

## Ethical Hedonism: Deliberation and Analysis

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**Abstract:** This study presents deliberation on and analysis of ethical hedonism and its position within value structure of ethical actions from the perspective of ethical philosophers; the approach of the present researcher is issued after analyzing the views of ethical philosophers. It seems that despite what has been so far expressed, tendency to hedonism cannot be a criterion to determine the value of men's voluntary actions, in spite of the fact that pleasure as stated in Holy Quran and the traditions of Imams is a natural human propensity. Some philosophers and thinkers have emphasized this idea and consider all human actions as an attempt to reach pleasure, in so far as they claim that even a human being's attempt to seek divine esteem is a fulfillment and satisfaction of pleasure drive. However, we believe that the ultimate purpose of a free agent in doing moral actions, even if pleasure is at highest level, is achieving divine revelation. In other words, God's revelation is not a means to reach higher purpose of pleasure, rather, it is the most fundamental goal in itself.

**Key words:** Hedonism, value criterion, personal hedonism, ultimate pleasure, nearness to God

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### INTRODUCTION

Pleasure and its position within value structure of moral actions has become one of the prominent obsessions of ethical philosophers. This study presents a brief discussion of the comments of some Western and Muslim philosophers and criticizes personal and sensory hedonism as the single value criterion to judge moral actions. Also, the views of those who pay attention to the spiritual aspect of pleasure are mentioned and deliberating on the concept of pleasure, public, maximum and personal aspect of the issue will be thoroughly scrutinized.

The study and analysis of the philosophy of ethic experts demonstrate extreme tendencies in their approaches and that their insights are dead in either theory or practice. The issue of pleasure has become entangled in this maze of theories. The most important questions regarding this topic are:

- What is the position of pleasure in human action?
- Does pleasure guarantee moral value?
- Is pleasure a qualified criterion to judge moral action?
- Is as stated by some, pleasure the only criterion for judging moral action?
- Is an action a purpose in itself or just a motivation towards higher and more elevated goals?
- Is pleasure the only or just one of stimulating human actions?

Anyway, what moral philosophers know as hedonism has both supporters and critics. Of course, it must be noted that their comments, either official approval or

denial are not carefully stated and thus, require further investigation. The present study attempts to examine the issue through investigating some radical views by citing holy texts.

**Meaning and definition:** Pleasure is defined as whatever which is mild to human nature and human tends towards it, is pleasurable and the experience derived it is called pleasure. Bentham, a Western philosopher, offers 58 synonyms for pleasure: happiness, joy, delight, etc. All names refer to a single emotion or feeling (Rahmati, 645, Holy Quran, Nahj al-Balagha, Mafatih al-Janan). He states that nature pits human beings at the mercy of two powerful gods, pain and pleasure, these two forces show us what to do and determine the criteria for right and wrong and are the source of the chain of causes and effects around us.

**Hedonism:** From the perspective of ethical philosophers who believe that humans tend towards pleasure as the ultimate goal of actions, hedonism is considering pleasure as value criterion and ultimate link behind all human actions. As some researchers have stated, human beings desire peace and tranquility and peace is the single unalloyed pleasure, in other words, human beings seek pleasure and inner peace is the best type of pleasure (Omid, 2002)

**Psychological hedonism:** Man is created in such a way that he is naturally in search of pleasure. Although, everyone seeks pleasure for his own sake, this can't work out in society.

**Ethical hedonism:** Human actions are moral if their ultimate goal is pleasure and the more pleasurable an action is, the more valuable it becomes.

### **PLEASURE AS THE SINGLE CRITERION TO JUDGE VALUE OF AN ACTION**

Some hedonists go to the extreme by stating that pleasure is the only criterion behind all human actions; some consider personal pleasure as the only criterion and focus on physical pleasure; Aristippus, for example, consider small and sensory pleasures as inherently and intrinsically valuable and believes that human should strive for them. Of course, considering his viewpoint in which emotion is the only certainty, such a fixation on physical pleasure is understandable; he states that “pleasure is the fruit of mild action and harsh actions cannot be ultimate destination of morality, then pleasure is the single foundation upon which all human actions are based (Abedi *et al.*, 2014; Frankna, 1997).

