

# What is Pleasure?



# Pleasure



- Of all concepts in philosophy, almost everyone thinks they understand the notion of pleasure...
- Typically pleasure is related to things such as positivity, joy, good sensation, happiness.
- So pleasure is something that is good...
- It is something to long for and work towards.
- So philosophically speaking, the “pleasure principle” is a thing that makes experience appealing and attractive.



- So if pleasure is something good to long for, its opposite, pain, is something to be avoided.
- In the “Philosophy of Pleasure” the general belief is that pleasure is an essential value and represents the only thing that motivates human action.
- So all human action aims towards maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.
- But there is an important question about the ontology of pleasure.
- What constitutes pleasure and its opposite, pain.
- On the surface this seems like an easy question to answer, but as you shall see, in reality the difference between pleasure and pain is nuanced and subtle.
- There is also, of course, a gradation, between what constitutes pleasure and what constitutes pain.



- In this presentation I'm going to discuss the following:
- 1. Pleasure as a Sensation (Simple Concept)
- 2. Motivational Hedonism
- 3. Plato
- 4. Aristotle
- 5. Epicurus
- 6. Stoicism
- 7. Freud
- 8. Hedonic Paradox

# Pleasure as Sensation



- Most of us think that pleasure is a sensation.
- It is experienced by the body.
- Generally we think of pleasure as a localized or diffuse bodily sensation.
- But the pleasurable sensation is not absolute.
- It is dependent on context, mood, temperament, occasion etc.
- In other words, what might be perceived as pleasure in one context, may be perceived as not pleasurable in another.
- For example: If a person whom you are attracted to, brushes your hand during a conversation, you might consider it a pleasurable sensation.
- If, on the other hand, a person whom you are not attracted to does the same thing, you may not consider it to be pleasurable at all, even though the “sensation” itself is identical.



- This suggests that there is a distinction that needs to be made between sensation and the hedonic (i.e. pleasurable) response.
- In other words, that there is a **cognitively apprehended component** to pleasure that is independent of sensation.
- This is an important idea promoted by Gilbert Ryle who basically challenged the idea that pleasure is a simple bodily sensation akin to pain.
- For Ryle pleasure is a “mode of engagement” – in other words, pleasure comes from our everyday pursuits in the world – OUR COGNITIVE INTENTIONS – and not mere bodily sensations.
- This brings up an important question:



- Is pleasure fundamentally a feeling, something that we can isolate experientially, or is it an attitude toward a sensation or activity? Does pleasure lie in the sensation or experience itself, or in our attitude towards the experience?
- This is an important question that is at the heart of all hedonic philosophical discussions.
- For Gilbert Ryle pleasure is related to our disposition— we get pleasure by what we are disposed to do.
- Displeasure happens when whatever we are disposed to do is interrupted or interfered with.
- For Ryle pleasure is inside out, not outside in.

# Motivational Hedonism



- Gilbert Ryle's ideas represent a type of motivational hedonism.
- Motivational hedonism is also sometimes called “psychological hedonism”.
- This theory is based on the idea that our psychological motivations (desires) propel us to seek pleasure and avoid pain.
- This is what guides all of our behaviour. (Strong Motivational Hedonism)
- This is what guides a lot of our behaviour. (Weak Motivation Hedonism)
- Motivational Hedonism(s) include both conscious and unconscious desires for pleasure but is particularly interested in the unconscious desires.
- Some of the philosophers that have argued for various types of “psychological hedonism” include:





- Epicurus
- Sigmund Freud (Id, Ego, Superego)
- Jeremy Bentham (Utilitarianism)
- John Stuart Mill (Utilitarianism V2)
  - Plato? (The Good)
  - Aristotle? (Given End – Telos)

# Plato



- Not typically thought of as a hedonist...
- However, like all philosophy, Plato is concerned with the question of what constitutes pleasure and how pleasure is related to “The Good”.
- For Plato pleasure is intimately related to a person’s intentions (similar to what Gilbert Ryle argues).
- Unlike a hard-core hedonist who argues that the pursuit of pleasure motivates everything we do, Plato takes the view that the pursuit of pleasure wisely can lead us to the best possible life.
- The pursuit of pleasure without wisdom, on the other hand, can, and sometimes does lead us astray.



