but propose and defend his own version of utilitarianism that would later go by various other names by modern scholars as to distinguish it from the classical Benthamite theory of utilitarianism.

In order to simplify things and get our terminology in order let's review a few terms before we proceed. *Utilitarianism* is the theory both Mill and Bentham subscribe to, which is a form of hedonism that says that things must be measured in its utility according to the greatest happiness principle, that which brings most pleasure to the largest amount of people or even all sentient beings. They have radically different ideas on what that means though; how pleasure ought to be measured as well as how that theory should be executed. Hedonistic Utilitarianism is one of the tools Weijers uses to analyze hedonistic theories. It is the ethical theory that the pleasure and pain of all involved must be measured equally. Both of Mill's and Bentham's theories fall into that category. It is an altruistic hedonism, as opposed to selfish hedonism which Weijers labels Hedonistic Egoism. This altruism is clearly stated in both Bentham's and Mill's works, that it is the general happiness (the pleasure over pain) of *all* involved, not just your own. Your own pleasures and pains should not even get a heavier emphasis than those of others affected by your actions, as Mill says: “[F]or that standard [The greatest happiness principle] is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest

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<sup>78</sup> See his book *On Liberty* (1859) where he speaks of political or social freedom and *A System of Logic* (1843) where he speaks of metaphysical freedom.

<sup>79</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

*amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it.”<sup>81</sup>*

Bentham’s utilitarianism has been labeled as *Quantitative Hedonism* in order to distinguish it from Mill’s version which has often been labeled as *Qualitative Hedonism*. Both theories self-identify as *Utilitarianism* and are both labeled as Hedonistic Utilitarianism in Weijers’ diagnostic system.

### **The Difference Between Bentham and Mill**

The task for us is to understand what is the difference between Mill’s *Qualitative Hedonism* and Bentham’s *Quantitative Hedonism*? We have a pretty good insight into Bentham’s theory by now so his distinction is, therefore, a good place to start in that comparison. We have seen how Bentham values pleasure in his *Felicific Calculus*. He has various categories for us to assess the value of the general pleasure produced by our actions, such as intensity, duration and extent. Pleasure is simply a matter of math to him. One can always come to the right altruistic hedonistic conclusion by simply counting the relative “units” of pleasure that will be produced by your actions. We have touched upon Mill’s objections to this cold, calculating and simplistic view of pleasure in an earlier chapter. So how would Mill improve upon this?

We will see in Bentham’s calculus that there is one glaring omission in his categories of pleasure. It is one of *quality*. He has one on *intensity* but is that the same as *quality* when it comes to pleasure? If we are to distinguish between high and low quality of pleasure, are intense pleasures always of high quality by default? Mill does not seem to think that so and refutes that intense pleasures are synonymous with high quality pleasures because he himself has a whole another criterion for the relative *quality* of pleasures as we shall see.

One of the benefits of working with the ideas of John Stuart Mill is that he is such an excellent and coherent writer that is able to express even complex ideas in a very concise and clear manner, so I will let him explain why and how he qualifies pleasures as higher and lower, in his own words:

*It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in*

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<sup>81</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 282.

*estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.*

*If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.<sup>82</sup>*

Here we see him present and defend his qualification of higher and lower pleasures. It is the category of *quality* that was sorely lacking in Bentham's hedonism, Mill thinks. Yet it is not absent merely due to some clerical error in Bentham's calculations of pleasures. Quality is simply not really applicable to Bentham's perception of pleasure. To him it is a matter of intensity and duration and other criteria of that nature. It gives a very level playing-field of pleasures. It doesn't take sides or cater to subject preferences of pleasures.

### **Mill and Bentham on swine and pain**

This makes Bentham's hedonism more susceptible to the classical criticism that hedonism is the philosophy of swine. Which means that it is the theory of the good life that is as applicable to swine as it is to humans. Indeed, it reduces human beings to the status of swines. That was an argument that hedonists had been bombarded with since the days of Epicurus and quite unfairly so. It is a strawman argument against the Folk Hedonism representation of the selfish short-sighted glutton. It equates hedonists with swine who roll around in mud, that is, in base sensual pleasures. A more prudent version of the argument would be that it applies equally to swine as it does to men. This objection does in no part apply to Epicurean hedonism, nor to Millian *Qualitative Hedonism*, but might have a grain of truth when it comes to Bentham's *Qualitative Hedonism*. There is nothing really that excludes swine from Bentham's theory other than the fact that the swine themselves lack the rational foresight of applying his calculus to foresee the consequences of their own actions. They can still be a relevant and equal factor when a human calculates its actions in Bentham's mind. That means that if I were to use his calculus to decide on a plan of action for myself,

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<sup>82</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 279-280.

and should said actions affect the swine in any manner, then its pleasures and pains are as equal to any other's in the calculus.

There is no distinction of kind in Bentham's model of pleasures. A human satisfied is in fact the same as a pig satisfied or even more importantly for animal rights, a pig's pain is as important as a human's pain. This is the greatest strength of Bentham's hedonism in my view that it does not discriminate between the pain of animals and humans. This was a radical idea in Bentham's time and in many ways still is to this day. Many animal rights activists and philosophers such as Peter Singer owe Bentham a great deal in setting up this framework for animal rights through hedonism. For it does not matter if animals can speak, think or rationalize, it matters only if they can suffer. If they have the ability to feel pain, then that is all the platform they need to demand the rights to be free of pain, for that is his hedonistic criterion of true pain. There is no distinction of *who* feels the pain, only that there *is* pain. So we may criticize his simplistic views on pleasure, but it is his "simplistic" views on pain that really set the stage for a non-anthropocentric hedonism that cares not for a distinction between "higher, nobler, deeper, profound human pain" and beastly pain. There is only *pain*. It is what makes us equal.

Mill on the other hand firmly refutes the swine argument. It is not applicable to his version of hedonism any more than it was for Epicurus. Mill says that pleasures are what are intrinsically valuable and ought to be pursued. How is he immune from the swine argument then? Is that not applicable to the life and values of swine? Yes it is, Mill admits, but even though a human and a swine might live by the same principle, that of hedonism, they do so in remarkably different ways. Mill says to those critics, that if they state that we might as well be and live like swine if pleasures are all that matters, then they are saying that all the pleasures they can perceive of experiencing and enjoying are those that are available to the swine.

It is not him and the hedonists, Mill says, that are belittling humans with their theory of pleasures, but the critics who uphold that the only pleasures available to human life are those that we share with pigs.<sup>83</sup>

Mill basis his distinction of the higher and lower pleasures on human exceptionalism, which means that the higher ones are only available to humans.<sup>84</sup> Higher pleasures exist because humans exist. There would be no higher pleasures without us and the ones that cannot for the life of them grasp any semblance of these higher pleasures are barely human in Mill's mind, as we shall see. These higher pleasures are the ones that are created when man engages

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<sup>83</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 278.

<sup>84</sup> It is not clear whether Mill thinks that the higher pleasures would be available to aliens with rational faculties akin to humans or to animals were they to develop human rational traits, but I am inclined to say, yes, they would be available to them.

pleasantly with his higher faculties of reason, feeling and sense. Those attributes that make us distinctly human are the ones that generate the distinctly human pleasures. Those are the higher pleasures that Mill speaks of: Those of higher quality than others. That is not, as noted above, merely a distinction in intensity, duration or any other category found in Bentham's calculus. For I can experience the distinct human pleasure of reading a good book, which is exclusively available to my species and therefore, a higher pleasure and of greater quality than a pig's orgasm that might beat my own reading pleasure in intensity by far on a Benthamite scale. Therefore, a high quality pleasure does not automatically mean, or is synonymous with, a high intensity pleasure, according to Mill.

One should not even try and compare any aspect of those pleasures, for it does not even matter how the base pleasures that we share with pigs measure up with our higher distinctly human pleasures in intensity or any other kind, for we are always comparing apples and oranges. The higher pleasures are not only higher in quality, they are different in *kind*.<sup>85</sup> This harkens back to Epicurus as he said that, yes men should seek pleasures and avoid pains, but those pleasures were of a specific *kind*. Any pain should be avoided, that was a given, but the pleasures that we ought to seek were *not* the ones available to pigs, because as we will recall, most of them lead to suffering in the long run, but we ought to seek the pleasures of intimate friendships and sober reasoning. One might argue that those specific pleasures were distinctly human, at least the one of sober reasoning. This is starting to sound an awful lot like Mill. Both of them are suspicious of base sensual pleasure for hedonistic reasons. Epicurus avoids them because they are pitfalls of desire and further suffering. They might rob you of your sovereignty to be independent of them and mourning their loss might cause you pain.

Mill on the other hand advocates avoiding them (up to a point) for other reasons. He is working in a hedonistic framework that thinks of the whole. He is in fact working within Weijers' altruistic Hedonistic Utilitarianism and seldom is it in the absolute best interest of *all* that you make decisions where you lavish yourself in excessive luxury and pleasures.

