

HEDONISM AND THE SUBJECT'S PRIORITY IN WELFARE THEORY

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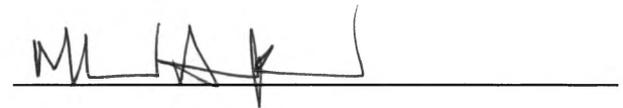
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I certify that I have read Hedonism and The Subject's Priority in Welfare Theory by Luis Alfredo Rivera, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree: Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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HEDONISM AND THE SUBJECT'S PRIORITY IN WELFARE THEORY

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San Francisco, California
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Welfare theory is concerned with prudential value, or the value that something has for a particular individual; it can be divided into two principal categories: subjective versus objective. Roughly, subjective theories prioritize the experience of the subject, while objective list theories do not. In this paper I argue, first, that for something to be of value to an individual's well-being, it must enter into his experience. Thus, a theory of welfare should be subjective, and the experience of the subject should be prioritized and maintained throughout. Second, I propose that because Hedonism naturally represents the view that well-being is a quality of experience, it serves as an appropriate place from which to build a theory of well-being. Third, I defend Hedonism against the three classical objections that have been taken to falsify it: The Heterogeneity objection, The Philosophy of swine, and The Experience Machine Experiment. And this to show that these objections are problematic, and that Hedonism has been unfairly dismissed.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


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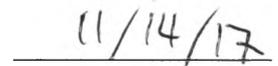

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
II. Hedonism	5
III. Objections to Hedonism	9
A. The Heterogeneity Objection	9
B. The Philosophy of Swine Objection	16
C. The Experience Machine Objection	22
IV. Conclusion	36
V. References	37

I. Introduction

The experience of the subject should be prioritized in theories of well-being. Well-being is an experience; there is something that it is like to be well. The subjective point of view should serve, and be maintained, as a reference in any theory of well-being. Subjective, unlike objective, theories of well-being prioritize the experience of the subject. Of these, I argue, Hedonism, most adequately accounts for the subject's experience of well-being.

The concern and motivation for the priority of the subject follows from the views that welfare theory, is concerned with prudential value, and that it should be "faithful to our ordinary concept" of the term. As Sumner puts it:

Welfare assessments concern what we may call the prudential value of life, namely how well it is going for the individual whose life it is. This relativization of prudential evaluation to the proprietor of the life in question is one of the deepest features of the language of welfare: however valuable something may be in itself, it can promote my well-being only if it is also good or beneficial for me. Since an account of the nature of welfare is descriptively adequate only if it is faithful to our ordinary concept, any serious contender must at least preserve the subject-relativity which is definitive of prudential value.¹

Welfare theory seeks to describe what welfare is, what it consists of. As Sumner suggests, for a theory of well-being to be "descriptively adequate", it should be "faithful to our ordinary concept" of the term. Our ordinary concept of the term naturally concerns prudential value. What we are trying to describe in a theory of well-being is what is going

¹ Sumner (1996, p. 20).

on when we say that someone is doing well. What do we mean when we say ‘he/she is well’? I take it that when we say that someone is well what we are ultimately pointing to is not only the overall status of the general conditions of that individual’s life, but more specifically, their general mental state in the midst of those conditions. When an individual says ‘I am doing well’, we take them to mean that they are generally *enjoying* the current conditions and circumstances that life has brought; we take ‘well’ to be referring to certain features of their experience. In more philosophical terms, what we are evaluating when we ask ‘are you doing well?’ is prudential value. Prudential value is “concerned with the value that something has *for a particular individual*”, or whether something is good or bad for that person.² A theory of well-being will then be concerned with prudential value. Sumner says that “the best theory about the nature of welfare is the one which is most faithful to our ordinary concept and our ordinary experience”.³ What we want in a theory of well-being then is one that describes and explains what is going on when we say ‘I am well’, in the way we ordinarily mean and experience it.

A bit of background would be helpful in our search for such a theory. In what Fletcher says is “sufficiently common to be accurately regarded as orthodoxy”⁴, Parfit created a tripartite distinction among “theories about self-interest”⁵. He divided welfare

² Silverstein, Matthew (2000, p. 280).

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ Fletcher (2016, p. 149).

⁵ Parfit (1984, p. 493).

theory into: Hedonistic theories, Desire-Fulfillment theories, and Objective List Theories. Parfit defined “theories about self-interest” as seeking to answer the question: “[w]hat would be best for someone, or would be most in this person’s interests, or would make this person’s life go, for him, as well as possible?”⁶ Thus, from their inception, “theories about self-interest”, or interest in one’s own well-being, are taken to be primarily concerned with prudential value. This is in accord with Sumner’s position that theories of well-being evaluate prudential value, and helps explain why it makes little sense to exclude the subjective point of view in this evaluation. Parfit’s categorization of theories of well-being can be further divided into subjective and objective types. By Sumner’s definition, “a theory is subjective if it makes welfare depend at least in part on some mental state, but it may make it depend on something else as well”.⁷ Hedonism and Desire-Fulfillment theories both fall under the subjective label, and Objective List Theories obviously under the objective heading.

Welfare theory is comprised of objective and subjective theories. Objective theories “exclude all reference to the subject’s attitudes and concerns”, and are deprived of “reference to the subjective point of view”.⁸ There are numerous Objective lists, but they are usually grouped as such according to their adherence to both, attitude-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 493.

