



Hedonistic Theories

The refinement of hedonism as an ethical theory involves several surprising and important distinctions. Several counter-examples to hedonism are discussed.

I. Hedonistic theories are one possible answer to the question of "What is intrinsic goodness?"

- A. **Hedonism:** (def.) the philosophical doctrine that (1) all pleasure is intrinsically good, and (2) nothing but pleasure is intrinsically good.

Similar theories might involve enjoyment, satisfaction, happiness, as concepts substituted for pleasure. A major problem of hedonism is getting clear as of what pleasure and pain consist. Are pleasures events, properties, states, or some other kind of entity?

- B. **Psychological Hedonism:** (a descriptive theory) all people do in fact pursue pleasure. This theory holds that this is not the way people ought to be; this is the way people actually *are*—they naturally seek pleasure. Hence, the theory is an inductive generalization from experience by social scientists.

- C. **Ethical Hedonism** (a prescriptive theory) whether or not people pursue pleasure, they should or *ought* to do so. A right action is productive of pleasure; a wrong action is productive of pain.

II. The hedonistic position can be substantially refined.

- A. To say "all pleasure is intrinsically good" is not to say "all pleasure is good, *simply*." Something intrinsically good might be instrumentally bad.

1. Pain is often good as a means: it is a signal that something is wrong and a change is necessary. (*E.g.*, A 16 month-old does not remove her finger from a closing door if no pain is felt. Pain in this instance would be good as a means.)
2. Some pleasures are a means to something more painful and so would not be good: *e.g.*, making fun of other people, getting drunk, taking drugs, and so forth.

B. *Pleasure is not the only thing desirable*—many other things are desirable as means and ends (just not intrinsically desirable). *E.g.*, liberty, peace, money, and education are desirable, but on this view only pleasure is desirable as the ultimate end.

C. Note especially the distinction between **pleasure** and **the sources of pleasure**.

1. Obviously *people get pleasure in different ways*. *E.g.*, some persons detest superficial conversation and read existential psychoanalysis; some persons detest reading and love causal personal interaction.

2. Blurring the distinction between pleasure and the sources of pleasure is often the basis of *the mistaken attraction to [relativism](#)*; the sources of pleasure can be different for different persons.

Some persons have mistakenly taken this distinction to mean that "Therefore, you can't generalize about what actions should be done because they would differ for different people; hence, ethics is relative."

3. Nevertheless, *the pleasure can be the same even though the sources of pleasure are different*. The pleasure from the winning of a battle could be the same as the pleasure from the winning of a football game.

Think about how this statement is logically related to C.L. Kleinke's [observation](#) in his book [Self-Perception](#) that "What distinguishes emotions such as anger, fear, love, elation, anxiety, and disgust is not what is going on inside the body but rather what is happening in the outside environment." (C.L. Kleinke, *Self-Perception* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1978), 2.)

4. Nevertheless, the hedonist believes *moral goodness is an instrumental good*—it is not necessarily an intrinsic good.

- a. Moral goodness is doing the right thing, but this might not lead to happiness. Consider the Nazi doctors performing abortions in prisoner of war camps. Consider also the problems raised by the teleological suspension of the ethical.

- b. Moral goodness, according to hedonism, can be an instrumental good, but it doesn't follow that it will always lead to pleasure. (E.g., honest upright Great Aunt Sarah who lives alone by a rigid code does not necessarily live a life of pleasure.)

III. The hedonist doesn't seek pleasure constantly—a constant indulgence of appetites makes people miserable in the long run.

- A. **The Hedonistic Paradox:** "Pleasure to be got must be forgot." As [Aristotle](#) taught, pleasure is the side-product of activity. *i.e.*, some of the most miserable people are those who desire to get out of the situation they are in, in order to have pleasure somehow "happen" to them.

- B. One secret to pleasure seems to be to lose yourself in activity. So likewise in work or sports, by being engaged continuously, pleasure is not directly sought. Things and activity are sought.

When hungry, seek food; when poor, seek money; when restless, seek physical activity. We don't seek pleasure in these situations. As [John Stuart Mill](#) stated, "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness ... Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness along the way."

IV. [John Hospers](#) proposes **three counter-examples to hedonism**.

- A. Suppose two people get an equal amount of pleasure from two different activities: (1) throwing dishes and (2) playing the piano.