Some other thinkers, such as Epicure, emphasize spiritual pleasure while insisting on the fact that personal pleasure is value criterion and ultimate goal of human actions. In addition to numerous criticisms against personal hedonism, two things are necessary to mention. First, adherence to ethical principles and fulfilling religious obligations are for men to reach perfection. How is immersion in fleeting sensory and non-sensory personal pleasure and ignoring the good of others perfection? Who considers eating, drinking and sleeping as perfection? Even private spiritual pleasure prepares the ground for perfection; they are not perfection in themselves.

Second point is what is meant when it is said that human prioritizes personal pleasure? Does it mean preferring personal to public pleasure? If yes, what kind of ethics is that? Some thinkers, like Bentham, believe that communal pleasure is founded in personal enjoyment; others such as John Stuart Mill, believe that society is the channel through which personal pleasure is provided.

**Reasons behind individual hedonism:** Followings are arguments by supporters of personal hedonism:

- Human beings naturally seek pleasure
- Individuals crave for pleasure and flee pain
- Satisfying natural propensity is intrinsically valuable and rational

Therefore, personal enjoyment is the ultimate standard of moral value and it is highly recommended. It seems that the above arguments have defects in regard

with material, form and conclusion and they do not qualify as logical because, first, pleasure and delight are not the only human objectives and second, claiming that everyone wants to enjoy exclusively is without reason. Third reason is that assumption which consider tendency towards pleasure 'natural', should not yield moral obligations; and fourth, according to hedonism, human nature is based on psychological self-interest and humans do actions to satisfy pleasure drive. So, it must be noted that human nature is involuntary while being voluntary is a valuable element in regard with morality of human acts; thus, such actions are not voluntary. John Stuart Mill's argument about the fact that just pleasures are desirable is that it considers all objectives derived from pleasure and demonstrates that such objectives are desirable just because of the pleasure they accompany; thus, they are secondary.

It is irrational to infer 'pleasure should be required' from Mill's 'pleasure is actually required', because moral obligations cannot be achieved from what is in human nature (Macintyre, 2000; Abedi *et al.*, 2012) or the statement that 'all human beings are willing to enjoy, thus enjoyment is desirable' is expressing the obvious. According to Macintyre, considering the assumption that human beings inherently seek pleasure, how can we conclude that they desire increase and improvement of common good (474). As John Stuart Mill stated, human actions are right and proper to the extent that they create deeper happiness for larger number of people; thus, human actions are improper if they decrease human happiness (Frankna, 1997).

The fifth reason is that hedonists do not provide logically acceptable answers to following questions: what happens if our pleasure brings about others' pain? Should we stop having fun or continue seeking our pleasure? For example, when we found an amount of money and we didn't give it because we desperately need it or due to faith weakness; we enjoy spending that money while another person is at pain for losing that money. People who believe in maximum enjoyment and pleasure are asked this question whether happiness of larger number of people is justified at the cost of a small group and they cannot present reasonable answers.

The sixth reason is that hedonism is a self-contradictory thesis. If we do an action to obtain pleasure and that action is morally valuable because of the delight it yields, then we should expect others to do so. Therefore, people's actions are ethical even if they bring us pain and suffering. But, do we accept others' pleasure while we are at pain? Hedonists consider something good if it gives pleasure and they conclude that pleasure is the only positive element. It seems that,

first, pleasure is not the only synonym for good, second, considering these two as synonyms does not yield the conclusion that pleasure is the only positive element; at least such an assumption does not justify conclusion per se.

Some ethical thinkers have criticized the hedonist idea of equalizing good and pleasurable and call it 'naturalistic fallacy' (Moore, 2000; Gencler, 2008). Consequences of hedonism is another reason behind criticizing and invalidating this tendency. Is killing an innocent person is put in the scales of pleasure and pain and the pleasure pan is heavier such a killing, hedonistically speaking, is permitted and the outcomes are ominous (Abedi *et al.*, 2011). However, since discussing all critiques against hedonism requires both time and energy, this study primarily focuses upon delineating perspectives of Islam on pleasure and enjoyment.

#### **RELIGIOUS TEXTS AND PLEASURE**

Does saying 'man enjoys an action' mean that he performs the action for the sake of pleasure? Human gets pleasure from praying and helping others but are these actions done for sheer pleasure? Religion rejects extreme theories, considers perfection as the most original and highest objective and introduces nearness to God as the highest level of perfection. According to religion, although, different types of pleasure, even sensory and material are gifts for human's proper behaviors, highest degree of pleasure is derived from divine content; pleasure is the fruit of perfection rather than being equal to it. Following section cites examples to demonstrate the importance of pleasure in religious teachings.