⁷ Sumner (1996, p. 82).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

independence, and pluralism. Attitude-independence says that “it is not the case that G is (non-instrumentally) good for some agent X only if X, or some counterpart of X, has some pro-attitude towards G”.⁹ In general, objective list theories do not prioritize the experience of the subject. An evaluation of prudential value that is deprived of reference to the subjective point of view is problematic. Fletcher states that a general concern arose “that a conception of well-being is problematic to the extent that it is insensitive to a person’s affective states and volitions (tastes, preferences, desires, interests, etc.) such that a person could have a very high level of well-being, according to the theory, even if she was affectively unengaged”.¹⁰ Fletcher, quoting Railton, and addressing the same concern with the attitude-independence of objective list theories, also says that, “an influential way of putting this is that . . . it would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any way to engage him”.¹¹ The response to such concerns was, and is, to establish an ‘experience requirement’ that a theory of well-being should satisfy. The experience requirement establishes that: “something can benefit or harm a being only if it affects her experiences in some way—specifically, their phenomenology (or ‘what it is like’ to be having them.)”¹² Because of this general disregard for the subjective point of view, and failure to satisfy the

⁹ Fletcher (2016, p. 148).

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹¹ Ibid., 156.

¹² Bramble (2016, p. 88).

experience requirement, objective list theories will likely fail to be descriptively adequate of our ordinary conception of well-being. If we are looking for a theory of well-being that accommodates the experience of the subject in the search for prudential value, then a good place to start looking is under subjective theories of well-being, more specifically, Hedonism.

II. Hedonism

As one defender of Hedonism defines his preferred theory, it “is a form of mental state theory, according to which what matters to well-being is experiences alone”, and also takes it that “enjoyment is a necessary condition for well-being, not its only constituent”.¹³ Putting these together we get Hedonism as “the view that what is good for any individual is the enjoyable experience in her life, what is bad is the suffering in that life, and the life best for an individual is that with the greatest balance of enjoyment over suffering.”¹⁴ This brings us back to the experience requirement which says that “a state of affairs can make me better off only if, in one way or another, it enters or affects my experience”.¹⁵ Sumner ties it all together nicely when he says, “[a] theory of welfare can be descriptively adequate only if it incorporates some form of experience requirement;

¹³ Crisp (2006, p. 635).

¹⁴ Ibid., 622.

¹⁵ Ibid., 127.

this was the important insight in classical hedonism".¹⁶ Hedonism is loyal to the experience requirement and is committed to the position that for something to make me better off it must enter or affect my experience.

The experience requirement is a safeguard against the troubling view that something can make an individual better off without entering or affecting his or her experience; it is also meant to preserve and insist on the priority of the subjective point of view in welfare theory. Bramble presents an interesting argument for the experience requirement:

1. If something could benefit or harm someone without affecting her experiences (say, fame, success, desire-satisfaction or whatever it may be), then it could do so even after she is dead.
 2. Nothing can benefit or harm us after we are dead (there can be no posthumous benefits or harms)
- Therefore,
3. Nothing can benefit or harm someone without affecting her experiences.¹⁷

Bramble defends premise (2) by using an example of the historical figure Van Gogh. Van Gogh was thought to live a life full of suffering, and no one appreciated, understood, or acknowledged his artistic accomplishment while he was alive. Van Gogh did have tremendous posthumous success and fame. It is of course thought that this success and fame would have made Van Gogh better off if he had attained it while he was alive. The question is can we say that this posthumous success made Van Gogh better off? And if we

¹⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁷ Bramble (2016, p. 88).

say yes, can we say his life was tragic? History says that Van Gogh had a tragic life. If his posthumous success negated the ‘tragic’ part of that evaluation, then can we say that the posthumous success actually means he in fact had a glorious life? Bramble asks, “[i]f the contribution to our well-being of success, fame, desire-satisfaction, or whatever it is, does not depend on our experience being affected, then *why should it matter whether we are alive or not for this contribution to be made?*”¹⁸ The obvious answer is that in such a case it shouldn’t. Someone who thinks that a person’s well-being can be affected by things that never enter into that person’s experience should agree that that person does not need to be alive for something to affect their well-being. But the thought and implications of that position seem odd, and troubling. Brandom concludes this argument by bringing out the crux of the discussion: “[w]hat, after all, *is* death? On a plausible conception, it is just the permanent cessation of one’s experiences. Death, then, we can say, ends one’s ability to be benefited and harmed precisely *because* it is the end of one’s experiences, and benefitting and harming require affecting one’s experiences”.¹⁹

This last point also seems consistent with our regular talk about death, and what it means for the dead. We most often take death to be the end of that person’s experience, and death precludes the possibility of them being affected by things that happens in this world (like previous debts). Sometimes we say things like ‘may he rest in peace’, or ‘may

¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90.

he burn in hell'. But in those cases we still have in mind a subject who is resting in heaven, or burning in hell. We gain some satisfaction of a person being in hell because we imagine that the fire is affecting the experience of that person in a particular way (and they deserved it of course). If the experiencer, or first person point of view is omitted from our imagination when thinking about another's well-being, then it is hard to think of who will be affected by any particular thing, event, or circumstance that might befall her, in this life or the afterlife. When we say so and so 'is doing well' we mean that the experience of that person is of a particular quality. Without that person conscious and experiencing life, it is hard to make sense of who it is that is or is not doing well, and how?

Bramble thinks that the experience requirement motivates Hedonism. He says that, "[i]f the experience requirement is true, then hedonism seems likely to be true as well." This is because:

1. If things must affect someone's experiences in order to benefit or harm her, this is likely because benefiting and harming just consist in affecting people's experiences in various ways.
2. If benefiting and harming just consist in affecting people's experiences in various ways, this is likely because they just consist in affecting people's pleasure and pains specifically.²⁰

Premise (1) is the experience requirement, and it is native to all mental-state theories of well-being, including Hedonism. But premise (2) presents an argument which is

²⁰ Ibid., 88.

particularly Hedonist. The Hedonist argument takes premise (1) as obvious, and adds that what ultimately affects an individual's experience in a beneficial manner is a quality of experience understood as enjoyment (or pleasure), and what ultimately affects an individual's experience in a harmful manner is a quality of experience understood as suffering (or pain). Further, a person's well-being can be determined by how much they actualize the experience of enjoyment versus the experience of suffering. These arguments are the basis for the three classic objections to Hedonism known, respectively, as the 'heterogeneity', 'philosophy of swine', and 'experience machine' arguments. I will turn to these objections next.