Also, a reasonable man that has at any time cultivated a taste for the higher pleasures will prefer those over the lower ones. A man may occasionally slip and prefer the lower pleasures above the higher against his better judgment, but that is not fatal to Mill's argument. He says:

*It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of*

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 282.



*character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.*<sup>86</sup>

This argument not only preserves his idea of the self-evident superiority of the higher pleasures, how we can stumble and forego them occasionally, while still recognizing them as a higher good, but also tackles the ideas of Folk Hedonism. He addresses the notion of the short sighted man who trades an immediate gratification at the expense of his greater/long-term pleasure vs pain paradigm.

As Mill has explained, his criterion for a higher pleasure was that if a person had experienced both a higher and a lower pleasure, he would not want to regress back into the lower one in exchange for the higher, as a rule. We simply would not choose to become swine after having once been human were we given the choice. Not even a well-kept swine where all of its needs were fulfilled. As he says:

*Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.*<sup>87</sup>

This is an understandable argument that may appeal to many or even be self-evident to others. I myself am not so convinced that Mill speaks for all, or even most, of humanity in this assertion that we would not sacrifice some sense, some reason and intelligence for the pleasures of a beast. It might very well be a tempting offer to many despite his assertion to the contrary.

I think the argument reversed might make my refutation a bit clearer. Would we sacrifice some sense, reason or intelligence in order to be rid of some pain? I think that is a far more pressing argument if we are to look for kinks in Mill's armor. I would argue that yes, that might be a very tempting offer to many. It all depends on the levels of pain and circumstance of course. I think that Mill is unaware of the philosophical can of worms he is opening with these sorts of arguments because if they are only mildly tweaked, we stumbled upon an age old problem in the philosophy of well-being, that of desire. If we have at one time had the desire for intellectual pleasures which engage our reason and refined feeling, the archetype of

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<sup>86</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 281.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

Mill's higher pleasures, then we wouldn't trade it for an inferior pleasure. So the argument goes. Yet, that is *not* the offer Mill presents us with. We must recognize that his offer is *not* that of simply having had these higher pleasures and then simply exchange them for some base unrefined instant gratification. Mill offers us to become a beast *whose desires and needs are fulfilled*. If we take him up on his offer and renounce our humanity and reason (and with it the access to our higher pleasures) and become beasts, then we don't really have a *need* of higher pleasures. Were I to become a pig and have *my needs* fulfilled I would be thoroughly content and blissful. I would not spend my days in sorrow and mourning over my lack of higher pleasures or my abilities to process them. I simply would be unaware of them. Reading a good book, writing a thesis or engaging in sober reasoning would simply be out of my sphere of wants and desires. How can I mourn that which I am oblivious too, especially when all of my conscious needs are well taken care off? This is simply the same paradigm as the Epicurean who simply removes the desire for a thing so his wanton of it does not cause him harm. Were I a human being of refined feeling and intelligence but one who lived in a cultural wasteland where my need to have those rational human aspects of my psyche stimulated, I would be in pain. I would have a distinct human desire for a higher pleasure that I am in want of.

By virtue of my capacity to experience Mill's higher pleasures, I am in pain. That is not a good deal for any hedonist, so even though I may have had a taste of the higher pleasures I may very well be inclined to rid myself of my *desire* for them, just as an Epicurean might rid himself of the desire for something which is unobtainable to him. A refined pallet can be a gateway to excruciating pain when left in want of its desired pleasures. Therefore, taking Mill's offer and becoming a fulfilled pig might very well be the rational hedonistic choice for Mill's "*intelligent human*."

## **Mill as a Eudaemonist**

Once Mill makes his distinction of lower and higher pleasures, those of refined human pleasures of quality and the ones that we share with animals, he does open himself up to new avenues of criticism. Once you have a difference in *kind*, in your distinction of pleasures, some might doubt your commitment to the core principles of hedonism. Evan Kreider argues, for example, that the Millian *Qualitative Hedonism* is so radically removed from basic hedonistic theory that it is best to read it as a eudamaemonic theory rather than a hedonistic

one. That is the only way that it retains logical consistency with its own precepts.<sup>88</sup>

Eudemonism is the ethical theory that whatever brings about well-being is the right thing to do. It is usually ascribed to Aristotle and his virtue ethics where he argues that the good life for man is to be virtuous as that brings about the most well-being and the core of eudemonism is that *well-being* is the only thing that has *intrinsic value*. This is opposed to Epicurus, who agreed in part, but argued that *pleasure* was the only thing that had *intrinsic value*. What they are arguing about is the simple question of *what is pursued for its own sake?* Is it well-being or pleasure?

Mill self-identifies with hedonism and argues that it is pleasure that we desire for its own sake. Pleasure is tangible and empirical and does not rely on obscure or metaphysical concepts of the good. Mill himself says: “[P]leasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.”<sup>89</sup> It is clear that he identifies pleasure as that highest good, not well-being. So why are we even talking about this? Kreider wants to argue that Mill may say that he adheres to the core principle of Value Hedonism but it only goes so far when Mill redefines “pleasure”.<sup>90</sup> When pleasures are made higher and lower where the higher ones bear distinct similarities to Aristotelian virtues, the lines get blurred. The higher pleasures, according to Mill, are produced when men of intellect and refined feeling engage pleasantly with their intelligence and reason.<sup>91</sup> Kreider picks up various quotes from Mill that seem counterintuitive to classical hedonism, like this one: “*With much tranquility, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain*”<sup>92</sup> Here we have a statement that seems very much at odds if we look at Mill as a classical *Value Hedonists* and a *Motivational Hedonist*. Not only do we resign ourselves to very little pleasure if we possess tranquility, but we might also endure great pains for the sake of excitement. These conditions are put forth as descriptive of the human psyche. We find these states-of-being acceptable, says Mill. Here he clearly states that there are things we value more than pure pleasure and the absence of pain. Tranquility above pleasures and excitement above pain. This doesn’t seem very hedonic if we are to measure this to Mill’s core precept for his hedonism where he says: “*Utility, or the Greatest*

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<sup>88</sup> Evan Kreider, “Mill on Happiness” *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2011): 1-2.

<sup>89</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 278.

<sup>90</sup> Kreider, “Mill on Happiness” *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2011): 2.

<sup>91</sup> This does not exclude things such as pleasure from poetry or other such artistic endeavors because they require human intelligence to be appreciated. If it is a pleasure unobtainable to a pig for mental reasons, it is a higher pleasure.

<sup>92</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 284.

*Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.*"<sup>93</sup>

It certainly seems damning at a first glance if we are willing to sway from the principles of utility, depending on our inclinations for tranquility or excitement. I would argue though that there are two ways this can be reconciled. One could argue that this peculiar statement *can* be interpreted in a hedonistic form if we think back to Epicurus. Like we saw at the start of his chapter, he distinguishes between two different kinds of pain: Mental and physical pain. It is the primary goal of Epicurus' theory to be free of pain. Everything else is secondary. To be free of mental pain is to obtain his *ataraxia*, his version of tranquility. Epicurus also promoted the idea that pleasures ought to be minimal once the freedom from pain was relatively secure. Only pursue friendships, sober reasoning and simple living. So many other pleasures like additional luxuries are high risk pitfalls of excessive desires that may lead to unnecessary suffering. Therefore, a pursuit of tranquility at the "expense of pleasures" is actually a very logical lifestyle to pursue for a hedonist when we compare it to the teachings of the original philosophical hedonist, Epicurus.

I am not quite sure that the same goes for excitement at the cost of pain. I can't find a logical hedonistic model that would justify such actions aside from arguing that boredom or lethargy are pains in and of themselves. Therefore, one might seek excitement to remedy that pain at the cost of some lesser pain. A man highly troubled by boredom and desire for excitement might seek it at the expense of great pain but a man who wouldn't mind a bit of excitement but is not particularly bothered by his sedentary lifestyle might pursue some excitement but not at the risk of great pain. Therefore, when Kreider argues that because of Mill's assessment on tranquility and excitement, that pleasure is not required for the good life<sup>94</sup>, I could refute him by saying that Mill is indeed still dealing with the pleasure and pain paradigm once we realize that tranquility *is* a pleasure and excitement *is* a remedy for the pain of boredom and lethargy.

Kreider continues to argue that with Mill's distinction between the higher and lower pleasures, he is creating a new platform for people to calculate their happiness. There is such a stress put on these higher pleasures, the ones that are specifically human, infused with specifically human sensibilities. Not only are these pleasures, pleasurable, but also necessary for a particular *human dignity* that we all possess in some form. This dignity is essential for

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<sup>93</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 278.

