Hedonism & The Experience Machine

1. Hedonism: This is the view that happiness, or pleasure, is the only thing that is “intrinsically good.” All other good things are only “instrumentally good.”

But what is meant by “intrinsically good” and “instrumentally good”?

a) Intrinsic goods: These are things that are desirable for their own sake. As Mill says, they are “desirable as ends.” They are good, in and of themselves.

b) Instrumental goods: These are things that are often called “good”, but they are only good insofar as they make it easier for us to obtain intrinsic goods. They are desirable only because they are a means to some truly good end. They are not desirable for their own sake.

The hedonist claims that happiness is “intrinsically good” (that in fact, it is the only intrinsic good). It is desirable for its own sake. It is just plain good to have some happiness—not because of what happiness leads to, but because happiness itself is good to have. On the other hand, money is only “instrumentally good.” It is not just plain good to have money and nothing more. No: It is only good because it is a means to obtaining other good stuff. Money is not desirable for its own sake. If you had a pile of money but could not obtain anything with it, the money would not be of any value.

2. A Mis-Conception About Hedonism: Since “hedonism” is the view that pleasure is all that is valuable, one can easily get a picture of hedonists in a drunken orgy, eating grapes and being fanned by servants, reveling gluttonously in the baser pleasures. But, by “pleasure”, the hedonist usually means something much broader than the simple baser pleasures. In his day, John Stuart Mill actually tackled this issue after he was accused of the following:

The Satisfied Pig: Imagine a pig, wallowing in mud all day. The pig is immensely satisfied, and receives nothing but pleasure from it. Now imagine Socrates, the Greek philosophers, musing all day on an important puzzle of logic. He fails to solve the puzzle that day, and is somewhat dissatisfied with these results.

According to hedonism, it seems that it is better to be the satisfied pig than the dissatisfied Socrates, since pleasure is all that matters. For this reason, opponents accused hedonism of making man no better than an animal. If pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good, then we might as well all be pigs, happily wallowing in the mud.
To this, Mill replies that by “pleasure” we do not merely mean the baser pleasures of bodily sensations. He points out that there are different kinds of pleasure, some more valuable than others; for instance, intellectual, emotional, and moral pleasures. The higher pleasures are MUCH more valuable, such that it is actually better to be an intelligent and rational, but slightly dissatisfied individual, than be a completely satisfied pig. He writes, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

This standard, refined version of hedonism does not reduce to the idea that the only valuable things are the base, sensual pleasures; nor does it imply that our lives are no better than that of swine.

Potential problem: Are the two kinds of pleasures comparable? That is, is there some large amount of “baser” pleasures that would be better to have than some small amount of “higher” pleasures? If so, then it seems that it WOULD be better to be a satisfied pig that lives for a million years rather than a slightly dissatisfied Socrates who lives for 70 years.

3. Objection to Hedonism: Many disagree with the idea that happiness is the ONLY thing in the world that is “intrinsically good,” or good for it’s own sake. In order to support the stance that happiness is not all that matters, Robert Nozick tells the following story.

The Experience Machine: Scientists have invented a virtual reality machine, sort of like The Matrix, where you can plug in and have completely happy experiences. When you are in the experience machine, you do not know that you are in the machine. They erase your memory of having plugged in, and the computer-simulation is so real, you cannot tell it apart from reality. You cannot leave the machine once you are inside, but the scientists guarantee that life INSIDE of the machine will be filled with far more happiness than your real life OUTSIDE of the machine. They give you a choice: Do you (1) Plug into the machine for the rest of your life, or (2) Choose not to plug in, though you know you will be less happy?

What would you do? Nozick’s example of the experience machine is meant to be a counter-example to hedonism. He asks, “Would you plug in?” Most people answer “No” to this question. Though it is stipulated that life would be much happier IN the machine, it seems to most of us that a life in the machine just wouldn’t be as valuable as a life outside of the machine. A life in the machine seems to be missing something.