III. Objections to Hedonism

A. The Heterogeneity Objection

Hedonism is considered a "felt-quality" theory. As Bramble defines them, "[f]elt-quality theories entail that all pleasure feel alike in some way"²¹ According to felt-quality theories, "some bit of phenomenology counts as pleasure or pain just in virtue of its phenomenology (i.e., 'what it is like' to be experiencing it)".²² Against this felt-quality feature of Hedonism came what has come to be known as the *heterogeneity objection*. It goes as follows: "introspection and reflection make it clear that there is no such common

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 90.

quality of enjoyable to all things we in fact enjoy: eating, reading, working, creating, helping”.²³ First, it seems that a person who admitted to “in fact” *enjoying* these various activities would first have to admit, or at least have some idea, that there is something that it is like to experience enjoying something. If this is true, then it is difficult to see how that does not in itself admit to a common quality of experience—enjoying something? When we use the word ‘enjoyment’ to describe and communicate a quality of various experiences, we assume that the other person will know what we mean when we say ‘I enjoyed this or that’. This then, should serve as evidence, though rough, of a common quality to various enjoyed experiences. Our common use of the word ‘enjoy’ to describe our mental state during varying activities should serve as preliminary evidence for the claim that there is a common quality of enjoyable. Crisp agrees, and suggests that in such a case:

the internalist would be well advised to refer to our ordinary understanding of enjoyment. First, enjoyableness is usually taken to be a single property of a variety of experiences. Eating, reading, and working . . . are very different from one another. But if you experience each, I may ask you: ‘Did you enjoy those activities? Did you enjoy the experience of those activities? Did your experiences in each case have the *same felt property*—that of being enjoyable? Of course, they are all enjoyable in different ways and for different reasons; but they are all enjoyable.²⁴

²³ Crisp (2006, p. 623).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 629.

If the individual then replies that they did enjoy all these activities, but insists that there is no common quality of enjoyable, then no progress has been made, and we are back where we started. I believe Locke had faced a similar impasse when he said that “[Pain and Pleasure] like other simple ideas cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them is, as of the simple ideas of the senses, only by experience”.²⁵ Like pain and pleasure, what exactly it is like to be enjoying something is difficult to describe. But in admitting that we enjoyed various activities and circumstances, we admit that ‘enjoyable’ can be a common quality of varying experiences.

Another strategy to deal with the heterogeneity objection incorporates metaphor. This strategy also further elucidates the felt quality of ‘enjoyable’. In the words of Roger Crisp, this strategy proceeds by admitting that, “enjoyment is not a single common ‘component’ of enjoyable experiences, but allows enjoyment to serve as a single ‘dimension’ along which experiences can vary.”²⁶ He elaborates further by saying that “[v]olume . . . is not a ‘component’ of auditory experiences, but an ‘aspect of sounds If pleasantness is like volume, then arguing that pleasantness is not a single property common to pleasurable experiences, because of the qualitative differences between them, would be like arguing that, because sounds are so different from one another, there is no

²⁵ Locke (1975, p. 20).

²⁶ Crisp (2006, p. 624).

single quality of volume”²⁷ Volume is then a single dimension of experience through which we perceive a plethora of sounds. Like volume, enjoyment/pleasantness is a single “dimension” through which we perceive a great variety of pleasant experiences. This is meant to show that we can perceive how enjoyable an experience is. If we can have a great variety of pleasant experiences, it follows that we have the capacity to perceive the pleasantness of an experience. The metaphor of a ‘dimension’ is an appropriate way to bring out this capacity to experience pleasantness. Enjoyment is not a single component of enjoyable experiences, but a single dimension through which we perceive and evaluate pleasantness. It is this dimension, or capacity, that allows us to experience pleasantness. Though the metaphor does not necessarily bring closure to the argument, it does provide a context and language through which the Hedonist view might be better understood.

Another possible approach in addressing the heterogeneity argument is to take the position that “[p]ositive hedonic tones do not have to be an easily isolable and identifiable part of our experiences. Perhaps it is, on a phenomenological level, fused together with the non-hedonic elements of experience to such an extent that it is difficult to recognize across pleasant experiences”.²⁸ The problem with this position is that if the Hedonist admits that the pleasantness of an experience is difficult to recognize, then how can we evaluate how pleasant a given experience is? And how can she claim that it is

²⁷ Ibid., 624.

²⁸ Labukt (2012, p. 179).

particularly the “pleasant” or enjoyable quality of experience that contributes to well-being, if this quality is hard to recognize? It seems odd to pair the hedonist principal claim, that it is the ‘pleasantness’ dimension of an experience that promotes well-being, with the claim that it is difficult to recognize the pleasant quality or element of a pleasant experience. If we are to evaluate prudential value by how enjoyable our experiences are, enjoyment should be an identifiable feature of those experiences. It can be the case that the pleasantness of an experience is “fused together with the non-hedonic elements of experience”. But what is important for the Hedonist to establish is that the pleasantness of an experience is identifiable to a sufficient degree. If “pleasantness” or “enjoyment” are to single out a feature of our experience which we associate with well-being, that feature should be identifiable and recognizable (again only to a sufficient and appropriate degree).