<sup>94</sup> Kreider, "Mill on Happiness" *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2011): 2.

human life for without it we are nothing but mammals frolicking in the mud. Therefore, it must be maintained in order to live a good human life, pleasures and pains be damned. It trumps the hedonistic paradigm according to Mill, Kreider argues.<sup>95</sup>

Such statements can only be salvaged as being logically consistent if we read Mill as a eudemonic thinker, not as a hedonist. If Mill thinks that human virtues are necessary, and therefore *valuable*, as ends in themselves and not merely as means to a good human life, then how is he really different from Aristotle? Mill makes his distinction of the higher pleasures in order to promote the development of the distinctly higher rational human capacities. That has nothing directly to do with pleasure or the avoidance of pain Kreider says, it is simply the Aristotelian notion of mankind as a species developing its rational traits in order to advance as a species.<sup>96</sup> Mill's ideas on the freedom of speech in *On Liberty* also have a eudemonic flare to it according to Kreider. Mill is fervently in support of freedom of speech. It is not only good or useful; it is not good because it leads to good things. It is good in and of itself. If a man speaks and causes another pain with his bluntness, he should not be silenced. Freedom of speech is a *good* that is above the pleasure and pain paradigm. It is a principle that drives the rational development of the species, or so Kreider argues. The same goes for freedom of opinion. Those rights are not a part of the hedonistic paradigm, but simply essential for "the mental well-being of mankind (which all other well-being depends)".<sup>97</sup> Not surprisingly, Kreider thinks all this talk of well-being, is suspiciously eudemonic. Therefore, he thinks that Mill is not a hedonist, since he seems to argue for various goods that are necessary and seem to have various aims other than facilitating pleasures and avoiding pain. Aims like the mental development of the species or the development of individual higher rational faculties. Mill is simply a eudemonic, not unlike Aristotle, as he seems to promote various kinds of well-being through non-pleasure centric methods as well as advocating for these various virtues that rely on nothing but principle or some vague notion of a good life or well-being. This is unlike the hedonic account of the good life where value can be measured in tangible pleasures.

Mill is simply caught in a hedonistic framework, due to his close connection with Bentham and the philosophical radicals, so he uses their hedonistic jargon and frame of reference, but he is in fact advocating for a drastically different theory for the good life that takes focus away from the hedonistic core of simple pleasures and pains. Or so Kreider wants to argue, and it is certainly an interesting perspective worth noting.

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<sup>95</sup> Kreider, "Mill on Happiness" *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2011): 7-8.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

## **A Refutation of the Reading of Mill as a Eudaemonist**

I would like to close this segment off with an attempt at a rebuttal to Kreider's arguments.

Mill has certainly made his arguments clear on why he thinks a distinction between the higher and lower pleasures is necessary. Firstly because it refutes the criticism that hedonism is the philosophy of pigs and showcases how the pleasures of pigs are not the same as the pleasures for men. We might have a common core of pleasures but the ones that are distinctly human are not only higher in *kind* but naturally preferred by all those who have experienced them. These higher, uniquely human pleasures are of the utmost importance for Mill's hedonism not at least because they serve as the basis for his theories in *On Liberty* I would argue. This is Kreider's argument turned around, as we shall see. If free speech and freedom of opinion ought to be self-evident rights that exist for their own sake, then what does that say about Mill's commitment to Value Hedonism? We have seen him clearly state that he truly believes that pleasures are the only thing that are pursued for its own sake and never as a means to an end for something else. I would think it highly presumptuous to deny that this was his opinion on the matter once we have seen him state it so clearly. Then what of the freedom of speech, why is that sacred even though it may clearly promote pain when left unchecked. Why not tweak it in such a way that it can be better fitted to the classical hedonistic paradigm to ensure that speech does not cause unnecessary harm? Why not make a principle for speech that makes insults and hurtful comments illegal? Wouldn't that be what the utilitarian hedonistic policymaker would argue for? Surely there is no harm or pain inflicted by restricting insults is there? Are men in any actual form of pain in their want of flinging verbal mud at each other?

Mill may seem like he is preferring some virtuous principle of freedom over the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, because as I have argued, there are surely ways to make speech laws more compatible with the hedonistic paradigm of pleasure and pain. This is where we are wrong though. I would argue that even though it may *appear* that Mill is preferring principle of freedom over hedonism, he is not. We will recall another criticism of Kreider where he says that Mill's statement that free speech is fundamental to the mental well-being of mankind is eudemonic. This is a key factor in explaining exactly the reverse of Kreider's point. Mill had said that the principle of freedom of opinion and freedom of speech was crucial for developing the higher human reasoning skills as we will recall. A point that shows that these principles of freedom are in fact not valuable in and of themselves, but merely a means to an end. In this I think I have rescued Mill's Value Hedonism. It is still only pleasure that has *intrinsic* value in his mind. But what of this development of the higher human reasoning skills? Is that an end in itself? It certainly sounds like it. We should develop

our rational capacities as individuals and as a species, even though it might be painful.<sup>98</sup> It does sound like an end in and of itself. How can this possibly be hedonistic?

I would argue that no, the development of our rational human faculties is not an end in itself and yes it is a hedonistic idea. We will recall Mill stating that the higher pleasures are those we produce when we engage pleasantly with our own rational higher faculties. Therefore, if it is the hedonistic mission to promote as much pleasure for mankind as possible and that is the prerequisite for experiencing these higher pleasures, then Mill, as a hedonist, could only be logically consistent in arguing for a social order where the development of those higher rational faculties were a priority. Therefore, if a somewhat abrasive and painful free speech is what is needed for humanity as a whole to develop the skills needed for the higher pleasures, then, on a hedonistic scale, it is well worth having full free speech and freedom of opinion laws because in the end they will set up the stage for us, as a species, to experience more of the higher pleasures overall. In that way freedom of speech is a means for development of our rational faculties which in turn is a means for us to be more receptive of the higher pleasures. This is perfectly logical in a hedonistic framework and exactly what one would expect a Qualitative Hedonist to argue for.

## **The Role of Pain in Hedonism**

We have talked about the aversion many have towards the core principals of hedonism, that of pleasure being the only thing of intrinsic value. I have great sympathy with people who find the notion unappealing or simply base and revolting. I understand that gut instinct that immediately tells you that there are a multitude of things that have great value for us in our lives that don't boil down to our personal pleasures. In most cases though, as the main proponents of the theory have argued, those fears can be quelled by diving deeper into the arguments against hedonism. Presenting various versions of altruistic hedonism where the pleasure of others is of utmost importance is a good starting point. It negates the ignoble stereotype of the hedonist as a selfish self-destructive glutton. Other measures can be used in the defense of hedonism like using deductive reasoning to dissect the things people claim to be of value above pleasures, like virtue, love, truth etc. That ought to, in most cases, reduce those things to pleasure, that is, that pleasure is their ultimate goal when it really comes down to it. We do strike a similar chord in many people when we say that pain has no value, or that pain is the only thing of *intrinsic* negative value. Many might oppose that notion for

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<sup>98</sup> See reference to how his version of freedom of speech may produce unnecessary pain.

the very same reasons. How can hedonists say that there is no value in pain? We have a culture that has romanticized the notion of “noble pain” to no ends through poetry, ethics and religion. It has especially been engrained in our tablet of values through Christianity, that pain is a necessary evil and sometimes even a necessary good.

In our Biblical scriptures we see numerous instances where suffering and pain is romanticized and endorsed for non-tangible reasons. In ethics, personal pain and suffering is often encouraged for some greater noble good. In most cases, that can logically be deduced to be pleasure in some form for yourself or for your community. That is consistent with the hedonic framework at least, even though these promoters of pain don't consciously recognize that they are playing into the hedonistic paradigm. The religious promulgation of suffering is a bit harder to fit into a hedonistic framework because in many cases the suffering that is promoted within the scriptures does not have tangible rewards. We have explored Bentham's arguments that monks who abstain from pleasure in order to be saved and get an eternity of pleasure in heaven are in fact nothing but high-stakes-hedonists<sup>99</sup>, which is an argument that is hard to refute, but the *promise* of heaven is still not a tangible pleasure. Sacrifice for sacrifice's sake is not hedonism, it's just pointless, bordering on madness, as Mill argues. He says:

*[S]elf-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? Would it be made, if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men can do, but assuredly not an example of what they should.<sup>100</sup>*

That's the main point of hedonism when it comes to pain. If you are going to choose to incorporate any pain into your life or simply choose not to avoid it, there has to be a point to it. Bentham and Mill as Utilitarian Hedonists can surely see multitude of reasons why a

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<sup>99</sup> See, *Bentham's Defense of Hedonism*.

<sup>100</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 287.



person might choose to experience some pain because your pain might mean less pain for others or more pleasure for others.