**Sensory pleasures in religious texts:** There are numerous verse about different types gourmet food, plenty of fruit orchards, trees, streams, beauties, heaven servants and other blessings that God has promised to the believers in paradise. If sensory and material pleasures were worthless, God would have asked his devotees to give up tendencies and ignore gifts and blessings of paradises; he wouldn't have promised nay pleasure in the first place. However, there are various Hadith which recommend taking pleasure from provided earthly blessings; verses such as 'Do not forget your share in the world' (The Stories) which means that The Lord has determined blessings and pleasures to enjoy in this world. Or 'thou prophet, say who hath forbidden the beautiful gifts of Allah which he has produced for his servant and the things, clean and pure which he has provided for sustenance? Say: they are in the life of this world, for

those who believe and purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus do we explain the signs in details for those who understand (The Height, 32). This gracious verse considers beauty as a sort of pleasure.

**Spiritual pleasures in religious texts:** And Allah sets forth as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh; behold, she said. O my Lord! Build for me, in nearness o thee, a mansion in the Garden and save me from Pharaoh and his doings and save me from those who do wring (Moore, 2000). According to this verse, nearness to God has been the ultimate purpose of that precious lady and this implies that if there is any pleasure, it is definitely spiritual and only nearness to God. Imam Sajjad (AS) said that: 'Dear Lord! Forgive me for any pleasure except for that of remembering you'. This eloquent statement indicates the significance of non-sensory and spiritual pleasures.

Abandoning some pleasures is a pleasure in itself. Although, physical and sensory pleasures must be enjoyed as a channel to reach the peak of perfection, we should know that immersion in such pleasures does not lead to salvation and is not single manifestation of perfection, they might even take us far from perfection and human must prevent them. Therefore, stopping sensory pleasures sometimes brings about joy, happiness and peace of the soul.

**The main purpose of man, higher than sheer pleasure:** Basically, physical and spiritual pleasures are not ultimate purposes and human seeks an objective much higher than pleasure. Imam Ali (AS) beautifully says: I pray thee not out of fear of hell, nor with the hope of heaven; I found thee worthy of worship and I gave thee my obedience. Fear of torture is painful and joy of heaven is delightful; but they are not the purposes of my obedience. You are my goal and you deserve obedience.

Prophet Ibrahim (AS) considers God as the main goal behind his action, life and death; God is his single goal. Although, being with material beloved is pleasurable, highest pleasure is achieved when a person knows that his actions are actually acts of God and he is near to God. The main goal is nearness to God and this nearness will cause pleasure in itself. The Holy Quran, in describing people of wisdom, states that: 'And those who show patience in craving the satisfaction of God' (The Thunder, 22). Therefore, a wise man is one who does all his actions for the sake of God and he will attain sweet and pleasant eventualities. To put it in a nutshell, the purpose of all human actions must be seeking God's satisfaction not pursuit of pleasure.

As dear Lord says, 'And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of Allah and Allah is the kindest to his devotees' (The Heifer, 11). Some people devote their lives to seeking God's satisfaction and such a sacrifice is only to please Allah and attract his affection.

**The main stimulus and drive behind human actions:**

According to proponents of hedonism, pleasure is the single drive behind all human actions. This is evident from their original theory but explanation is required due to the stamen of some great thinkers. They stated that 'the main stimulus and drive behind human actions is achieving pleasure and avoiding pain'; this is totally visible in sensory pleasures. Even actions which are done under God's command might apparently offer no pleasure and joy but if we look closely, we see that gratification of our needs is the main drive behind such activities. One might even sacrifice his life and yet, the main motive is the pleasure he gets from sacrifice and devotion. Even suicide is done to get a delusional pleasure. It can be said that attaining pleasure was the main drive behind the actions of prophets and saints, too (Mesbah and Muhammad, 2008).

It is better to say that pleasure is one of the factors and drives of human actions rather than being the single cause behind them. Is attaining pleasure or God's satisfaction the ultimate purpose of human actions? Why does a man do an action according to reason and revelation? Pleasure or God's content? There might be people who consider pleasure as their primary priority; but not all are like that.