An “internalist model of enjoyment”, like felt-quality theories, says that there is “a single ‘feeling tone’ common to all enjoyable experiences”, and “a common quality of enjoyableness to all the things we in fact enjoy”.²⁹ Crisp defends this “internalist” view against the heterogeneity objection by establishing a distinction between what he characterizes as determinable and what he terms determinate. Crisp says:

If the advocate of heterogeneity is seeking in enjoyable experiences something like a special sensation, such as . . . a tingle or feeling located in a certain part of the body, such as an itch or ‘pins-and needles’, or indeed something like a

²⁹ Crisp (2006, p. 623).

perceptual quality such as redness, she will fail. But there is a way that enjoyable experiences feel: They feel enjoyable. That is, there is something it is *like* to be experiencing enjoyment, in the same way that there is something that it is like to be experiencing a particular kind of enjoyment (bodily enjoyment, perhaps, or the enjoyment of reading a novel), in the same way that there is something that it is like to be having an experience of color. Enjoyment, then, is best understood using the determinable/determinate distinction, and the mistake in the heterogeneity argument is that it considers only determinates. Enjoyable experiences differ from one another, and are often gratifying, welcomed by their subject, favored, and indeed desired. But there is a common quality—feeling good. . . The determinable/determinate distinction also helps us to be clear about the role of ‘feeling’ in this analysis: Feeling good as a determinable is not any particular kind of determinate feeling.³⁰

The determinable/determinate distinction allows us to make further sense of what is meant when a hedonist says that all enjoyable experiences feel enjoyable. Here, the experience of “enjoyable” is analogous to the experience color. The color red is a determinable in the sense that it can be made more specific by asking ‘what kind of red?’ The color scarlet is a determinate in that it is a hue of the color red, and we normally would not ask ‘what kind of scarlet?’ In a similar way, “enjoyable” is a determinable in that we would normally ask ‘what did you take enjoyment in?’, or ‘what did you enjoy?’ Crisp adds that enjoyment is “in a sense a second-order or intentional” in that enjoyment” is usually taken *in* some ‘first order’ property of one’s experiences. One enjoys the experience of warmth of the fire, the taste of the mango, the wit of Jane

³⁰ Ibid., 629.

Austen”³¹ What Crisp is getting at is that the feeling or experience of enjoying something is general, is made more specific, or our experience is further colored, by the plethora of items, situations, or circumstances we might take enjoyment in. To enjoy a sweet mango on a hot summer day is indeed a different experience than enjoying a great novel on a cold winters evening. Our experience of enjoyment can be as different and varied as the things we might take enjoyment in; but that does not mean that there is no common quality of ‘enjoyment’ in these varied experiences. The heterogeneity argument is right if enjoyment is taken to be a determinate. There is perhaps no one thing in common to all the experiences we might actually enjoy. But it is mistaken if enjoyment is taken to be a determinable, or ‘second-order’. All the experience which we might take enjoyment in could in fact be different from one other, but there is, as discussed earlier, a dimension through which we can perceive the ‘enjoyableness’ of a given situation. There is an experience of enjoying something, something it is like to be enjoying something, regardless of how different these experiences ultimately are. How different they ultimately are could be as varied and numerous as the things we might take enjoyment in. The difference between these experiences can be accounted for by the things we take enjoyment in.

B. The Philosophy of Swine Objection

³¹ Ibid., 628.

After the Hedonist has trudged through the heterogeneity argument, the objection that Hedonism is the ‘philosophy of swine’ awaits. What came to be known as the “philosophy of swine” objection was actually a response to another classical objection. First, the Hedonist claims that it is ultimately the ‘enjoyment’ or ‘pleasantness’ dimension of an experience that is constitutive of well-being. Second, it follows from this that the Hedonist is forbidden from using anything other than enjoyment/pleasantness to measure how a given experience/activity promotes prudential value, or welfare. Thus, it is taken that the Hedonist is committed to the view that “all enjoyable experiences are on the same level”.³² If all that matters is enjoyment, then so long as two experiences are enjoyed, then they are equal in regards to well-being. The problem is that it seems to us that some experiences/activities/pursuits are of a higher quality than others. And Hedonism seems to have no way to account for this difference in quality.

The classic thought experiment in which this objection was framed asked you to choose between the life of an accomplished composer, and the life an oyster. The life of the composer was one of success, honor, fame, accomplishment, perseverance, etc . . . The life of the oyster would be defined by a continuous but mild sensual pleasure, and would last much longer than the composer. But, regardless of how the life of the oyster was embellished, it did not ultimately seem appealing; the life of the composer seemed like the better choice. The catch is that if you choose the life of the composer, then, contra

³² Ibid., 630.

Hedonism, you are admitting that there is more to well-being than pleasure or enjoyment. Hedonism seems to have no way to explain the general gravity towards choosing the life of the composer, for if all that matters is enjoyment, the life of the oyster should seem like a fine option? But it does not?

In response to this thought experiment, J.S. Mill (a hedonist) said that “[t]o suppose that life has . . . no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—[is] utterly mean and groveling . . . a doctrine worthy of swine”.³³ For Mill, a doctrine of swine was unacceptable, so he devised a solution: he proposed that there are ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures. For mill, we want to choose the life of the composer over the oyster because it entails pleasures of a higher quality; they are of a higher quality because they are more ‘noble’. The problem with this solution is that if a Hedonist evaluates that, say, listening to Mozart, is a higher pleasure than eating a donut because it is more noble, then he has abandoned Hedonism, because now the value ‘noble’ is contributing to well-being alongside enjoyment. A Hedonist could reply that ‘noble’ adds to well-being because it increases enjoyment. But, as Crisp says, “it is not clear why, if nobility can increase enjoyableness and hence value, it cannot be a good-making property in its own right, nor why an experience could not be noble without being in the slightest enjoyable”.³⁴ Again, the Hedonist claims that it is only the ‘enjoyment’

³³ Mill (1998, Chapter II).

³⁴ Crisp (2006, p. 632).

component of enjoyable experiences that promote well-being. ‘Noble’ is not an allowable value available to the Hedonist, only enjoyment/pleasure. So Mills solution is not a satisfactory one for the Hedonist.

