Well-Being and Hedonism
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Well-Being? What?

Platitudes:

- What makes a life go well.
- What a Good Life has.
- More contentious ones: what makes someone flourish, what makes a happy life.

Another way of asking our question: what makes the good life the good life?
What kind of question are we asking?

- Why aren’t we done?
- Not just any description.
- A description that also gives a particular sort of explanation: constitutive cause.
Constitutive Cause

What makes something the way it is.

- Winning a football game. Winning a football game is having more points than the other team at the end of the match.
- Water. (natural kinds) Water is $H_2O$. (Water is $H_2O$ at a certain temperature and pressure, in a big enough amount . . . ? The question requires empirical investigation.

Not

- cause in the historical sense
- cause as in pushing, pulling, twisting, burning, squeezing, triggering, enabling . . .
- cause in the intentional sense
  “I went to the kitchen because I wanted the cake” $\rightarrow$ the cake caused me to go to the kitchen

constitutive cause is (in some sense) the same thing as its effect
Choiceworthiness?

A life might be choiceworthy for other reasons, e.g., aesthetic reasons, moral reasons (what else?).

Aristotle’s example: Priam of Troy.

Rather: it is a substantive claim that Priam’s life went better because he bore his misfortune with dignity, in itself.

It’s not just part of the content of the question that these things make a difference.
Epicurean Hedonism

You should act so as to maximize your own pleasure and minimize your pain.

(Epicurus thought pleasure just is the lack of pain.)

Contrast psychological hedonism.

For we recognize pleasure as the good which is primary and congenital: from it we begin every choice and avoidance, and we come back to it, using the feeling as the yardstick for judging every good thing. (Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” 2)

It’s still not a very plausible view .....
Hedonism about the good

The only *intrinsic* good is pleasure (and the lack of pain).

**Intrinsic good** good in itself; it’s goodness doesn’t depend on anything else. In contrast to an *extrinsic* good.

**Instrumental good** Good because it is the cause of something else that is good.

Example: maybe such a hedonist thinks that money is good. But only because it *leads to* getting more pleasure.

Allows acting for the sake of others. But still makes all other values merely instrumental goods. Cases: Priam again; two empty universes.
We’ll focus on hedonism *about well-being*, probably the most popular version of hedonism today. This is a more constrained view.

**Hedonism about well-being** Well-being is pleasure and lack of pain. A life goes well just to the extent that it has a better balance of pleasure versus pain.

Leaves open all sorts of stuff. Lots of “versions” of hedonism about well-being.
Objection: the Hard-partier objection

Objection: Epicurus is saying we should all be hard-partiers!

Epicurus’ Response:

Since pleasure is the good which is primary and congenital, for this reason we do not choose every pleasure either, but we sometimes pass over many pleasures in cases when their outcome for us is a greater quantity of discomfort; and we regard many pains as better than pleasures in cases when our endurance of pains is followed by a greater and long-lasting pleasure. Every pleasure, then, because of its natural affinity, is something good, yet not every pleasure is choiceworthy. (Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” 3)
Objection: the Beneducci-Bugajski objection

Jason: “I feel as though the aspects of life that bring about the greatest amount of pleasure require pain. In my mind, the ultimate pleasure results from the hard work and pain required to achieve something.”

Ben: “…shows us that the unpleasurable experiences- like studying or working out- lead to the pleasurable ones of acing an exam or having a toned body, implying that the unpleasurable experiences make the pleasurable ones. Therefore, my question is: if…humans want more than just pleasurable experiences, is the answer to Anarchy, State, Utopia’s question simply that human nature dictates the dual experiences of both pleasure and adversity to truly live a complex, meaningful life?”

There seem to be at least two ways to take these objections . . . .
Consider the case of Alice the mountain climber:

Ever since Alice heard of Mount Everest as a child, Alice wanted to climb it. And Alice was not one to sit idly by and let her dreams fade away. When Alice became about your age, she started to train hard: running, weight training, eating right, every day for years. She practiced by climbing smaller mountains and made what money she had by serving as a climbing instructor and guide. She scraped and saved until she had enough to climb Everest. Finally, she saved enough and made her attempt. It was gruelingly difficult, but she got to the top and down again safely. It was the greatest achievement of her entire life.

Alice felt very happy when she got to the top of the mountain, and she always remembered that moment with fondness. But she paid for it with a great deal of pain.
Consider the case of Alice the mountain climber:

Did the pleasure involved outweigh the pain? There was a lot of toil involved . . . . Can the hedonist really say “definitely yes?”

If not, it seems the hedonist must say Alice’s life would have gone better if she hadn’t made the climb.

What about the value of setting and achieving a worthwhile, meaningful goal?—apart from the pleasure she got from it?
John Stuart Mill: Higher and Lower Pleasures

The criticism:

To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened… (J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism II, emphasis added)
Mill’s response: we must distinguish higher and lower pleasures:

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account. (J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism II)

What is Mill saying?
Is this giving up on hedonism?
Robert Nozick’s experience machine is supposed to show that we care about other things than pleasure.

1. A life outside the experience machine is better than it would be inside the experience machine.

2. A life inside the experience machine would have more pleasure than one inside the experience machine.

3. So: a life with less pleasure is better than one with more pleasure.

4. So: pleasure cannot be the only thing responsible for how good a life is.

Why not enter the experience machine?
The Reverse Experience Machine

Consider the following case:

Charlie the scientist comes up to you and makes you an offer. 

*I’m afraid you’ve been living in an experience machine your whole life. You have thought you were interacting with other people, your friends, your family, but it only seemed that way.* [She offers incontrovertible proof of her claims.] *But if you would like, I can relieve of you of your situation.*

Would you “plug out?”
The Experience Machine redux

A new case. The *only* difference is whether one is in the machine or not.

Hedonism predicts that the two lives are, from the perspective of well-being, entirely the same. How should you choose between them? Flip a coin . . . .
Consider Bob₁. Bob₁ lives a life full of joy, cute children, cushy job, great house, etc., whatever you want. His wife loves him dearly.

Consider Bob₂. As far as Bob₂ can tell, Bob₂ lives a life full of joy, cute children, cushy job, great house, etc., whatever you want. His wife seems to love him dearly.

In fact, Bob₂ has all the same experiences as Bob₁—everything seems exactly the same. But unbeknownst to him, his wife is cheating on him, his kids hate his guts, his friends talk shit about him when he’s not around.

Hedonism predicts that the two lives are, from the perspective of well-being, entirely the same. Flip a coin . . . .

But who wouldn’t say Bob₁ is better off than Bob₂?