- But what does it mean to pursue pleasure wisely?
- There is an interesting quotation from Plato's Crito that highlights what Plato might be thinking:
- *"The first and greatest victory is to conquer yourself; to be conquered by yourself is of all things most shameful and vile."*
- This quotation suggests something very interesting about what Plato thinks regarding human motivation.
- To act on impulse (in the blind pursuit of pleasure) is shameful.
- It is shameful because it distracts us from what really matters...the pursuit of things that have the potential to make us better.
- To have pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the only goal in life makes us no better than ordinary animals.



- Many of Plato's ideas related to pleasure/pain can be found in the dialogue Protagoras.
- The main discussion here is between Protagoras and Socrates. Protagoras was well-known as a Sophist philosopher.
- At one point the discussion turns to the question of what constitutes pleasure.
- Socrates points out that it's not uncommon for people to hurt themselves in the pursuit of pleasure.
- It's not uncommon for people to fail to see that what we call bad is not necessarily unpleasant in the short term.
- For example, people will indulge in food that cause pleasurable sensations but harm the body in the long run.
- Why would they do this? For Socrates it's because they do not know that pleasure is short while pain is long.
- It's a matter of ignorance...like someone mistaking the sizes of things because of not taking into account distances, assuming something is small because it's far away.



- In order not to make such a mistake one has to have knowledge and the ability to use reason.
- Socrates' assumption is that being wise and reasonable would prevent self-harm.
- To be overcome by pleasure is really equivalent to being ignorant.
- For Socrates the pursuit of pleasure should always be done in the light of knowledge and for good purpose.



- Socrates does not completely reject the pursuit of pleasure.
- However, the pursuit of pleasure should always guide us to something higher – specifically the Form of the Good.
- In a nutshell Plato believes that indulging ourselves only in the stuff of the material world in the pursuit of bodily pleasure is missing something extremely important.
- He makes the observation that there are times we experience pleasure even though there is no bodily need for us to fulfill.
- The pleasure we're experiencing, in a way transcends the body, and suggests that there is a part of us that is motivated by something beyond the body.
- Things that may give us pleasure not related to the body:
  - Conversing
  - Learning
  - Thinking
  - Insights
  - Knowledge
  - Love
  - Friendship
  - Truth etc...
- All of these point us in the direction of the Form of the Good which transcends the materiality of the body.
- At this point I need to quickly bring up an important Platonic idea...the concept of recollection.



- At the heart of Plato is the notion of anamnesis – this is the idea that humans possess innate knowledge.
- Knowledge consists of rediscovering the knowledge within.
- According to Plato the soul is trapped in the body.
- Importantly the soul once lived in “Reality” (not this world) but got trapped in the body.
- It once knew everything but forgot it.
- The goal of recollection is to get back to true knowledge.
- To do this one has to overcome the body.
- So real pleasure is not about indulging the body but overcoming it and reconnecting to the transcendent reality that we’ve forgotten.
- And that reality is the Form of the Good.

# Aristotle



- Like Plato, Aristotle sees pleasure as a means to an end.
- It should never be sought for itself.
- For Aristotle pleasure and happiness must intertwine.
- The reason for this has to do with his idea of Teleology.
- Teleology comes from the Greek word telos (end or goal) and is basically the belief that there is a purpose that pervades all reality.





- For Aristotle Pleasure/Happiness arises when the purpose of a thing is unimpeded.
- True happiness encompasses the small pleasures of life.
- Happiness is an end in itself, it is the final goal that encompasses the totality of one's life.
- It is not something that can be gained or lost in a few hours, like pleasurable sensations.



- Happiness is a by-product of living, moving, doing – it is the outcome of an unimpeded movement from Potentiality to Actuality.
- Happiness (not pleasure) is the ultimate value of life as lived up to this moment and is measured by how well one has lived to one's full potential as a human being.
- Pain is the experience one has when one's potential is impeded...regret, for example, is a kind of pain.
- This can happen because of psychological, physical, or external circumstances.
- In essence, the goal for Aristotle is to avoid pain and move unimpeded towards one's purpose.