It is not un-hedonistic to choose pain and sacrifice if it leads to some hedonistic goal, like more pleasure or lesser pain for yourself or others. I think it is especially easy for Bentham to rationalize all sorts of pain in his hedonistic model because he is both altruistic in his hedonism and argues that all pain is equal in kind. That means that it doesn't matter who experiences the pain or for what reason. Pain is pain. Therefore, I might choose to experience some massive pain in order to bring about a bit more pleasure to the lives of a large herd of cows. That is completely rational and consistent with Bentham's quantitative hedonism. For Bentham, pain is certainly an evil, but it is also a currency. I might embrace tremendous pain in order to purchase a higher amount of pleasure. This can work for me as a person, but ultimately I should think of all affected by my actions. So, therefore, I might embrace tremendous pain in order to purchase a small amount of pleasure for a lot of people which would, when stacked up, prove to be a greater amount than the pain I purchased it for.

This applies for anyone affected, not just humans. Because in Bentham's mind, the pain animals feel is the same that people feel. That does invite some human exceptionalism though because the theory only allows rational altruistic creatures to follow it. I cannot expect a tiger to take the pain of its prey into consideration when it is hunting for example. So while I might choose to endure some pain for the pleasure of pigs, I cannot expect the pig to voluntarily choose to experience some pain or abstain from some pleasures on my account.

Things get a bit more complicated with John Stuart Mill when we approach the role and value of pain. He is of like mind as Bentham on the core that pain is always an evil and has no value of any kind except as a currency for greater pleasure or for prolonged freedom from pain in the future. He too opens up numerous scenarios where a man might (and in some cases, ought) to choose to experience pain for the sake of others. It might be a sound investment for your own future pleasures or simply for an elongated period of freedom from pain. It might also be a communal effort on your part where you pursue your hedonistic duty to experience suffering of some kind in order to promote the pleasures of others or relieve them from pain. In both cases one must assume that the pleasure and freedom from pain purchased with your suffering will be greater than what was suffered, otherwise you have simply created more overall suffering in the world which is the prime sin of all hedonists.

So far Mill is pretty in line with Bentham on the role and value of pain, but Mill's qualitative hedonism makes his worldview more complex than the simple hedonistic calculus of Bentham can account for. Mill's primary objective is to promote the expansion of higher

pleasures. Those high quality human pleasures that are obtained by pleasantly engaging with your higher human rational faculties. He is perfectly comfortable using suffering as a currency for that aim. That means that all things that set the stage so that more humans are receptive to those higher pleasures are his aim. All things that help us as a species develop our rational human faculties are good and fundamental to this aim. These things may well cost a bit of suffering without directly producing pleasure. So freedom of speech that allows for insults and hurtful comments is well worth the suffering, not because it provides pleasure of some kind, but because it helps make humans more developed in their reasoning and mental attributes and *that* is the platform needed for the expansion of the higher pleasures.

I would argue that what we have here is not a straightforward “pain as a currency to purchase pleasure” -model like we see from Bentham, but a “pain as a currency in order to set the stage for increased receptiveness of higher pleasures” -model.

Epicurus has a completely different view on pain than Mill and Bentham. He sees no value in pain of any kind. Not even as a currency for further pleasures. His whole philosophy has the aim to be rid of pain. Not merely making sure you have more pleasure than pain, but to abolish pain completely. When your hedonistic theory presupposes that pleasure is the freedom from pain, then there is very little that suffering can buy you. If all you want is to be free of pain, for that is pleasure, then trying to purchase that with pain is nonsense. There certainly are pleasures aside from those to be free of pain, but none that come close to the core pleasure that is to be free of pain

Exchanging the pleasure to be free of pain for another pleasure is always a bad deal according to Epicurus. If I purchase some luxury with suffering, then the pleasure I bought cannot compare with the pleasure of being free from suffering. His teachings value independence from pleasures that don't rely on being free from pain, so if pain was considered a currency there would nothing be worth purchasing with it in his hedonic model. It isn't really clear, however, what he thinks when it comes to the suffering and pleasures of others. He doesn't explicitly say that you should choose suffering to ensure the pleasure or freedom from suffering for others. We have only encountered him saying that close friendships are of great importance and that men should live justly.

If my pleasures and pains come into conflict with those of my dear friends or distort the process of justice, it is not clear how one should act. Should I choose personal suffering to purchase the freedom from suffering for my friends or strangers? It isn't clear but I am inclined to think that it is simply a personal choice. One does not have an Epicurean obligation to do one over the other. I am inclined to think that personal freedom from pain is

more important than either justice or the suffering of my friends in Epicurean hedonism; simply on account of how much stress he puts on the personal abolition of pain.

## **Non-hedonistic Insights into Pain**

Hedonism has many objectors as we have mentioned and just as there are many competitive theories that claim human life has many things of *intrinsic value* aside from pleasure, so are there numerous alternative theories on the role and value of pain for human life.

Various philosophers would argue that there are numerous reasons that man ought to choose suffering and personal sacrifice. The very notion seems ingrained into our ethical compass that personal sacrifice is a good and noble thing. Bentham and Mill don't object to it per se, but it must have a point to produce more pleasure or relief more pain in the end, either for yourself or for others. Personal sacrifice with no tangible reward for anyone involved is simply pointless they argue.

## **Christian Insights into Pain**

We have touched upon just such a teaching in the scriptures of the Bible. Now it is time to present and analyze what it says on the topic of suffering without tangible rewards. This is important for a discussion on hedonism as these teachings on pleasure and pain are some of the most influential of all in the west and have shaped our natural receptiveness to hedonistic theories.

When we have dozens of generations raised in an ideological environment where sacrifice for sacrifices' sake is applauded and suffering is presented as a self-contained virtue that needs no tangible reward or reason for existing, it is no wonder that hedonistic theories have been met with aversion and dismissal. Suffering and self-sacrifice without tangible rewards is where the effects of those pains cannot be reduced to some greater pleasure or the future freedom of pain. Promulgation of such sacrifices usually take the form of:

“You must suffer because of X and X is a virtue”,

“You must suffer for your faith or to prove your dedication to the faith”,

“You must suffer because God favors those in pain”,

“You must suffer to be closer to Christ and his suffering”

“You must suffer to pay for a transgression against the dictates of the faith” and

“You must inflict pain on others for transgressing against the faith”.

There are of course many more. These are just some examples of arguments or demands that promote or order some sacrifice in exchange for nothing that can be measured on the hedonistic scale. Let’s look at some actual Biblical examples of these:

*“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”*<sup>101</sup>

Here we have an argument for suffering for Christ’s sake. You do not gain any pleasure from your suffering, nor does Christ. You are not sparing anyone further or prolonged pain. There is no one that gains anything from this suffering when it comes to either pleasure or freedom from pain. This is what John Stuart Mill would call empty, pointless suffering.

*“Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”*<sup>102</sup>

Again we have a commandment that promotes suffering with no tangible rewards. This is the argument that one must suffer to be closer to Christ because *he* suffered. This is the *sharing of suffering* argument. There is nothing to be gained from it, neither pleasure nor freedom from pain for anyone involved. The idea that you are helping a cause or a person by imitating their suffering as an act of empathy and unity is absurd to the hedonist. All you have done is doubled the amount of suffering by inflicting it upon yourself instead of extinguishing it in the other.

*“And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”*<sup>103</sup>

Here we have an argument promoting suffering for the sake of discipleship and post-mortem promises. A hedonist would argue that any mentor who would require suffering as a point of entry to their tutelage had already failed as a mentor. This is because whatever wisdom he has to give, it has *instrumental* value for you to be better equipped to live well, but suffering has *intrinsic* dis-value for your well-being. Bentham and Mill might concede that the pain required by Christ to become his disciple might be worth the entry price should his teaching have the power to drastically improve your quality of life in the hedonic calculus, but

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<sup>101</sup> Colossians, 1:24.

<sup>102</sup> 2. Timothy, 2:3-4.

<sup>103</sup> Luke, 9:23.

Epicurus would most likely refuse as he does not see pain as valid currency for anything. The second part of this argument appeals to post-mortem promises which are not tangible to the hedonistic paradigm.

*“[W]e share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.”<sup>104</sup>*

Here we have a peculiar argument for the promotion of pain. It argues that one should share in Christ's suffering for ideological reasons. One should also share in the sufferings of others of the faith as a sign of unity because the unity of ideological suffering brings comfort. For the hedonist this seems very peculiar because when taken on hedonistic face-value, this seems to present a problem (that of suffering) that is its own solution (that of comfort). The Epicurean would approach this argument as such that first there is collective ideological suffering and then a collective reprieve from suffering. They would not accept that there can both be suffering and not suffering at the same time. There is however no reason given for why collective ideological suffering and comfort would correlate between participants of this practice.

*“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”<sup>105</sup>*

Here we are again presented with the idea of ideological suffering: The argument that you must suffer for ideological reasons. You do not really have a reason to suffer except for an ideological commitment to suffer. This will seem very counterproductive to hedonists. There is no mention of a reward or a point to the suffering, it is merely presented as a self-contained virtue that exists for its own sake, hurting for the sake of pain.