1. Aren't these activities of different worth?
 2. *The hedonist's answer:* Yes, their worth is the same intrinsically, but they are instrumentally different.
- B. Consider Mark Twain's story, "The Mysterious Stranger": surely the happiness of insanity is not an [intrinsic good](#). (Additionally, the effects of taking drugs are not an intrinsic good.)
1. Surely, this state of affairs, that pleasure is intrinsically good, cannot be right.
 2. *The hedonist's answer:* Yes, it is a deplorable state [instrumentally](#), but intrinsically, the insane person is better than his previous state. The drug addict, when on drugs, is better than he was in his previous state (or he would not be inclined to take the drugs). Note the vicious circularity of argument.
- C. Consider a counterexample: suppose a murderer gets a big thrill out of killing people.
1. Surely, the undeserved "pleasure" of the murderer is bad.
 2. *The hedonist's answer:* This illustrates the same confusion as shown in the first two examples. The consequences are bad, *i.e.*, the consequences are only instrumentally bad, but the pleasure is intrinsically good.

Hedonistic theories of art

According to one kind of theory, the function of art is to produce just one kind of effect upon its audience: pleasure. It may also inform or instruct, represent or express, but first and foremost it must please. The more pleasure it gives, the better the art.

If the theory is left in this simple form, it yields the result that glossy and superficial works and those containing nothing difficult or obscure are the best works of art. Thus, on the hedonistic account, *King Lear* might come out far behind [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#)'s *The Song of Hiawatha*, or [Joyce Kilmer](#)'s "Trees," in view of the difficulty of comprehending Shakespeare by many people and the pleasant, easy lilting quality of Longfellow's poem; similarly, a simple ditty might come out ahead of Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. True, Shakespeare and Bach might produce more pleasure in the long run since their works have endured through more centuries, but, on the other hand, the simple works can be apprehended and enjoyed by vastly more people.

Sit at your meditation place and find the smallest spot you can find. It might be a glint of light or a spot of dirt or whatever it is, just take a moment to have it fill your sight. Try not to strain but rather, gently place all your attention on the spot. Feel as though you have eyes in your heart and your heart is concentrating very intensely upon that spot, effortlessly, calmly and extremely intensely. When you are doing this well, you might find that only the spot is in focus and everything else is a little blurry or out of focus.

Feel yourself entering the spot, as if you have shrunk yourself and you are travelling into its reality. You might imagine that you are shrinking smaller and smaller until the spot is absolutely huge and you are travelling deeper and deeper within it. Look around as you travel deeper and deeper within the spot seeing the worlds opening within worlds.

Find yourself at the atomic level, seeing the atoms energetically moving about. Notice the enormous space between each atom. Feel their energy and power. Remember that just one of these atoms has the power of an atomic bomb.

Now dive even deeper within the atoms of the spot until all around you are the vibrating strings of energy that make up all matter. You can see all sorts of

amazing fractal patterns, chaotically formed and vibrating to a rhythm without regularity, but like a beautiful, disordered dance.

How stunning is this energy world. Everything moves endlessly. Almost without borders these little strings move about. Now for a moment just imagine that this is what love looks like. That love is the power that arranges these little strings, that breathes them into life and is actually the strings themselves.

That we are all made from the exact same stuff. But more than that, every one and every thing is made from love.

Feel that love totally encompassing you. Do you see how it is impossible to be unhappy here? How it is unrealistic to hate anyone here, with this consciousness? The great masters have told us to love our enemies, do you see how natural it feels to do so and how unnatural it feels to ignore the awareness of this love. To separate ourselves from each other, this seems to be the height of ignorance, the height of ignorance of this awareness.



Feel that you are in essence this love. Every particle of you is actually love. And you are a part of this spot, the energy within all things.

We are all actually one.

One.

Why Learn to Meditate

Eventually, we will be able to stay happy all the time, even in the most difficult circumstances.

The purpose of meditation is to make our mind calm and peaceful. If our mind is peaceful, we will be free from worries and mental discomfort, and so we will experience true happiness; but if our mind is not peaceful, we will find it very difficult to be happy, even if we are living in the very best conditions. If we train in meditation, our mind will gradually become more and more peaceful, and we will experience a purer and purer form of happiness. Eventually, we will be able to stay happy all the time, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Usually we find it difficult to control our mind. It seems as if our mind is like a balloon in the wind – blown here and there by external circumstances. If things go well, our mind is happy, but if they go badly, it immediately becomes unhappy. For example, if we get what we want, such as a new possession or a

new partner, we become excited and cling to them tightly. However, since we cannot have everything we want, and since we will inevitably be separated from the friends and possessions we currently enjoy, this mental stickiness, or attachment, serves only to cause us pain. On the other hand, if we do not get what we want, or if we lose something that we like, we become despondent or irritated. For example, if we are forced to work with a colleague whom we dislike, we will probably become irritated and feel aggrieved, with the result that we will be unable to work with him or her efficiently and our time at work will become stressful and unrewarding.