# Epicurean Pleasures



- Epicurus advocated living in such a way as to derive the greatest amount of pleasure possible during one's lifetime, yet doing so moderately in order to avoid the suffering incurred by overindulgence in such pleasure.
- He argued that since it is an innate part of human existence to avoid pain and seek pleasure we need to develop an understanding of what constitutes pleasure and what constitutes pain.



- It is not inconceivable that we may make errors in judgement and seek out the wrong things, believing mistakenly that they will lead to pleasure.
- Epicureanism divided pleasure into two broad categories:
  - Pleasures of the body
  - Pleasures of the mind



## Pleasures of the Body

- Pleasures involving sensations of the body
- Act of eating a delicious food or of being in a state of comfort free from pain.
- Existing only in the present
- One can only experience pleasures of the body **in the moment**, meaning they only exist as a person is experiencing them.

## Pleasures of the Mind

- Pleasures involving mental processes and states
- Feelings of joy, the lack of fear, pleasant memories
- Pleasures of the mind do not only exist in the present, but also in the past and future, since memory of a past pleasant experience or the expectation of some potentially pleasing future can both be pleasurable experiences.

Because mind pleasures can encompass **past, present, and future**, they are considered to be greater than those of the body.



- The greatest pleasure a person could reach was the complete removal of all pain, both physical and mental.
- In order to do this a person had to learn to control his/her desires, because desire itself was seen as painful.
- Epicureanism distinguishes three types of desire...



<b>Natural &amp; Necessary</b>	<b>Natural but Not Necessary</b>	<b>Not Natural &amp; Not Necessary</b>
<p>These desires are limited desires that are innately present in all humans.</p> <p>They are necessary for one of three reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. necessary for happiness.</li><li>2. necessary for freedom from bodily discomfort.</li><li>3. necessary for life.</li></ol> <p>Clothing would belong to the first two categories.</p> <p>Food would belong to the third.</p>	<p>These desires are innate to humans, but they do not need to be fulfilled for their happiness or their survival.</p> <p>Wanting to eat delicious food when one is hungry is an example of a natural but not necessary desire.</p> <p>They fail to substantially increase a person's happiness, and at the same time require effort to obtain and are desired by people due to false beliefs that they are actually necessary.</p> <p>For this reason they should be avoided.</p>	<p>These desires are neither innate to humans nor required for happiness or health.</p> <p>They are also limitless and can never be fulfilled.</p> <p>Desires of wealth or fame would fall under this category, and such desires are to be avoided because they will ultimately only bring about discomfort.</p>



- If one follows only **natural and necessary** desires, then, according to Epicurus, one would be able to reach the highest form of happiness.
- Philodemus of Gadara's basic guideline:
  - Don't fear god,
  - Don't worry about death;
  - What is good is easy to get, and
  - What is terrible is easy to endure.



# Stoicism



- Epicureanism is often put side-by-side with Stoicism.
- Like the Epicureans, the Stoics were interested in figuring out how to live the best possible life.
- Epicureanism sought to do this through moderate pleasure and the avoidance of pain.
- The Stoics, while agreeing with much of what the Epicureans had to say, rejected the idea that it is possible to avoid pain.
- Instead, they believed that one should accept the inevitability of pain and learn how to deal with it, without letting it get in the way of achieving happiness.
- Here's a quotation from *Letters from a Stoic* written by Seneca where he describes the main differences between Epicureanism and Stoicism:



- “The difference here between the Epicurean and our own school is this: our wise man feels his troubles but overcomes them, while their wise man does not even feel them. We share with them the belief that the wise man is content with himself. Nevertheless, self-sufficient though he is, he still desires a friend, a neighbour, a companion. Notice how self-contented he is: on occasion such a man is content with a mere partial self – if he loses a hand as a result of war or disease, or has one of his eyes, or even both, put out in an accident, he will be satisfied with what remains of himself and be no less pleased with his body now that it is maimed and incomplete than he was when it was whole. But while he does not hanker after what he has lost, he does prefer not to lose them. And this is what we mean when we say the wise man is self-content; he is so in the sense that he is able to do without friends, not that he desires to do without them. When I speak of his being ‘able’ to do this, what I am saying in fact amounts to this: he bears the loss of a friend with equanimity.