*“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”<sup>106</sup>*

Here we finally have an argument that might be considered valid by hedonists. We haven't really touched upon *discipline* as a factor in any hedonistic calculus, but it can very easily be incorporated into various hedonistic theories. Only straw-men Folk Hedonism theories are

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<sup>104</sup> 2. Corinthians, 1:3-7.

<sup>105</sup> Philippians, 1:29.

<sup>106</sup> Hebrews, 12:11.

said to promote the pursuit of pleasures without any discipline.<sup>107</sup> Epicureans of course value discipline very highly. It is the cornerstone of their teaching on independence from the outside world: To be free from unnecessary desires and excessive luxury. Discipline is also just a fundamental part of any hedonistic rationale. When you decide some plan of action for yourself with the aim to maximize pleasure and minimize pain you need discipline to stick to it. This is where the Folk Hedonist comes in. Even though he is not an accurate representation of any kind of hedonist that has been argued for, he can serve as an example of what not to do. He is short sighted and excessive. In short, he lacks all discipline. He would pick the most immediate gratification at the expense of greater or more long-term pleasures. He would make bad choices regarding his health with either drugs or unhealthy pleasurable foods. He would still be a hedonist and consistent in the core of hedonistic thought, he would just not be a very logical one due to his lack of discipline in following through with the choices that are more likely to be productive for his long term well-being as far as pleasure and avoidance of pain is concerned. So all forms of rational hedonists would agree with the author of The Book of Hebrews that whatever discomfort or pain may come of discipline, it is still a good thing and conducive to a good life. They would however, disagree that it was good because it “*yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness,*” because righteousness is not a good in and of itself. It is only an *instrumental good* because it makes sure that neither you nor others suffer pain at the hands of others.

*“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”*<sup>108</sup>

This is another instance of suffering as a point of entry into an ideology. The only thing an ideology has to offer a hedonist is a more efficient way to maximize pleasures (for oneself or for all, depending where you land on the hedonistic scale) and avoid pain. Paying a price of pain into an ideology that seems to hint at continual suffering where bearing ones cross is a chronic lifestyle with no tangible rewards, must be considered as a hollow and empty bargain to all hedonists.

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”*<sup>109</sup>

This will be our last example of a Christian glorification of suffering without tangible rewards. Here we at last have a clean bargain of suffering for a prize. Bentham and Mill recognize pain as a currency so this might appeal to them in theory, especially the idea that present suffering

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<sup>107</sup> We will recall the Folk Hedonism stereotype of the hedonist as a short sighted glutton, prone to excess and utterly devoid of all discipline.

<sup>108</sup> Luke, 14:27.

<sup>109</sup> Romans, 8:18.

are miniscule compared to the prize offered. If the deal rings true then that is indeed a deal that the utilitarians might well consider taking. Well what is being offered in exchange for suffering? Some great glory will be revealed. This is a very good instance to explain the merit in the clarity of hedonism. Hedonistic theory strives to cut away all the metaphysical and transcendent fat away from ethics and drag things of value for a good life down to earth. Make those things tangible and obvious to all. Having authority figures demand or explain away suffering in exchange for non-distinct terms and rewards is not conducive to a happy life. If I ask you to suffer, I better give you a good reason, one that makes sense to philosophers and children alike. If I say you must suffer “for duty,” “for the love of country,” “for obedience to God,” “for virtue,” “for rewards in another life” or even “for then great glory will be revealed to you”, I have not given any tangible reason for your suffering. All such bargaining should be met with great suspicion. Therefore, in a hedonistic paradigm, I have to explain clearly what greater pleasure I will bring about in exchange for your suffering. You are able to rationally choose on your own terms if I am making you such an offer, because you are well acquainted with the sensations of pleasure and pain. If I offer you any of the other rewards or reasons for your suffering, you are unable to quantify them with your suffering in order to measure if it is a good deal or not. How much will you have to love your country in order to suffer 10 units of pain? How much for 20 units of pain? How important is your pain in the eyes of God, is it enough for you to part with some of your possessions in order to please him or must you feel actual physical pain to show your devotion and how would you know that you have suffered enough or not suffered enough for him? What is the exchange rate of pains vs units of revealed glory? What exactly does glory do and how is it conducive to you living a good life? These are all ethical quandaries that hedonism wants to clean up. Do away with all of those meaningless terms and useless values. If I am to ask you to suffer I better be able to offer you direct pleasure or something that is instrumental to pleasure in return so you can clearly estimate whether or not you think that deal is a good one or not. Therefore, I think I can safely say that Christianity’s ideas on pain and suffering are not compatible with any of those hedonistic theories we have covered in this paper, and while the freedom from pain is certainly more central for Epicurus than for Bentham and Mill, I think none of the three would partake in any of bargains of pain vs rewards that Christianity has to offer.

### **Callicles’ and Nietzsche’s Insights into Pain**

There are two other philosophers whose insights into pain and suffering I would like to address. These insights are those of the ancient Greek interlocutor of Socrates, Callicles, and that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Their views are very relevant to our analyses on the hedonistic views on the role and value of pain even though they are both anti-hedonist. Both of them see great value in pain, for different reasons and both are very critical of the ideas that pain should be avoided to the best of one's abilities. Nietzsche criticizes Epicurus in teaching that men ought to try and minimize their pain and maximize their pleasures. He says that the two are so interconnected that if one wants to have an abundance of one, the other must follow. Divorcing the two is impossible. Happiness/pleasure is derived from the act of *overcoming* adversity and pain. Triumph of the will. One must have the desire, the want and the need in order to quench it. A thirsty man who drinks is happier than those that never experience thirst. This is very much in line with Callicles' thinking, even though Nietzsche does not acknowledge him in any of his works.<sup>110</sup>

I would argue that Nietzsche is not really doing the nuances of Epicurus' happiness theories justice. It's a somewhat ham-fisted interpretation of his theories, but the contrast between them is clear none the less. While Epicurus thought that the main obstacle to happiness was pain (and self-sabotaging behaviors like excessive desire which lead to pain), Nietzsche argues that pain is the core component of pleasure, and therefore, of happiness.

That argument is twofold in Nietzsche's mind. First, the *act* of overcoming pain is pleasure. Not the pain free state which follows pain's demise, but that glimpse of a moment where pain is undone through the sheer force of will. That moment is the euphoric glimpse of man's happiness. It is important to note that this *overcoming* of pain is not undertaken in search of that particular miniscule moment of bliss, but rather, that glimpse of pleasure, for Nietzsche, is not the end goal. It is just an insignificant side effect of a process of overcoming oneself which has little to do with *happiness* as we have hitherto defined it.<sup>111</sup> The second notion is that pain, not merely the overcoming of it, is always a lingering part of all pleasure. This seems to me to be a terse argument that does not follow the first step in any logical way. If pleasure is the moment of overcoming pain, and yet pain is still a lingering and essential part of all pleasure then is pain ever really conquered?<sup>112</sup> This is a muddled stance to take which may be explained by the fact that Nietzsche did not particularly care for either pleasure or happiness and famously did not think them very useful or essential for living a good life.

Let's turn our attention to Callicles, the progenitor of the idea that pleasure, and by proxy, happiness, needs pain in order to be fulfilled in any meaningful way. In the dialogue *Gorgias*, Callicles debates Socrates about pleasure, happiness and pain. Callicles argues, in a similar vein as Nietzsche, that pleasure is overcoming pain and happiness is generally the

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<sup>110</sup> Kristian Urstadt, "Nietzsche and Callicles on Happiness, Pleasure and Power," *Kritike*, volume 4, (2010): 133.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.



equivalent of pleasure or at least relies upon pleasure, it is not a 100% clearly defined, but it matters not for this line of arguments which it is. A man who is thirsty experiences more pleasure by drinking water than a man who is not thirsty.<sup>113</sup> That follows that a man who is thirsty and drinks, having his desire quenched and the pain of his thirst dissipate is a lot happier than a man who has never, or is incapable of experiencing thirst. If you are going to acknowledge the pleasure of a cold drink of water as a good, than you must acknowledge that thirst, as a thing in and of itself, a want, a desire, a pain, is also good. Pain and pleasure are so intertwined that one cannot be had without the other.