What the Hedonist needs to get out of this quagmire are “the resources to explain the vastly greater value we put on certain enjoyable experiences without introducing non-hedonist elements into the account of well-being”³⁵ Crisp suggests that Mill was on the right track, but the context of the argument needs to be modified. He notes that Mill was operating in an empiricist context that saw pleasure “as something like a sensation, the value of which depended on two factors only: intensity and duration. Mill was inclined to accept this as far as it went, merely seeking to add a third determining factor: quality.”³⁶ The problem is that, as noted earlier, the view that understands enjoyment as a sensation takes enjoyment to be a determinate. Under the internalist model of enjoyment, enjoyment is “in a sense a second-order or intentional” in that enjoyment” is usually taken *in* some ‘first order’ property of one’s experiences. In this context, an enjoyed experience could ultimately be judged to be better than another on account of its intensity, but intensity is understood as “just another property of the enjoyed experience”.³⁷ The enjoyed experience can have a plethora of properties, and they all

³⁵ Ibid., 633.

³⁶ Ibid., 632.

³⁷ Ibid., 632.

could (or not) potentially influence our evaluation of that experience; intensity is only one such property. But, enjoyment itself “is not something that can be more or less intense”.³⁸ There are not different types of enjoyment, but different properties to the things/events/state of affairs that we might take enjoyment in. And those properties do provide plenty of options from which to evaluate a given experience. But as concerns well-being, it is only that pleasantness/enjoyable dimension that is conducive to well-being. Other aspects of experience which we might use to judge one set of circumstances as better than another, such as honor, nobility, success, intensity, duration, and so on, would not enter into the well-being discussion if they did not entail a certain quality of experience, namely that to actualize them is often enjoyable or pleasant. What makes the feeling of honor or success worthwhile is that it attributes a pleasantness or enjoyment to the experience of the individual. Without accounting for this pleasant quality of experience that honor or success often bestow, it is hard to see what good they are doing for the individual. Honor and success must be taken to affect one's experience somehow, for if not then the subjective point of view is irrelevant in the discussion, and we have the same issue that the Van Gogh example previously discussed faced. Also, ‘intensity’, or any other property, does not directly correlate with enjoyment, for I might enjoy a not-so-intense experience like a nice stroll in the park more than something more

³⁸ Ibid., 632.

intense like skydiving. Or I might enjoy an impromptu philosophical discussion with a friend more than receiving an honor like a doctorate in Philosophy.

The internalist model of enjoyment, using the determinable/determinate distinction allows the Hedonist to make sense of why many are inclined to say that, though both can be enjoyed, reading a classic novel is qualitatively different than eating a donut. Crisp states that “[t]here is nothing in the kind of internalism I have described using the determinable/determinate distinction that is inconsistent with allowing that the assessment of enjoyableness and hence the value of an experience, that is, on what the subject is taking enjoyment *in*”.³⁹ Say we enjoy a novel for its wit, imagery, beautiful syntax, character development, message, etc . . . The experience of eating a donut does not have those features to offer. In choosing eating the donut over reading the novel we are giving up all those properties that make up reading a classic novel, things some find highly enjoyable. The instances of enjoyment that the novel provides do seem to be of a higher intensity and duration. But intensity and duration are properties of the novel, and our interaction with it. Intensity and duration are themselves elements of the experience of reading the novel, which are not present in the same way in eating the donut, which we *sometimes* take enjoyment in. Thus we can use values like intensity and duration to evaluate an experience without saying that it is anything but pleasantness that is responsible for well-being. When we evaluate prudential value in those experiences, what

³⁹ Crisp (2000, p 634).

we are evaluating is whether there is a particular quality present in the experience, from the subjects point of view. And ultimately only the subject herself can determine that. The Hedonist is thus allowed to prefer one enjoyable activity over another without contradiction. For any two enjoyable experiences, the properties of each respective experience may explain why one is preferred over another. The properties or things we take enjoyment in do contribute to our assessment of that experience, but the good promoting dimension of the experience is 'enjoyment'.

A final word about the 'philosophy of swine' objection. The thought experiment that prompted it, the composer versus the oysters dilemma, is problematic. One huge stumbling block for anyone who ponders this option is that the life of an oyster does not seem appealing, regardless of any other consideration. From a human point of view, when asked if we would like to be an oyster, we think of the same consciousness we know possess, the same phenomenological reality we have now, but somehow in an oyster shell in the bottom of the ocean. That in itself makes this option unappealing and naturally repellent. And it seems that this natural antagonism remains throughout the Hedonist trying to solve this seeming dilemma. It would be different, and I believe quite productive, if instead of the composer versus the oyster, we were given the option of the accomplished and famous composer versus the anonymous farmer. The farmer, like the oyster, experiences only a low-grade continuous pleasantness or contentment throughout his life, while the life of the composer is as described above. I believe that this would

offer two viable options, and the thought experiment would take a different direction. The problem with the oysters versus composer conundrum is that there is only one viable option. And then the Hedonist is forced to account for the natural repulsion away from the oyster option and gravity toward the life of the composer. It seems obvious that a human consciousness experienced from the shell of an oyster is not appealing to most humans. It is simply not much of an option.

C. The Experience Machine Objection

The tallest hurdle the Hedonist must jump comes in the form of a thought experiment; one that many take to falsify Hedonism. Silverstein quips that “nowadays most philosophers entertain the idea of hedonism just long enough to dismiss it”, and we can largely thank Robert Nozick’s experience machine experiment for that.⁴⁰

Silverstein nicely sums up the experience machine: “imagine a machine capable of providing us only with pleasurable experiences. This machine can stimulate our brains so that we feel we are living an ideal life. . . And while we are on the machine, the experiences are indistinguishable from real experiences”.⁴¹ If well-being consists only in psychological states, or experiences, Nozick asks, “why do we find the idea of a life spent

⁴⁰ Silverstein (2000, p. 279).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 281.

on the experience machine so disturbing?”⁴² Nozick rightly presumes that most of us would choose not to connect to such a machine; he then takes this unanimous desire to not connect to the machine as evidence of a general lesson. As Nozick sees it, “we learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it”.⁴³ Nozick takes our aversion for the scenario he proposes as evidence that we want, “to *do* certain things” and “be a certain way”; and “not just have the [machine created virtual] experience of doing them”. From this he concludes that “what we desire is to live . . . in contact with reality”.⁴⁴

Nozick’s argument follows a desire-as-evidence approach, and uses inference, to identify the reason why it is we unanimously desire to not connect to the experience machine. The argument can be divided into four major steps. The first step takes the unanimous choice not to connect as evidence for something—there is a reason why we wish not to connect to the experience machine (and that this reason is indicative of a larger lesson). The second step is to hypothesize that *the* reason we do not wish to connect is because we wish to track reality (as opposed to being under the illusion of a machine created virtual world). In the third step, a conclusion is made that a connection

⁴² Ibid., p. 281.