- So the Stoics, in contrast to Epicureans, believed that there are many things outside of our control in life, and therefore many things which could befall us and make our lives very difficult.
- Sickness, loss, poverty, death and other tragedies which commonly befall human beings are things which in general we have little control over.
- Should the goddess Fortuna (the Roman goddess of luck or fortune) decide that a terrible ill must come upon us, in many cases there is little we can do except wait and hope the terrible storm will soon pass, and not wipe us away for eternity.



- Stoic philosophers stressed that to be alive means to be open to the many troubles which can arise in our lives at no fault of our own, and that the attainment of happiness is not merely a matter of ceasing to desire things we need not desire.
- What is required in order to live a successful life is courage, moral strength, and of course, wisdom.
- It's inevitable that bad things will happen to us, and we will have desires for things the attainment of which will not benefit us.
- But as a Stoic, a person will bear whatever fortune one encounters with strength, understanding, and wisdom.
- Most importantly, this kind of person will refrain from acting on impulse or giving in to base desires.

# Freud – Pleasure Principle



- While not often thought of as a philosopher, one of Freud's central tenants is the pleasure principle.
- Freud builds a psychology on the Hedonic principle of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.
- He does this through his tripartite division of the mind – ID, EGO, SUPEREGO
- The pleasure principle (ID) is the driving force of life and seeks immediate gratification.
- This would be equivalent to “simple hedonism” where the goal is maximize pleasurable sensation.
- Newborns, according to Freud are essentially ID.
- The ID strives to fulfill our most basic and primitive urges – hunger, thirst, sex etc



- A key aspect of the ID is that it wants instant gratification.
- During early childhood, the ID controls behaviour.
- Children act on their urges.
- What Freud pointed out is that children will try to satisfy their urges without giving a thought to whether or not the behaviour is considered acceptable.
- It's cute when you're a kid, but it's considered pathological when acting this way as an adult.



- In order to function in society the ID must be mitigated.
- We suppress our ID impulses through the Ego.
- The Ego is the conscious mind – it's the part of ourselves makes conscious decisions.
- People generally are unaware of anything but their Ego.
- There is no conscious awareness, when, at times, we are propelled into action not through deliberate and rational thought, but through the impulses of the ID.
- It breaks through, and moves us into maximizing our unconscious (ID) desires.
- Pleasure is the domain of the ID. For Freud Egoistic Hedonism is an impossibility. When human beings are propelled through life in this way, they generally manifest psychosocial pathology.



- An interesting observation made by Freud is the relationship between the ID impulse and jokes.
- Jokes, according to Freud, are pleasurable and funny, because they enable the ID to express itself in a socially acceptable manner.
- In other words, jokes allow us to express many of our deepest sexual, aggressive, and cynical thoughts and feelings which would otherwise remain repressed.
- What makes them funny is the element of surprise, of bringing to the surface unexpected unconscious thoughts that we momentarily become aware of in ourselves – the laughter comes from the discomfort that we feel in becoming aware of something in us that we didn't have a conscious awareness actually exists.



# Superego



- The Superego is often thought of as the inner psychological police.
- It is that part of the mind that lets the Ego know what is allowed and what is not.
- Because we think of ourselves as autonomous and free agents we externalize both the ID and the Superego.
- One way to think of it is the devil as the externalized embodiment of the ID, and the Superego as the external embodiment of God.



- So, the human mind is in a constant battle between the id and the superego.
- We think we decide on our own free will, but our decisions and actions are actually the winning side of this battle.
- In terms of Hedonic pleasure, Freud argues that it is impossible, because of social and personal constraints, to experience all the pleasure that we desire
- The problem is that the desire for fulfillment does not go away.