This line of reasoning seems rather reasonable and would prove to be rather influential (and controversial) in various aspects of human thought regarding the role of pain, desires and even evil, in human lives. But as for the argument itself, it opens up a whole line of similar reasoning with different components. For example I could say: “If you were to recognize friendship as a good, then by association you will be forced to concede that *loneliness* is a good”, for loneliness is the prerequisite for the joys of friendship. Callicles argues that these pains are good in and of themselves. It is fortunate that they are a fixture of human life so that we may experience their pleasurable antidotes. We should not merely be thankful for loneliness because it highlights the joys of friendship, we should actively engage in loneliness from time to time for its own sake. Don’t merely praise the world for its inclusion of the mystical sting of loneliness while you revel in the company of friends and loved ones. No, engage in loneliness so that you may truly feel the joys of friendship.<sup>114</sup>

Wait until you become hungry before you eat, engage in hunger before you sate it. He argues for a life of want and fulfillment. Not a life of constant gratification. It isn’t enough that *hunger* exists so that the pleasure of food may be experienced, if you refuse to engage in hunger. He likens the life of the glutton, he who shies away from all discomfort, to a bucket that is filled with water. There can be no more water poured into it, it simply spills. The water is still and stale. It is no better than the life of a rock, full and content, without motion and barely living. A better life is that of a man with a leaky bucket. It needs to be constantly replenished since the water slowly leaks out of it at the bottom. It drains near the bottom (engages in want and in pain) and then is filled up again. It is in constant motion; constantly having its fulfillment replenished and overall will take on infinitely more water than its sturdier non-leaking counterpart.<sup>115</sup>

I am not entirely convinced by his line of reasoning. I do not think we need to praise the problem for allowing the conditions for the existence of a solution. I can have various

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

problems, ailments and pains which I detest and yet I can be endlessly grateful and revel in the fact that there are solutions to these pains. I do not have to recognize disease as a good because it gives way for a cure. It simply does not follow one from the other in a strict correlating sense. However in spirit of fairness, Callicles seems to focus on solutions which bring pleasure above their value as a mere tool for overcoming a particular pain. So while I don't have to feel grateful for the existence of the Polio disease for me to appreciate modern vaccines against it, I can surrender the point that the joys of friendship are heightened by the sting of loneliness, for not only does loneliness give way for friendship as a solution, but makes it something far beyond a mere solution to a particular problem. It is a solution that is pleasurable in and of itself, more so than any mere vaccine that removes pain.

Callicles, and to a lesser extent, Nietzsche, argue for a life filled with an appreciation for desire. A healthy engagement with hunger, pain, loneliness will make the antidotes of these things that much sweeter. Pain and pleasure are so intertwined that one cannot be separated from the other. Overcoming pain is a pleasure in itself, a triumph of the will, a moment of victory which sharpens your resolve and your character. On top of that, the rewards of friendship, for example, far outweigh the mere remedying of loneliness, so the state of the world that includes the somber sting of loneliness has opened up a desire for companionship and the wealth of pleasures that can be found in friendships. They argue that to be alive and fully partake of this life's pleasures means engaging in want, in desires, in lack, in pain and then have those ailments fulfilled and reveled in, again and again. That is the *good life*: An eternal seesaw of pain and pleasure, the two intertwined aspects of a truly blessed human life - for those that can stomach the ride.

## **Criticisms of Hedonism**

We have touched upon some criticism of hedonism already in the previous chapters, but mostly only as inputs in order to illustrate hedonistic arguments. Let's look at some classic criticisms of hedonism.

### **Criticisms from Happiness Studies**

First let's take a look into some criticisms from the scientific field of *Happiness Studies*, where social and empirical sciences come together to study happiness in societies and individuals. This is a valid undertaking and certainly a positive development that harder sciences than philosophy are taking the notion happiness so seriously. I do take serious issues

with their arguments against hedonism though, for their lack of philosophical insights, as we shall see.

The Dutch sociologist, Ruut Veenhoven, says in his article *Hedonism and Happiness Studies* that there are two main objections to hedonism, or more accurately, there are two platforms for objecting to hedonism. One is at a societal level, that hedonism is bad for society and the environment in general and the other is on an individual level, that hedonism does in fact not make people happy. He says:

*The environmental argument holds that hedonism gives rise to over-consumption, and that this will add to the ongoing depletion of natural resources and consequently will hasten the destruction of the environment. Aeroplane tourism is just one of the dirty dogs in this reasoning. Following this line of argument it is suggested that hedonism reduces ones awareness of danger, because self-indulgences smothers awareness and critical thinking. The land of the lotus-eaters will be destroyed! Similar claims are made about the deleterious effects of hedonism on society. The daily treadmill of conspicuous consumption impoverishes social quality in many ways, undermining morals and destroying the work ethic within society. Again hedonists are seen to be blind to these dangers, since pleasure induces an unrealistic and rosy outlook. These views are often presented as part of a broader critique of consumer society and modernisation.<sup>116</sup>*

This argument is from the main publisher of peer reviewed articles on happiness studies, the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. One can be forgiven to double check that because this argument is almost completely bereft of any logical consistency with any hedonistic theory that has been explored in this paper. This criticism from a sociological point of view introduces three points:

1. Hedonism argues for over consumption and pollution which is harmful to society
2. Hedonism entails the loss of critical thinking skills which is harmful to both the individual and society
3. Hedonism undermines ethics and the moral fiber of societies, which is harmful in and of itself.

There is no correlation between Epicureanism and over consumption. The strictly advocate for minimalistic consumption and harmony with your surroundings. Greed is completely incompatible with all the Epicurean precepts we have explored here. Without greed you

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<sup>116</sup> Ruut Veenhoven, "Hedonism and happiness," *Journal of happiness studies*, volume 4 (2003): 2.

cannot have excessive consumption which in turn implies that Epicurean hedonists will be the least likely to aggressively deplete the earth's resources and pollute the environment. The same can be said of the theories of Bentham and Mill. Once we venture into *Utilitarian Hedonism* you also hit a brick wall when you venture into overconsumption. How can it ever be in the best interest of all that you, or anyone else, over consume anything on an earth with limited resources? It doesn't matter what area you focus on, be it food, energy, clean water, once you horde any of these, there is less to go around for others and that makes you complicit in furthering overall suffering, which is completely against the core of both versions of *Utilitarian Hedonism*. I would argue that pollution is accounted for in the utilitarian hedonistic theory even though it is not directly mentioned. Pollution decreases the pleasure of all who enjoy breathing. Hedonists of all kinds have a highly vested ideological interest in keeping the environment clean and self-sustainable, for that is the fundamental premise for being able to experience pleasure and avoid pain.

Mill would argue that none of the higher pleasures require over consumption or aggressive depletion of the Earth's resources, in fact, such a pattern of behavior would be counterproductive to furthering the expansion of the higher pleasures for humans. Even Bentham would argue against overconsumption and pollution had he been approached with the topic. The arguments he has put forth so far are indicative of that fact. He is the one who bluntly wanted to maximize all pleasures. Build a mountain of pleasures that stack and have it tower over the stack of pain. That was the good life. Then how would he argue against consumer behavior that deplete the earth's resources at an increasing rate when doing so would maximize pleasures more than contentment? We can plainly see that Bentham would oppose such a pattern of behavior when we analyze his *Felicific Calculus*. Step 5 and 6 do cover this issue.

5. Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
6. Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.

Even though Bentham might not have been aware of the seriousness of human pollution and the drastic effects it would have on the global ecosystem, I would argue that these two principles cover the issue. If I over consume it will obviously be to the detriment of all others due to the finality of resources, but aside from that let's take these two points at face value.

5. When I over consume and pollute it might bring me pleasure. If we all do it, it might bring all of us pleasure, but the more we do that the less likely it is that our actions will be followed

by a sensation of the same kind. There is less to go around and the overall quality of our environment and surroundings will decrease in tandem with our actions. Therefore, over consumption and pollution fail the 5<sup>th</sup> step in the *Felicific Calculus*.

6. The same goes here. The over consumption and pollution of one will have the adverse effect on others. There is a direct correlation between hoarding resources and polluting of one, to the scarcity and diminishing quality of life for others. Therefore, it also fails step 6 in the *Felicific Calculus*.

So there is in fact no school of hedonism in the philosophical tradition that advocates for personal over consumption and pollution in order to bring about pleasure. The argument is simply null and void.

As for the other points of Veenhoven's argument, it is hard to say if any hedonistic theory reduces the ability for critical thinking. All main proponents of the theory that we have covered have all been highly intellectual. They have all promulgated and defended their hedonistic theories on basis of rational argument and discourse. The hedonic tradition is therefore highly intellectual at its core. On top of that, two out of three of the main proponents have actively encouraged intellectual scrutiny and inquiry as a main component of their hedonism. Epicurus had laid immense stress on the value of friendship in his hedonism. One reason was that having friends was a very efficient way to protect yourself from the evils of this world, the other was that *sober reasoning* was the greatest pleasure of all and in order to engage in that, one needed friends. John Stuart Mill is even more adamant about the importance of rational discourse and the development of the hedonists' rational faculties. So much so that he even argues for introducing additional pain into society in order for us to be exposed to all manner of opinions in order to broaden our horizons. When a hedonist is ready to use pain as a currency for something that does not directly relate to pleasure, you know that that thing is of utmost importance to them. Having a more rationally developed humanity will make us more receptive to the higher pleasures so it does go full circle into pleasure in the end though. This ties into the third point in the criticism: That of hedonism undermining ethics and the moral fiber of societies.