⁴³ Nozick, (1974, p. 645).

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 646.

to reality has prudential intrinsic value.⁴⁵ Finally, if this is all true, then Hedonism is false because he has shown that something matters in addition to experience; and Hedonism says that the *only* thing that is intrinsically prudentially valuable is a quality of experience.

Now, if our desire not to connect to the machine is going to serve as evidence from which the conclusion that reality is intrinsically prudentially valuable can be drawn, a few things must be true. It must be true that there exist “some sort of connection between our desires and our well-being”. Silverstein notes that, “the hypothesis of such a connection is not at all unreasonable”, for “any determination of what there is to the good life must rely on, or at least begin with, our wants and our cares”.⁴⁶ Often, the things we value and desire do contribute to our well-being. So there does seem to exist a connection between our wants and our welfare. But, can we reliably count on our desires to identify those things that promote our welfare? Further, does the act of desiring something serve as sufficient evidence that the thing desired contributes non-instrumentally (or in any way) to our welfare?

The problem with using our desires to identify things that promote our welfare is that, as Griffin correctly observes, “notoriously, we mistake our own interests. It is

⁴⁵ The reason why reality here must have intrinsic value, or be valuable for its own sake, is because it would be problematic if reality here is valuable for the sake of something else. If reality is valuable to us, say because, as some would argue, a failure to track reality in the world we live in often leads to suffering, then this would make reality instrumentally valuable, and this would support Hedonism, not serve as evidence against it.

⁴⁶ Silverstein (2000, p. 287).

depressingly common that when even some of our strongest and most central desires are fulfilled, we are no better, or worse, off".⁴⁷ Take the simple case of the alcoholic who has a strong desire for alcohol. It is obviously not the case that his desire points to something that ultimately contributes to his welfare.⁴⁸ Also, alcohol is not intrinsically prudentially valuable. The same can be said about a plethora of things that folks desire that are in fact detrimental to their well-being. So an individual desiring something is not in itself evidence that the thing desired is in any way good for him.

Now, a proponent of the experience machine experiment could counter that "we are searching for an account of *human* well-being, and so we must rely on those desires that are nearly universal in scope. These near-universal desires, then, point to the things that are intrinsically prudentially valuable".⁴⁹ But, do our *near-universal* desires point to things that promote our welfare? Silverstein says that "our near-universal desires do not, however, serve as conclusive and foolproof evidence for what constitutes our well-being. Although our cares and desires may provide hints, they do not by themselves point to our well-being."⁵⁰ He uses the example of our near-universal desire for wealth: it is the case

⁴⁷ Griffin (1986, p. 10).

⁴⁸ The argument could be made that alcohol gives one pleasure, thus contributes to welfare. But the hedonist determines welfare by measuring enjoyment versus suffering. Thus, for the alcoholic, although alcohol *might* bring someone momentary enjoyment, the consequences of that pleasure is quite often suffering. The suffering would then overcome the pleasure in her life, and we would not say that that person is well. Also, alcohol is instrumentally valuable in that people drink it for the sake of something else, namely for its effect.

⁴⁹ Silverstein (2000, p. 288).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

that wealth can contribute to our well-being. But it must be qualified: an individual could attain some wealth, which would offer him the opportunity to obtain a large amount of debt that he could not pay back, which would likely leave him worse off than he was. Or take the case of a heroin addict—wealth for a heroin addict is akin to suicide. Point being that an individual must be competent to some degree for wealth to contribute to his welfare. Wealth could contribute to ones welfare, but put simply—it depends. Also, there are many that are fairing quite well without anything we would call wealth, so it is not necessary for that purpose; sure they likely desire to have wealth, but it is not a requisite to be well. But most importantly, in cases where wealth does promote ones welfare, it does so in an instrumental manner. Wealth can promote our welfare because it affords us a means to things we otherwise might not have access to: leisure, luxury goods, relationships, institutions, events, locales, status, etc. . . So while the unanimous desire for wealth is robust, the link between wealth and welfare is fragile. That we unanimously desire something is not itself evidence that what we desire is good for us, let alone intrinsically good.

At this point the experience machine proponent could “introduce a distinction that explains which of our desires—those things that we want and about which we care *for themselves*—can be distinguished from instrumental desires. Thus, while not every near-universal desire is a reliable indicator of well-being, we might be able to appeal safely to

our near-universal *intrinsic* desires.”⁵¹ But what is in question is the thing that we desire, not the desire itself. The ‘intrinsic’ part of intrinsic desire qualifies the thing desired, not the desire itself. A desire is for or against something. Nozick is purporting that the experiment machine experiment is proof that reality is intrinsically valuable. To then say that reality is intrinsically valuable because of an intrinsic desire for it does not answer much. The critical issue is whether Nozick has sufficient evidence to establish that reality is intrinsically, and not instrumentally, valuable. The only definite evidence the experiment machine affords is a unanimous desire not to connect to the machine; and this evidence alone does not support the conclusion.