By training in meditation, we create an inner space and clarity that enables us to control our mind

Such fluctuations of mood arise because we are too closely involved in the external situation. We are like a child making a sandcastle who is excited when it is first made, but who becomes upset when it is destroyed by the incoming tide. By training in meditation, we create an inner space and clarity that enables us to control our mind regardless of the external circumstances. Gradually we develop mental equilibrium, a balanced mind that is happy all the time, rather than an unbalanced mind that oscillates between the extremes of excitement and despondency.

If we train in meditation systematically, eventually we will be able to eradicate from our mind the delusions that are the causes of all our problems and suffering. In this way, we will come to experience a permanent inner peace, known as “liberation” or “nirvana”. Then, day and night in life after life, we will experience only peace and happiness.

Breathing Meditations

Generally, the purpose of breathing meditation is to calm the mind and develop inner peace. We can use breathing meditations alone or as a preliminary practice to reduce our distractions before engaging in a **Lamrim meditation**

A Simple Breathing Meditation

The first stage of meditation is to stop distractions and make our mind clearer and more lucid. This can be accomplished by practising a simple breathing meditation. We choose a quiet place to meditate and sit in a comfortable position. We can sit in the traditional cross-legged posture or in any other position that is comfortable. If we wish, we can sit in a chair. The most important thing is to keep our back straight to prevent our mind from becoming sluggish or sleepy.

The first stage of meditation is to stop distractions and make our mind clearer and more lucid.

We sit with our eyes partially closed and turn our attention to our breathing. We breathe naturally, preferably through the nostrils, without attempting to control our breath, and we try to become aware of the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. This sensation is our object of meditation. We should try to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else.

At first, our mind will be very busy, and we might even feel that the meditation is making our mind busier; but in reality we are just becoming more aware of how busy our mind actually is. There will be a great temptation to follow the different thoughts as they arise, but we should resist this and remain focused single-pointedly on the sensation of the breath. If we discover that our mind has wandered and is following our thoughts, we should immediately return it to the breath. We should repeat this as many times as necessary until the mind settles on the breath.

Benefits of Meditation

If we practice patiently in this way, gradually our distracting thoughts will subside and we will experience a sense of inner peace and relaxation. Our mind will feel lucid and spacious and we will feel refreshed. When the sea is rough, sediment is churned up and the water becomes murky, but when the wind dies down the mud gradually settles and the water becomes clear. In a similar way, when the otherwise incessant flow of our distracting thoughts is calmed through concentrating on the breath, our mind becomes unusually lucid and clear. We should stay with this state of mental calm for a while.

Even though breathing meditation is only a preliminary stage of meditation, it can be quite powerful. We can see from this practice that it is possible to experience inner peace and contentment just by controlling the mind, without having to depend at all upon external conditions.

So much of the stress and tension we normally experience comes from our mind

When the turbulence of distracting thoughts subsides and our mind becomes still, a deep happiness and contentment naturally arises from within. This feeling of contentment and well-being helps us to cope with the busyness and difficulties of daily life. So much of the stress and tension we normally experience comes from our mind, and many of the problems we experience, including ill health, are caused or aggravated by this stress. Just by doing breathing meditation for ten or fifteen minutes each day, we will be able to reduce this stress. We will experience a calm, spacious feeling in the mind, and many of our

usual problems will fall away. Difficult situations will become easier to deal with, we will naturally feel warm and well disposed towards other people, and our relationships with others will gradually improve.

Transforming Meditations

Meditation is a method for acquainting our mind with virtue. The more familiar our mind is with virtue, the calmer and more peaceful it becomes. When our mind is peaceful we are free from worries and mental discomfort, and we experience true happiness. If we train our mind to become peaceful we shall be happy all the time, even in the most adverse conditions, but if our mind is not peaceful, then even if we have the most pleasant external conditions we shall not be happy. Therefore it is important to train our mind through meditation.

When our mind is peaceful we are free from worries and mental discomfort, and we experience true happiness.

There are two types of meditation: analytical meditation and placement meditation. When we contemplate the meaning of a Dharma instruction that we have heard or read we are doing analytical meditation. By deeply contemplating the instruction, eventually we reach a conclusion or cause a specific virtuous state of mind to arise. This is the object of placement meditation. Having found our object through analytical meditation, we then concentrate on it single-pointedly for as long as possible to become deeply acquainted with it. This single-pointed concentration is placement meditation. Often, analytical meditation is called simply 'contemplation', and placement meditation simply 'meditation'. Placement meditation depends upon contemplation, and contemplation depends upon listening to or reading Dharma instructions.

Since most of the problems we experience when we are new to meditation come from overstraining at placement meditation, it is important to be moderate and avoid becoming tense from exerting too much pressure. The effort we apply should be relaxed and steady, and whenever we become tired we should rest.