We have already gone extensively into hedonistic ethics theories. Hedonism does not undermine ethics, it is an ethical theory at its core. The worst that can be said about it in that regard is that it is an alternative ethical theory that may rival conventional ethics in various societies, but it is very hard to argue that hedonism in and of itself undermines *ethics*. That would mean that it was sawing off the branch it was sitting on because it is a part of ethics, as an ethics theory for the good life. It may very well undermine some other ethical theories, but

that is simply a difference of opinion in the theories which should be celebrated in all ethics discourses. In the previous chapter on Christianity's insights into pain we saw a glimpse of how the hedonistic ethical theories engage with other incompatible ethical theories and this is where this contention about ethics connects with the second point on critical thinking. In that chapter where Christianity and hedonism argued about the role of pain, a topic which incidentally comprises one half of all hedonistic subject matters, that of pain, we saw two radically different approaches to *how* these matters should be discussed and analyzed.

What hedonistic ethical theory wants to do is to drag the discussion on *the good* down to earth so it may be measured and perceived in a tangible way. Stop talking about virtues, truths, glory, blessings, beauty etc. and talk rather of pleasures. We cannot compare the value of glory in any meaningful quantifiable way to the value of truth. How much truth is equal to 4.5 moments of medium amounts of glory? This is no way to *rationaly* discuss ethics and the good. The only way for a meaningful *rational* discussion on ethics and the good is to have a consequentialist view where all values are broken down to units of pleasure and pain. In that way a person can meaningfully value what she is ready to do for the pleasure of glory and what price is too high. It matters not that person X values glory immensely while person Y does not value it as highly, because when you exchange the abstract value of glory for subjective units of pleasure, things make sense again. Person X who desires glory might get 10 units of pleasure from being glorified at an event, while person Y might only get 4 units of pleasure for the same experience. Therefore, person X might be willing to sacrifice more and be more dedicated to achieve his goal of 10 units of pleasure, while person Y might not want to pay a high price in time, pain or effort to achieve it. This is the logical way to discuss ethics, hedonists will argue. So accusations that hedonism undermines rational and critical thought as well as undermines ethics are highly suspicious and borderline offensive to hedonists who claim that not only possess they a valid ethical theory, but a very rational one that promotes a platform for ethical discourse that makes critical thinking absolutely essential.

Veenhoven goes on to form additional arguments against hedonism, three of which form the brunt of his criticisms. I will engage with them briefly:

### **Argument #1**

*“One reason why hedonists might end up unhappy is that pleasure might fade with time. This would leave the pleasure seeker unsatisfied and give rise to an urge for ever-stronger stimuli. This could involve increasingly hazardous behavior and also lead, inevitably, to*

*disappointment, because experience blunts sensitivity, the result for the hedonist being one of emptiness.*"<sup>117</sup>

Here we have an argument that fundamentally misunderstands how hedonists value pleasure. Pleasure is all the things you enjoy. It is a subjective value-judgment. I may find great pleasure in reading Plato while you might not. That does not mean that the books of Plato *are* or *are not* pleasure. They are simply the object of my desire and tend to bring *me* pleasure. The idea of pleasure *fading* with consistent exposure might seem logical on the surface, but in reality, it does not lend itself to such an argument. Pleasure is not a one thing that you are exposed to. If I enjoy pizza and it brings me great pleasure and I over-expose myself to pizza every night for a prolonged period of time, then the pleasure I get from pizza might diminish and I might get tired of it, but that just means that my preference for pleasure in foods has altered, not that my receptiveness to pleasures from food has giving me diminishing returns as a whole.

It certainly doesn't mean that when I get diminishing returns from overexposure to a thing that used to bring me pleasures, that I must by default increase my doses of that thing. If I tire of pizza, the answer is not to have to increase the volume of it so that my original dosage of pleasure maintains the same. My receptors for pleasure don't dull by constant exposure to things I enjoy. My tastes will vary and change with age and maturity. I may develop new interests and taste as well as lose interest in others. That fluctuation is to be expected and has nothing to do with "blunt sensitivity" to pleasures.

## **Argument #2**

*"Pursuit of pleasure makes people evade challenges and therefore leaves them untrained. Evasion of experiences judged potentially painful would also reduce the hedonists stress tolerance, all this making hedonists more vulnerable in the long term and thereby also likely to be more anxious."*<sup>118</sup>

Here we have an argument that presents us with a problem for hedonists. If hedonists shy away from all experiences that might cause them pain, then aren't they ill-equipped to deal with the world? It certainly seems like a more fair assessment than the other arguments. First let's make sure that the premise of the argument is true. Do Hedonists shy away from all challenges that they judge as such that they might be painful? In the case of Epicurus, I would be inclined to say yes. There is never really a reason for an Epicurean hedonist to voluntarily

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

engage in painful activity. There is nothing to be gained from it when all you want is to be free of pain. Epicurus has a method to endure pain and stress by focusing on that it is always temporary. There is never really a need to worry for there is nothing to fear. There are no vengeful Gods or a judgmental afterlife so all you have to take care of is the minimization of pain in this life and even if you are so unfortunate as to be exposed to pains and suffering despite your best efforts to avoid them, do not worry, for pain is always just temporary. Worrying is in fact only adding on to the pain, since the core of his hedonism is to be free of physical and mental pain. Epicurus says: “*Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain*”<sup>119</sup> When you have nothing to fear except for pain and you are adamant in the perspective that pain is only temporal, then anxiety is minimized. This is how Epicurean hedonism promotes their *ataraxia*, the tranquility of being free from mental pain, like anxiety. So all things considered, Epicureans are fairly well equipped to endure painful experiences and anxiety.

As far as the utilitarians goes, it is a bit different. They both look at a pain as a currency. So if Veenhoven is right that the avoidance of pain leaves you more vulnerable and unable to deal with pain as well as being more prone to anxiety (which they also label as “pain”) due to your inexperience and incompetence, then they have a way to deal with that. If Veenhoven is right and avoidance of all pain actually produces *more* pain overall, then given the facts, the utilitarian hedonists would simply say that you should not avoid all pain, but engage in some challenges as they leave you more prepared to deal with future pains and reduce anxiety.

This isn’t a matter of the principle that all pains must be avoided at all cost and in all situations, for Bentham to say nothing about Mill. It is about that rational calculation of taking the actions that will lead to the most overall pleasure and the least overall pain. So in that hedonistic theory, Veenhoven is not bringing forth arguments *against* hedonism, but simply introducing a new factor for the hedonistic calculus. The hedonism of Bentham and Mill is flexible and will adapt to whatever the overall pain and pleasure levels of said actions are. So all arguments pertaining to how hedonists won’t fulfill the desired effects by pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, is simply a matter of fine-tuning the hedonistic calculus, not dismantle it.

### **Argument #3**

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<sup>119</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*: line 4.



*“[H]edonism erodes social bonds. In this reasoning the pursuit of individual pleasures makes people less sensitive to the needs of others, which links up with the earlier mentioned notion that hedonism leads to moral decay; and further isolation, with the hedonists left 'bowling alone'. That is obviously not much fun and the lack of companionship may make the hedonist even more vulnerable to addiction.”<sup>120</sup>*

Here we have an argument that hedonism erodes social bonds due to the selfish nature of the theory. Anti-social behavior leads to moral decay and loneliness is a factor that might lead to addictions. I do not doubt Veenhoven’s claims that selfishness might lead to antisocial behavior which might reduce ones empathy or adherence to traditional values. Nor do I doubt his claim that there might be a correlation between loneliness and addictions, but I do doubt that any of this has anything to do with hedonism. All three major hedonistic theories we have explored have either laid profound value in friendship<sup>121</sup> or been altruistic to the extreme, giving the pleasure and pain of everyone concerned equal value.<sup>122</sup> There is absolutely no hedonistic premise that undermines social bonds in any of the three major hedonistic theories, making the core of this argument null and void.

### **Robert Nozick and the Experience Machine**

The thought experiment called *The Experience Machine* by the philosopher Robert Nozick is a classic when it comes to arguments against hedonism. While I found that the arguments from happiness studies are mostly battling strawmen, *The Experience Machine* follows a more conventional string of arguments against hedonism. Usually when people have argued against hedonism they cite some other values aside from pleasure that we treasure for ourselves and often partake in at the expense of pleasure. They say that men often choose duty or virtue above pleasure, which is a fair point, but can be challenged, as Bentham and Mill did, that these things are merely a matter of preference in seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Robert Nozick’s argument follows a similar vain. His argument is that *living in reality* is a thing we value above pleasure and we would choose that at the expense of pleasure. That means that we would not forsake reality and live in a constructed illusion even if offered vast amounts of pleasure over pain in said delusion. His argument goes as follows:

*Suppose that there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time, you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes*

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<sup>120</sup> Veenhoven, Ruut, “Hedonism and happiness,” *Journal of happiness studies*, volume 4 (2003): 3.

<sup>121</sup> Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, line 27.

<sup>122</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, 278.

*attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? Nor should you refrain because of the few moments of distress between the moment you've decided and the moment you're plugged. What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision is the best one?<sup>123</sup>*

The presupposition of this argument is that most people would reject the offer, because even though it presents a fair and enticing offer of *Prudential Hedonism* (that the surplus of pleasure over pain equals to happiness), people would think that the price of abandoning reality, even for the sake of overwhelming pleasure, is too high.

I am quite skeptical of how valid this argument is because it contains various factors that do not directly address the pleasure vs. reality dichotomy. Leaving reality is a scary thing, no matter what you are promised. It is the reason that not even the most devout of Christians tend to end their life for the promise of everlasting bliss in heaven. Even if they are utterly convinced of the extreme superiority in the quality of existence in the afterlife, they still seem to cling to this life. Actually taking the leap to leave reality is a very frightening step to humans which may influence our decisions when presented with such an offer. Our inhibitions in taking the plunge does not however diminish the value or our appreciation of what is promised on the other side of reality.

When we analyze the data of how people would respond to this offer we see, that yes, a majority of people would refuse it, or 79% of those asked.<sup>124</sup> The reason for their refusal of the offer are varied and give us an insight into other factors that might influence a person's decision. 44% of those who refused cited some reasons for their refusal. They are as follows: 19% of those that refused cited reasons akin to Callicles' arguments that pain is required for

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 42-43.

<sup>124</sup> Wiejers, *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice*, 138.

us to experience pleasure, 14% of those who refused expressed fear that they would not have full autonomy or control in the machine, 4% of those who refused said they had responsibilities to others in reality and 3% of those who refused were afraid of the machine malfunctioning.<sup>125</sup>

Should a defender of hedonism be allowed to respond to this reason, she could say that you do not need to fear the lack of contrast with pain since your levels of pain are yours to control and program as well. For those who fear lack of control, one could argue that reality gives you even less control of yourself and your surroundings than the machine would. Responsibilities to others in reality might simply be your inner Hedonistic Utilitarian telling you that your overwhelming pleasures in the machine do not overshadow your obligation to the pain and pleasure of those counting on you outside the machine. Finally the fear that the machine might malfunction is not really an argument against hedonism. This is in addition to my first argument that leaving reality is simply a frightening step to take for humans no matter what, as we have seen in the millions of faithful that await perfect bliss in the afterlife, yet do not end their current lives. For those reasons I do not think that Robert Nozick's *Experience Machine* is a very convincing argument against hedonism.

## Conclusion

It is clear that hedonism has had its share of adversity through the ages. I have presented and engaged with some popular criticisms of hedonism but have yet to find any argument that would leave a lasting dent in its armor. The core idea of Value Hedonism that only pleasure has intrinsic value is still very compelling to me and one that I find hard to refute. Other things that supposedly have value above pleasure that people have argued can in most cases be deduced to pleasure when you really get down to it. Things like virtue, love of truth, beauty, duty and most other things that people have argued as having *intrinsic value* instead of pleasure, can be deduced to pleasure. Societies have values and from those values stem recognized virtues which are a set of behaviors that are beneficial to society. Everything that is beneficial to a society can be deduced to the creation and distribution of pleasure and freedom from pain for the citizens. Therefore, a self-sacrificing soldier that offers his life in defense of society is virtuous because he has laid his life in order to protect his society from harm i.e. from pain. His "virtue" is that of a Hedonistic Utilitarian, as is his "duty." We sacrifice the pleasure and pain ratio of a few for the hedonistic interests of the many. Even

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

ascetic monks that have consciously rejected all pleasures can be seen as being nothing but high-stakes hedonists that gamble away all of this life's pleasures in order to obtain an eternity of pleasure up in heaven in the afterlife. We rarely see people reject all pleasure simply for the sake of avoiding pleasure. It is the same with Nozick's *Experience Machine*. There are a multitude of reasons people might *say* that they would not sacrifice reality at the altar of pleasures, but there are numerous elements that factor into that decision that don't either directly relate to the value of hedonism or can be explained away in the hedonistic calculus.

When people reject pleasures it is seldom, or ever, that it is done merely for disdain of pleasure. Once their motivations and expectations are analyzed we see in most cases that such actions are merely a trade-off that they perceive will grant them more pleasure or less pain, in the end. You might see me rejecting the pleasure of a delicious cake, for the pleasure of being in shape. I might reject a multitude of mundane pleasures in order to live simply and thus free myself from the anxiety (i.e. pain) of modern life. I might pursue painstaking virtues of abstinence and self-sacrifice for the pleasure of the admiration of my fellow men. All of these things depend on desires and preferences. If I am vain or desire striving for athletic achievements, I will choose the pleasure of being in terrific shape over the pleasures of delicious fattening meals. The same goes for beauty. If I am inclined to value beauty above all else, I am simply valuing the pleasure of my experience of beauty which makes beauty nothing more than a simple *preference* on the hedonistic scale. Hedonists also argue that all valuable or reasonable sacrifices (where one chooses to reject some pleasure or experience some pain) have rewards that can be measured on the hedonistic scale. Inflicting pain on yourself or refusing pleasure with no intrinsic rewards are empty, meaningless gestures that no rational person should engage in. Hedonists always seek to drag these high-minded ideals, like virtue, truth, piety, beauty, etc. onto the scale of pleasure and pain and I would argue that it succeeds in that task.

In ethics, hedonism has multiple schools of thought that will yield different outcomes as to what would dictate ethical behavior in different circumstances, but what it does at its core is to bring ethical discussion down to Earth. It refuses to deal with ethical matters in abstract or intangible terms. The ethical validity of all claims must prove their worth and show exactly what pleasure they will produce or what pain they avoid. Hedonism is remarkably effective at dispelling meaningless values or ethical jargon that do not have *intrinsic value* on the hedonistic scale. It refuses to allow conventional ethics to state things like that one has a duty to sacrifice oneself for the love of country, for example. Hedonism challenges all such lofty claims to prove what tangible merit they have.

How will *love of country* improve your life or the lives of others?

Will *duty* bring anyone pleasure or shield anyone from pain?

Hedonism wants to turn ethics into something measurable and tangible. Ethics ought to be transparent enough so that every person can subjectively measure their expected pleasure vs pain ratio from any given action. That way people can be more in touch with their actual interests when *their* pleasures and pains become the foundation of ethical debates. The three main proponents of philosophical hedonism do differ in their theories on various subjects despite sharing a common core of Value Hedonism and Prudential Hedonism. Epicurus promotes a kind of hedonism that equates the freedom from pain to be the greatest of pleasures. All additional pleasures, like luxuries, can be enjoyed but ought to be approached with caution because dependence on them can be a great source of pain. A simple, pain-free life, independent of luxuries but filled with friendships and philosophy is the best life a hedonist can ask for according to him. Jeremy Bentham takes a more impersonal approach. He thinks that the pain and pleasure of all concerned should factor equally in all decisions a hedonist makes. Having a surplus of overall pleasures over pain is all that matters. His *Felicific Calculus* is a very lucid tool for a hedonist to analyze what the best course of action would be to maximize the overall pleasure for all concerned. His greatest contribution in my opinion is his idea that all pain is equal. It doesn't matter who feels the pain, if it is you or me or even a pig. That idea makes us all equal in terms of pain and would serve as a radical platform for animal rights where their interests would be of equal worth to those of humans.

John Stuart Mill builds on the premises of Jeremy Bentham but adds his qualification of pleasures on top of that. Those pleasures that are exclusive to humans due to our rational human traits are of more worth than the pleasures we share with animals. Developing those human traits will pave the way for humanity to experience more of these high quality pleasures. That is of utmost importance to him. Just as Bentham would use pain as a currency in certain situations should it lead to more overall pleasures, so would Mill be willing to use pain as a currency to set the stage for humanity to be more receptive to these higher pleasures. Bentham might deduce that the back-breaking pain of digging a well for a village would bring about more pleasure for all, the same way that Mill might argue that the pain of a mandatory rigorous education for children will make them more receptive to the higher pleasures throughout their lives. Epicurus is the only hedonist of the three that does not seem willing to use pain as a currency to purchase greater pleasure because, in his eyes, to be free of pain is the fulfillment of pleasure.

Hedonism is a simple concept that has remarkably varied and nuanced systems of thought that spring from it. It has proven extremely enduring throughout its history and still holds its ground in the face of criticism and dismissal. Its aim is to simplify ethics, dispel all high-minded ethical jargon that holds little tangible meaning and get to the roots of what is really of value for a good life. It can be applied effectively by children, by the selfish, by the extremely altruistic and even by the lovers of virtue and duty alike. It is very relevant in modern times, where there seems to be a definite need for a unified ethical system that respects the interest of all creatures in the biosphere that have the ability to feel pain. It is a system that can persuasively argue for the preservation of nature, for egalitarianism and the rights of animals from the simple premise that pleasure is good and pain is bad.

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