It is important to note that the machine experiment is not necessary to make the point that in actuality we prefer to “track reality” over, say, being permanently delusional or hallucinating. That we value reality, and wish to track it, seems far from controversial. Thus Nozick intends both the desire not to connect, and his explanation for why that is, because we value reality, to together serve as evidence for, and substantiate, the claim that reality is intrinsically valuable. But neither the unanimity of a desire, nor that the thing unanimously desired is in fact valued, prove that the thing desired is *intrinsically* valuable.

⁵¹ Ibid., 288.

Another confusing aspect of Nozick's argument is his claim that "the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is *why* we desire it . . ."⁵² Nozick takes reality to be objectively valuable in that it is valuable independently of our wishes, desires, or attitudes. So it is not our desiring it that makes it valuable, we desire it because it is valuable. But if it is not our desiring it that makes it valuable, then how can our desiring it motivate or substantiate the claim that it is valuable? Nozick's argument relies on desire serving as principal evidence for something. Now admittedly, it does seem that ideally we would come to desire that which is valuable independently of our desires. But as previously discussed, the connection between our desires and the prudential, intrinsic, or objective value of the thing desired is a contingent one. We cannot trust merely desiring something to show us what is valuable, for we can, and do, desire things that are not valuable. Though there might be instances when the thing desired is in fact objectively valuable (and again this seems ideal), an error occurs when we use our desiring something as evidence of the value of the thing desired; a further error occurs when we take our desiring something as also qualifying the value of the thing desired.

Still, defenders of the machine experiment argument can insist "that the search for our well-being must at least *begin* with our cares and wants. Although our desires and intuitions are not always accurate, we should not disregard them entirely. Surely, defenders maintain, our overwhelming intuitive prejudice against the experience machine

⁵² Nozick, (1989, pp.106-107).

tells us *something* about the role of happiness in a good life".⁵³ I'm not sure that the machine experiment affords any clear lesson as regards welfare. Perhaps it does? In order to find out, we should turn to the initial question the machine experiment incites: why do we unanimously not want to connect to the experience machine?

It is not an easy question to answer. While there is unanimity in the decision not to connect, there are many competent answers individuals could give for not connecting. If there is a plethora of reasons for not connecting, then it would be difficult to draw a single lesson from the experiment. In order to draw a single lesson from the experiment, one would have to assume that there is a single and principal reason, and/or that there is a single concern that underlies a set of answers. Multiple answers could be categorized into sets by how similar the reason that underlies them is. But if there are multiple sets, then it again becomes difficult to isolate a single reason for not connecting; and a single reason for not connecting is needed so that a single and principal lesson can be drawn from the experiment. Another difficulty in isolating the true answer for why we do not wish to connect concerns the person(s) conducting the experiment. Assuming there are more than one answer, one would need a way to evaluate all possible answers. Some sort of criteria by which to filter and judge all possible answers would be needed. The problem is that such criteria would need to be contrived, and in designing and exercising such criteria one risks introducing bias. Whatever the experience machine experiment has to tell us

⁵³ Silverstein (2000, pp 289-290).

about welfare is dependent on the reason folks have for not connecting. It is critical that this reason be identified without bias. Thus the risk for bias would need to be kept in mind in the handling and discounting of *any* answer.

Uncertainties such as these lead Sumner to conclude that “as striking as Nozick’s thought experiment is, it is not clear just what lesson we should draw from it. For one thing, as soon as we start to think realistically about the scenario he sketches then the decision not to plug in seems overdetermined. Once you have signed on and are floating in the tank you have relinquished all control over how things subsequently go for you . . .”⁵⁴ It is indeed difficult determine the particular reason why we choose not to plug in to the machine; without a singular reason it becomes more difficult to know what lesson should be drawn from it. Sumner points out that connecting to the machine entails handing over all control over how things will go for you. This is no small matter, and could very well be what motivates the lesson to be drawn from the experiment. That we value our ability to have a say in how things go for us is critical to our welfare. Nozick recognized these implications in the experiment, but entangled these issues with what he proposes to be the main theme of the machine experiment: our valuing “contact with reality”. Nozick says, “what is most disturbing about them [the machines] is their living of our lives for us. Perhaps what we desire is to live ourselves, in contact with reality (And this, machines cannot do *for* us). Without elaborating of the implications of this,

⁵⁴ Sumner (2006 pp. 94-95).

which I believe connect surprisingly with issues about free will and causal accounts of knowledge, we need merely note the intricacy of the questions of what matters *for people* other than their experience.”⁵⁵ That we value many things is certain. Why the issue of free will, especially as presented in the experience machine scenario, should motivate us to note “the intricacy of what matters for people other than their experiences” is not.

The experience machine scenario clearly instigates pressing concerns regarding will and agency. The machine scenario asks you to surrender control over how things go for you. If someone cares about their welfare, we would expect them not to voluntarily surrender control over how things go for them by choosing to connect to the machine. And this is what happens. The experience machine experiment shows that there is a dependency between our welfare and will/agency. While Nozick recognizes that issues concerning will and agency are implicated in the machine experiment, he takes these issues to be motivating of something else—that something matters besides experience. Nozick takes it that the reason we choose not to connect is because we wish to track reality, and that this wish to track reality shows that we value reality. He then concludes that if we value reality then something matters to us besides experience. Nozick confusingly places the issues of will and agency present in the experiment as somehow part of his conclusion, that something matters to us besides experience. Perhaps it is possible that the issue of free will could be justifiably presented as belonging to the

⁵⁵ Nozick (1974, p. 646).

intricacies of the issue of what matters to us besides experience—I am not sure. But the particular problems concerning will and agency that the experience machine scenario involves directly motivates a concern for our welfare, and our ability to influence how things go for us.