- This is where Freud's idea of sublimation comes into play.
- Dictionary definitions:
- Sublimation is the diversion of the energy of a sexual or other biological impulse from its immediate goal to one of a more acceptable social, moral, or aesthetic nature or use.
- A purification or refinement; ennoblement.
- So for Freud sublimation is a mature type of defense mechanism, in which socially unacceptable impulses or idealizations are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behaviour, possibly resulting in a long-term conversion of the initial impulse.
- In other words, pleasure and happiness, cannot be experienced directly but must be experienced in an indirect and socially acceptable way.
- The problem is that very few people can completely and effectively sublimate their impulses.
- This means that unhappiness and displeasure is an inevitable reality of human existence. Here's Freud's very famous quote on this:



- *“I do not doubt that it would be easier for fate to take away your suffering than it would for me. But you will see for yourself that much has been gained if we succeed in turning your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health, you will be better armed against that unhappiness.”*

*Sigmund Freud (Studies on Hysteria)*

# Hedonic Paradox



- The last thing I'll leave you with is the Hedonic Paradox...
- The Hedonic Paradox (also called the Pleasure Paradox) states that if you seek pleasure or happiness directly, you will fail. Instead, you must pursue other goals that will bring you happiness or pleasure as a side-effect.
- So paradoxically, the hard-core hedonists' constant pleasure-seeking may not yield the most actual pleasure or happiness in the long-run.
- This idea was explicitly articulated by the utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick in his book *The Methods of Ethics*.



- This is an idea that's implied in some of the theories that I've covered and has been expressed many writers.
- Here are a couple of examples:



- *“Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.”*
- *“The more a man tries to demonstrate his sexual potency or a woman her ability to experience orgasm, the less they are able to succeed. Pleasure is, and must remain, a side-effect or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself.”*

Victor Frankl



- *“Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you”.*

Nathaniel Hawthorne





- *“But I now thought that this end [one's happiness] was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness[....] Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness along the way[....] Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.”*

John Stuart Mill



- *“Happiness is like a cat, if you try to coax it or call it, it will avoid you; it will never come. But if you pay no attention to it and go about your business, you'll find it rubbing against your legs and jumping into your lap.”*

William Bennett



- *Happiness is found only in little moments of inattention.*

- João Guimarães Rosa



- How, then, is it that no one is continuously pleased? Is it that we grow weary? Certainly all human things are incapable of continuous activity. Therefore pleasure also is not continuous; for it accompanies activity.

Aristotle



# DISCUSSION

# The Experience Machine



- The Experience Machine also known as the Pleasure Machine is a thought experiment by Robert Nozick.
- Was first put in place in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.
- This thought experiment was created as an evaluation of Hedonism.
- The primary thesis of Hedonism is that “pleasure is good”...
- Given this thesis any component of life that is not pleasurable does nothing to increase one’s well being and is therefore not good.

# The Experiment



- Imagine a machine that could give us whatever desirable or pleasurable experiences we could want.
- By way of technology or some sort of psychological manipulation a person's brain can be stimulated to induce pleasurable experiences that cannot be distinguished from real life.
- If given the choice between real life and being hooked up to a machine that could give us whatever pleasure we desired would we prefer the machine to real life?
- What would you prefer and why?

# Nozick's Answer



- Nozick believes that if pleasure were the only intrinsic value, people would have an overriding reason to be hooked up to an "experience machine," which would produce pleasurable sensations.
- He believes, however, that most people would not choose to live their life in the experience machine.
- Here's his argument:





- **P1**: If experiencing as much pleasure as we can is all that matters to us, then if we will experience more pleasure by doing x than by doing y, we have no reason to do y rather than x.
- **P2**: We will experience more pleasure if we plug into the experience machine than if we do not plug into the experience machine.
- **C1**: If all that matters to us is that we experience as much pleasure as we can, then we have no reason not to plug into the experience machine. (P1&P2)
- **P3**: We have reason not to plug into the experience machine.
- **C2**: Experiencing as much pleasure as we can is not all that matters to us.

# Reasons Not To Plug In



- We want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them.
  - "It is only because we first want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them." (Nozick, 43)
- We want to be a certain sort of person.
  - "Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob." (Nozick, 43)
- Plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality (it limits us to what we can make).
  - "There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated." (Nozick, 43)