

A Refutation of Hedonism

I. What hedonism is

Hedonism is the doctrine that whatever is good in itself for a person is good for that person in virtue of the pleasure that the person takes in it.

And whatever is bad in itself for a person is bad in virtue of its painfulness.

So:

Activities that Sally takes pleasure in = activities that are good in themselves for Sally.

Activities that are painful for Sally = activities that are bad in themselves for Sally.

If a person neither takes pleasure in something nor is pained by it, that thing is neither good in itself for that person nor bad in itself for that person.

Examples:

If you enjoy playing tennis (that is, if you enjoy *playing tennis*, whatever your attitude towards beating your opponent, or taking exercise, or being thought an athlete by your friends, or anything else you associate with playing tennis might be), then playing tennis is good in itself for you.

If you are pained by missing the bus, then missing the bus is bad in itself for you.

If you are not pained by missing the bus, then, given that you don't positively enjoy missing the bus, missing the bus is neither good in itself for you nor bad in itself for you.

II. What hedonism isn't

A) Hedonism is not a psychological doctrine. It is not the doctrine that people are attracted only to things they enjoy and averse only to things that pain them.

It is not the doctrine that people in fact value only that which they enjoy.

Hedonism is, rather, a doctrine about value itself, about what is actually valuable.

B) Hedonism is not the doctrine that a person's own pleasure is the only thing good in itself for that person—not, that is, if this doctrine implies that pleasure is a feeling or state of mind to be distinguished from pleasant activities.

Hedonism is, rather, the broader doctrine that pleasant activities or pleasant occurrences or activities a person enjoys are the only things good in themselves for that person.

C) Hedonism does not imply much if anything about how we are to treat others. A person who holds hedonism true might also hold any one of various normative ethical theories.

D) Hedonism implies that the only things that are worth a person's pursuing for their own sakes are those things, whatever they are, that that person enjoys or are pleasant for that person. To the extent that a person is concerned with things that she does not enjoy or that are not pleasant, that person is living poorly or is wasting her life.

III. Examples meant to show that hedonism is false

1) You think Sally likes you and is your good friend. Unknown to you, though, Sally thinks you are an idiot and behind your back she makes fun of you to her friends. You never find out what Sally is doing and you always enjoy being with Sally. One day you leave to take a job a continent away, your new life absorbs you completely, and you never see or hear from any of the old gang again. (But whenever you think of Sally, you remember her fondly.)

Was there anything bad for you in your relationship with Sally? Hedonism implies that no, there was nothing bad for you in it, as you were neither hurt nor harmed in it—on the contrary, you enjoyed your relationship with Sally. But, of course, that Sally was not really your friend was very bad for you, and so hedonism is false.

2) The orthodox view in anthropology has been that the first people in the Americas were the people associated with Clovis tools. Recently, some anthropologists have proposed that there were people in the Americas before Clovis people, and so now the Clovis-first theory is a matter of contention. You, for your part, couldn't care less when or how or why or by whom the Americas were first populated, for you find no pleasure or pain in understanding matters that make no difference to your practical affairs.

But it would be good in itself for you to know about the world in which you live. And so your knowing how the Americas were populated would be something good in itself for you that is good in itself for you independently of your current affective attitude toward it.

3) You steal a person's car to go joy riding. Your punishment is time in jail. Being punished is painful to you, and yet it is good in itself for you to be punished for what you did, as it is always good in itself for a person for that person to get what he or she deserves. Since hedonism, though, implies that that which is painful to you is bad in itself for you (though it might have good effects), hedonism is false.

4) You are a promising young pianist. One morning you notice that your fingers are stiff. Your doctor tells you that you suffer from an untreatable neurological condition. Though you will not lose your ability to hold and manipulate objects with your hands, you will never again play the piano well.

Why is having this neurological condition bad for you? If it is bad for you because it robs you of the enjoyment of playing the piano well, then were you simply to cheer up (perhaps by pursuing other things you enjoy), your neurological condition would no longer be bad for you. But your neurological condition would not cease to be bad for you merely were you to cheer up, so hedonism

is false.

Contrary to hedonism, your pain at no longer being able to play the piano well is an appropriate response to the loss of something good in itself for you. Playing the piano well is good for you independently of the joy you take in it.

5) You die suddenly of an aneurysm. You did not know before you died that you were at risk of an aneurysm and you felt no symptoms of your condition, and so your condition itself did not negatively affect your enjoyment of life. And your death was entirely painless.

Was your dying bad for you? Did something bad happen to you when you died? Hedonism implies that your dying was not bad for you, as it was not an event that pained you and now there is no you to be pained by what you are missing. —But that's crazy! Your dying was close to the worst thing that could have happened to you. It would have been better for you to have suffered and been damaged (to some degree) and yet lived. So, again, hedonism is false.

IV. An argument that hedonism is false

1. We can construct examples (or find examples in life) in which something bad in itself for a particular person happens to that person though that person experiences no physical or emotional pain when that thing bad in itself for her happens. (Consider dying painlessly.)

Thus:

2. Something can be bad in itself for a person though that person finds no physical or emotional pain in that thing. (From 1.)

Thus:

3. A person's finding an activity painful is not necessary to that activity's being bad in itself for that person. (From 2.)

4. Hedonism implies that necessary to an activity's being bad in itself for a person is that person's finding that activity painful.

Therefore:

5. Hedonism is false. (From 3 and 4.)

The moral of the story: Just because it doesn't hurt, don't think it's not bad in itself for you.

V. Another argument that hedonism is false

1. We can construct examples (or find examples in life) in which a particular person takes pleasure in something when that something is not good in itself for her. (Consider the pleasure you take in your relation with Sally.)

Thus:

2. Something can be pleasant for a person though not good in itself for her. (From 1.)

Thus:

3. A person's finding something pleasant is not sufficient for that thing's being good in itself for that person. (From 2.)

4. Hedonism implies that sufficient for a thing's being good in itself for a person is that person's finding that thing pleasant.

Therefore:

5. Hedonism is false. (From 3 and 4.)

The moral of the story: Just because you're as happy as a clam doing it, don't think that doing it is good in itself for you.

VI. Responses

The examples in Section III are meant to show:

- 1) being pleasant to one is not sufficient for being good in itself for one
ie., something can be pleasant but not good in itself
- 2) being pleasant to one is not necessary for being good in itself for one
ie., something can be good in itself but not pleasant
- 3) being painful to one is not sufficient for being bad in itself for one
ie., something can be painful but not bad in itself
- 4 & 5) being painful to one is not necessary for being bad in itself for one
ie., something can be bad in itself but not painful

Do the examples in Section III show what they are supposed to show?