There are issues that must be satisfied before we would expect a rational and informed person to surrender his will and agency. Nozick asks us to consider the prospect of being an “intermediate blob . . . floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.”⁵⁶ Imagining this scenario, one would naturally wonder: “how do we keep our bodies from atrophying from disuse? . . . How do we know that the technology is foolproof? . . . What happens if there is a power failure? . . . Suppose the operators of the machine are really sadistic thrill seekers, or the premises are overrun by fundamentalist zealots?”⁵⁷ The truth is these concerns cannot be settled. For we cannot be certain that the machines will never break down for any reason. One might be tempted to settle these concerns by proposing that some people will remain unconnected in order to oversee the machines, and they will make sure that the machines are fully operable. But one then has to wonder how we can be certain that these people will never harm us. And even if it could be shown that the machine operators would never harm us, how do we know that *they* would be free from harm at all times? What about the whims of nature, such as

⁵⁶ Ibid., 645.

⁵⁷ Sumner (2006, p. 95).

natural disasters? No one can guarantee our safety. And if no one can guarantee our safety, then it would be expected that most rational people would choose not to connect. Nozick anticipated such concerns, and simply tell us to “ignore problems such as who will service the machine if everyone plugs in”.⁵⁸ But he never tells us exactly why we should ignore certain concerns, and not others? No explanation is given. Thus, we cannot rule out that the reason someone might choose not to plug in is because their safety cannot be guaranteed.

Now, throughout the experiment, Nozick anticipates a variety of concerns, and attempts to satisfy them by controlling for “boundary conditions”, and other modifications.⁵⁹ Nozick recognizes that the machine scenario might incite moral issues. As initially described by Nozick, life on the experience machine is devoid of moral value. So, in order to eliminate the absence of moral value as possible reason for choosing not to connect, he employs another modification, or boundary control. Silverstein says, “of the many types of value that might be lost in a life on the experience machine, perhaps the most obvious is moral value. Moral value involves the impact our lives and actions have on others. Choosing not to connect to the experience machine seems to many people to be a morally repugnant decision . . . It is therefore possible that our rejection of the

⁵⁸ Nozick (1979, p. 644).

⁵⁹ Sumner (2006, p. 95).

experience machine is driven by intuitions regarding moral value.”⁶⁰ In pondering the experience machine scenario one might wonder ‘what about my loved ones and the people I care about? Who will take care of my mother, and my children?’ Nozick anticipates such concerns, and addresses them by saying that “others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there’s no need to stay unplugged to serve them”.⁶¹ But there is a complication: moral value concerns the impact our decisions and actions have on others. First, a blob floating in a tank presumably cannot impact the lives of others. But neither can one in the illusory world created by the machines. And it makes no difference if others are plugged in or not. Remember that the experience machine will yield *only* pleasurable experiences. It is hard to imagine a world in which we experience *only* pleasure, and still have the ability to exercise our capacity to make decisions and act on them. In the actual world, we often decide what is better or worse based on an anticipated outcome; and there is often a price to pay for getting things wrong. But in the machine created virtual world there is no price to pay, for everything is a pleasurable experience—you cannot go wrong; so in such a world it is unclear just what purpose our will and agency would serve. Anything we might do for someone else will result in a pleasurable experience for them, and for us. Because morality is concerned with right and wrong, a world in which we cannot go wrong is void of moral value. So, Nozick cannot

⁶⁰ Silverstein (2000, p. 291).

⁶¹ Nozick (1979, p. 644).

eliminate the possibility that we might choose not to plug in because of moral concerns by saying that others can choose to plug if they wish. Sumner notes that, “in order to isolate the philosophical point which the experience machine is meant to illustrate, we have to control for boundary conditions by supposing that all these risks have somehow been neutralized”.⁶² But all the risks cannot be neutralized, and all of the concerns one might have cannot be satisfied. A concern for any of these risks, moral value, and/or any other concern, might be the reason for us desiring not to connect to the machine. The use of modifications to control for boundary conditions serve to elicit responses that are biased. And this is critical when the reason that people might have for not connecting to the experience machine is taken to be singular, evidence for something, and used to substantiate a larger philosophical lesson.

Nozick’s conclusion, that reality is intrinsically prudentially valuable relies on the evidence, and inferences made from that evidence, in order to substantiate it. The evidence is that we unanimously desire not to connect to a machine created virtual world for the entirety of our lives. But it is not clear exactly why we do not wish to connect; and this is necessary if we are to draw a lesson from it. There are many excellent reasons one might have not to connect. We might wish not to connect because we are not willing to surrender control over how our lives go for us, or because we value morality, or because our safety cannot be guaranteed. And it is not possible to eliminate these as possible

⁶² Sumner (1996, p. 95).

reasons for desiring not to connect by controlling for boundary conditions. Nozick proposes that the reason we wish not to connect to the machine is because we value reality. But that inference is never adequately substantiated by the machine experiment itself. Again, the claim that we value reality in the actual world is not a controversial claim, and the experience machine experiment is not necessary to establish or support this claim. Thus, what is critical for Nozick's argument is not to establish that we value reality, but that that is the reason we wish not to connect to the machine. And again, that is not clear. If that is unclear, then the jump from the claim that reality is valuable to the claim that reality is intrinsically prudentially valuable is without basis.

IV. Conclusion

It is difficult to see how something could make someones life go best if it never entered into their experience. 'To be well' describes a particular quality or dimension of experience, one most adequately described as enjoyment. When we say 'so and so is well', we mean that that persons subjective point of view is of a certain quality. Welfare theory should be principally concerned with, and maintain throughout, the subjective point of view. To be well is to have a particular kind of experience, and Hedonism got this right from the outset. Sumner says that, "the important insight in classical hedonism" is that it incorporated an experience requirement. And an experience requirement is critical to maintaining the priority of the subject's point of view in welfare theory.

In discussing the inadequacies of the classical objections to Hedonism I hoped to show that Hedonism has been given an unfair verdict based on questionable accusations. Instead of being so hastily discounted, the strengths of Hedonism could serve as a foundation on which to build welfare theory in general. Hedonism naturally satisfies the experience requirement, and stays faithful to our ordinary use of the term well-being. It also offers more insight into describing not only what welfare is and consists of, but how to go about obtaining it.

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