Prophets and saints are not like this. They understand real causes behind human actions, a claim which is supported by many verses we mentioned above. According to Holy Quran, 'And they feed for the love of Allah the indigent, the orphan and the captive, saying we feed for you for the sake of Allah alone; no reward do we desire from you nor thanks' (The Time, 8-9). According to this verse, Ahl al-Bayt (AS) fed the poor, the orphan and the captive just for the love of God, not for anything else.

**The concept of pleasure:** According to Mesbah, individuals enjoy pleasure and love themselves most. Since man considers himself the ideal being, the pleasure he takes in himself is in highest degree and all other pleasures derive from the pleasure one takes in oneself. He was asked why somebody doesn't enjoy his being and his answer was that since they don't pay enough attention to that. Whenever man can focus all attention on himself either as a result of external factor, such as danger or an outcome of constant training and practice

and ignores other beings, he can take immeasurable pleasure. Man enjoys himself, his perfection and the creatures around him but the purest pleasure is derived from oneself (159).

Now, the question is why and under what conditions a person enjoys himself. It is no doubt that man enjoys understanding his perfection or a favorable perception of material beloved. But when a man witnesses a humble and poor creature immersed in the mire instead of perfection, does he still enjoy his existence?

Of course, it is quite clear that man is essentially self-involved but we should not forget about the role and significance of others, too. This can be truly seen in the speeches and precious actions of Imam Ali; he said that 'I can use the best food, drink and clothes if I want to but I won't let my whims hold the reins of my being'. Why did he shun pleasure while he could take best pleasure from earthly blessings? He says that the reason is that maybe there are people in Hijaz and Yamama who don't have a loaf of bread; then how can I sleep with a full stomach while I am surrounded with the hungry and the thirsty? I as Ali be happy and do not share their hardship? Is there any self-interest and joy or that everyone naturally seeks his own pleasure and comfort in the above statement? The good is one who prefers welfare of others to that of his own. God, in this regard, said to his prophet (SAW): "thou wouldst only, perchance, fret thyself to death, following after them, in grief, if they believe not in this message" (The Cave, 6). "Now, hath come unto you a message from amongst yourselves; it grieves him that you should perish; ardently anxious is he over you; to the believers is he the most kind and merciful" (The Repentant, 128).

According to these and other verses, prophet takes good care of his people like a doctor and attempts to guide people; it also states that prophet experiences people's pain and happiness. Thus, so far it was proved that human beings do not only seek pleasure and comfort for their own and that reaching material beloved is desirable; in other words, man has an other-centered orientation. According to the verses mentioned in this study, man is a combination of self-love and communal orientation; he is both self-involved and cares for others. 'We have not sent down Quran to thee to be an occasion for thy distress but only as an admonition to those who fear Allah' (Ta Ha, 2-3).

Therefore, self-love, not with pleasure as the ultimate goal, is recommended. So, those who considered pleasure as the single orientation in ethical actions are right if the pleasure they talk about is the fruit of God's satisfaction, because union is the ultimate purpose and please is

worthy as long as it is derived from union with God.

Man is both self-oriented and communal; he seeks both personal pleasure and God's satisfaction. An action is moral if it is voluntary, motivated with God's commands, communal and valuable; the greater the motives of God, the more valuable the action is and it will ensure eternal happiness.

**The last word:** Hedonists consider pleasure as the single stimulus behind human actions; some foreground sensory and physical pleasures while others prioritize spiritual pleasures as more everlasting. They consider other worldly pleasure and the joy that comes from understanding one's existence and the pleasure of God's satisfaction as the motivation for their actions; some emphasize personal, self-involved pleasure while others insist on the role of others in taking maximum pleasure. While, accepting the irrefutable fact that hedonism is a human tendency, the present study states that pleasure can be an outcome of an ethical action and that understanding perfection is enjoyable not that pleasure is the sole purpose of actions or pleasure is the single criterion to judge the value of an action. Religious texts have emphasized both physical and spiritual pleasures. The most authentic purpose of human action is the content of and union with God and the more an action takes man to God's nearness, the more valuable it is. We also accept that an action is ethically valuable when it is voluntarily done to attain perfection and bring about union with God and that mere pleasure of an action is not

sufficient for judging ethical value of an action. Having or not having pleasure per se does not mean that the action is ethically valuable or unworthy.

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