Now, you might have the following worries:

(a) I would not be as happy in the machine because there is no pain or suffering there, and perfect happiness requires some suffering.
Reply: If that were the case, then the programmers would just be sure to add the perfect amount of suffering so as to maximize your happiness. (Note that this is NOT an objection to hedonism. It is merely the claim that suffering is instrumentally valuable toward achieving happiness.)

(b) I have obligations to other people in the real world. I can’t leave them.

Reply: Just imagine that, they will plug in too, if you do. No need to worry about them. They will be maximally happy.

Most would still refuse to plug in, believing that something would still be missing. But, what would it be missing? Nozick makes a few suggestions:

We want (a) to do things, and (b) to be a certain way, (c) in contact with reality.

But, someone in the experience machine (a) isn’t doing anything at all. Rather, they are only have the experience—the “what it’s like from the inside”—of doing things. Furthermore, someone in the machine (b) isn’t any way at all. Rather, they are an “indeterminate blob”, their virtual “actions” dictated by a machine rather than themselves. Finally, (c) they are not in contact with reality, but rather a man-made “virtual” reality.

If Nozick is right, then we can draw a conclusion about hedonism: For, if happiness were the ONLY thing of value, then the question of whether or not we should plug into the machine would be a no-brainer. Since the experience machine provides total happiness, a life in the machine wouldn’t be “missing something” at all. But, the fact that most of us think life inside of the machine WOULD be missing something valuable implies that happiness is not the only thing that is intrinsically valuable. Rather, a good life requires more than mere happiness. (For further discussion, watch this video.)

Consider another example:

A Happy Life of Deception: Imagine that you are super happy. You have a lot of friends, and loved ones. You have accomplished several important things that you wanted to do (maybe you won an award, or a race, etc., that you really wanted to win). Or so you think. As it turns out, your “friends” insult you behind your back. Your “loved ones” actually hate you, and your partner is secretly cheating on you. The “award” that you won was really a fake, presented to you as a joke. The “race” you won was secretly rigged, also as a joke. And so on. But, you never find out, and die a happy camper.
Which is better? This happy, but deceived life? Or a slightly less happy but GENUINE life? Most probably have the intuition that they would rather have REAL friends and REAL accomplishments, even if they had to give up some happiness in order to have this. But then, again, happiness is not the only thing that makes a life good.

Other Intrinsic Goods: In fact, the list of things that make a life good—i.e., the list of things that are “just plain good” to have for their own sake—is often quite a bit longer than Nozick’s. The following things are commonly cited by philosophers as having value in and of themselves as well:

- Knowledge
- Virtue
- Justice
- Beauty
- Love
- Friendship
- Life
- Self-Improvement

Can you think of any other things that it might be good to have—not as means to some further good end, but merely for their own sake?

4. Objection: The hedonist will typically try to argue that we are actually MISTAKEN in thinking that these other things are intrinsically good (for example, the things on our list above—things like justice, love, knowledge, and beauty). In reality, those things are only instrumentally good.

Take “life” for instance: Imagine that you just had some life, but you never had any happy experiences. Imagine that day-to-day life was absolutely mundane and nothing exciting ever happened whatsoever. Or, further still, imagine that you were alive, but in a perpetual coma! Would LIFE itself still be valuable in that case? The hedonist argues that it is not. But, life IS instrumentally value. One cannot have happy experiences if they are not alive—so life is the MEANS by which we obtain happiness (the one truly valuable thing in the world).

When we say that things like love and life are “valuable” we are getting confused. The explanation for our confusion is that these things are so closely ASSOCIATED with getting happiness, that we mistakenly think they are good in and of themselves. Things like love and life bring happiness SO OFTEN that we start to think it is the love or the life ITSELF that is valuable, rather than the happiness alone.

Even “being connected to reality” is only instrumentally good, according to the hedonist. For, one who is disconnected from reality is USUALLY very bad at finding happiness (e.g., if you are on a rooftop and believe you can fly, there is probably not much happiness remaining in your future.) Nozick disagrees, writing, “We want to be importantly connected to reality, not to live in a delusion. We desire this not simply in order to more reliably acquire pleasures or other experiences.” [What do you think? Also, in light of Chalmers’ claim, IS someone in experience machine disconnected from reality?]