Epicureanism and Hedonism

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Due Date

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As explained by Catherine Wilson, Epicureanism is a term that refers to a philosophical system that is founded on the teachings of Epicurus (2015). The underlying teaching of Epicureanism is that the greatest good that an individual should pursue is seeking modest pleasure, which, in turn, results in tranquility, aponia (the absence of pain), and ataraxia (freedom from fear). Conversely, Andrew Moore asserts that hedonism is an intellectual tradition whose underlying purpose is to avoid suffering and seek pleasure, which is described as the main components of well-being (2004). Both hedonists and epicureans, therefore, make efforts geared toward maximizing their total pleasure (pleasure less any form of suffering and pain) because they believe that pleasure is the ultimate goal in life, whereas pain is the only evil. Epicureanism and hedonism uphold the notion that pleasure is the most significant pursuit of human beings and that humans should strive to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

Epicurus was a hedonist – meaning, his main teaching was that what is painful is morally wrong and what is gratifying is morally good. Epicurus distinctively described “pleasure” as the “absence of suffering” (Barnes, 1986) and taught that every individual should strive to achieve “ataraxia,” (a state whereby one is free from any form of suffering or pain) (Folse, 2005). Epicurus argued that most humans experience suffering due to their fear of death, punishment in the afterlife, and divine retribution (Kenny, 2004). He wrote a letter to Menoeceus, in which he expressed that these fears cause individuals to seek power and wealth because they believe that having more political clout, prominence, or money will prevent them from passing away (Kenny, 2004). However, Epicurus stands firm in his assertion that the end of all existence is death, the horrifying narratives of chastisement after death are farcical superstitions, and that death is a natural occurrence that should not be feared (Gordon, 2012). The key points of Epicureanism are: “do not worry about death, do not fear God, what is good is easily achievable, and what is horrible can be easily endured” (Epicurus & Gerson, 1994).

Because of his views on pleasure, Epicurus was often mistaken as an advocate of pleasure. Even though Epicurus was widely misunderstood as a proponent of the pursuit of pleasure, he firmly asserted that individuals could free from suffering and pain and achieve happiness only by living morally, soberly, and wisely (Gordon, 2012). Epicurus was against excessive sensuality, salacity, and prurience and warned that individuals must consider whether or not their actions will facilitate suffering (Kenny, 2004). In Epicurus’ words, “the pleasant life is not produced by a string of drinking bouts and revelries, nor by the enjoyment of boys and women, nor by fish and the other items on an expensive menu, but by sober reasoning” (Barnes, 1986 pg. 372). Epicurus further taught that individuals could not live pleasurably without living justly, nobly, and sensibly because individuals who promote injustice or engage in dishonest acts will be overburdened with troubles facilitated by their own wrongdoings, as well as their guilty consciences. Their guilt will also cause them to be in a constant state of fear that their wrongdoings will be exposed and known by the general public (O’Keefe, 2014). However, a just and kind individual will have no reason to live in fear and have more chances at achieving “ataraxia.”

Pleasure is categorized into two distinct groups: “static” pleasure and “moving” pleasure (Laertius, 1901). According to Epicurus, moving pleasure occurs when an individual is actively in the process of satisfying a desire. A prime example of moving pleasure is eating a meal when hungry. When satisfying a moving pleasure, an individual takes action toward his or her intended goal of pleasure. Once the individual’s desire is satisfied (for example, when the individual is full after having a meal), the pleasure instantly disappears, and the desire of wanting to fulfill the same pleasure returns (Kenny, 2004). Contrastingly, Epicurus viewed “static” pleasure as the best form of pleasure, claiming that moving pleasures are often accompanied by pain (Kenny, 2004). Epicurus did not give much importance to marriage and sex, maintaining that both had dubious values. Rather, he maintained that living a happy life was achievable primarily through maintaining platonic relationships (Gordon, 2012). One of Epicurus’ Principle Doctrines states that “Of the things wisdom acquires for the blessedness of life as a whole, far the greatest is the possession of friendship” (Gordon, 2012, pg 5). He further taught that individuals should engage in philosophy because it is a pleasure that benefits humankind. Another of Epicurus’ doctrines states that:

“In other pursuits, the hard-won fruit comes at the end. But in philosophy, delight keeps pace with knowledge. It is not after the lesson that enjoyment comes: learning and enjoyment happen at the same time: (Gordon, 2012 pg 5).

There are three types of pleasure: empty and vain, natural and necessary, and natural but not necessary. Natural and necessary pleasures are pleasures such as shelter and food. Individuals can easily satisfy these pleasures; however, they bring pleasure once they are satisfied, they are difficult to eradicate, and they are naturally limited. When individuals surpass these limits, they experience unnecessary pleasures, including the desire for luxury items such as food and clothes. Even though food and clothes are necessary, luxury foods and clothes are not necessary. In like manner, Epicurus encourages individuals to live lives of hedonistic moderation by reducing their desires because doing so eliminates the unhappiness that is affiliated with unsatisfied desires. Vain pleasures include the desire for fame, power, and influence. Vain pleasures are almost impossible to meet because even though one achieves a certain vain pleasure, he or she will always desire more. Vain pleasures are primarily instilled by society and by unrealistic beliefs regarding what individuals need. Vain pleasures are unnatural, they result in dissatisfaction, they are unrealistic, and they should be shunned.

The underlying purpose of philosophy is to pursue and achieve pleasure, which is characterized by aponia and ataraxia. Epicurus advocated that individuals were in the best potion to pursue pleasure when they live self-sufficient lives enjoying the company of their friends. Moreover, he taught that human neuroticism and mania is caused by the denial of death and the widespread belief that death is both painful and horrific, which resulted in hypocrisy, unnecessary fear, and selfish behaviors aimed at prolonging lives. In Epicurus’ view, death only ends existence to the soul and the body, and should not be dreaded. He taught that even though the existence of gods cannot be denied, gods cannot involve themselves in human matters. He further taught that individuals should behave in an ethical manner not because they fear punishment from the gods, but because behaving immorally will cause them to suffer from guilt and make it impossible for them to attain ataraxia. The greatest good, as asserted by Epicurus, is seeking modest pleasure, which results in tranquility, aponia, and ataraxia. The combination of these states constitutes pleasure in its highest form.

There are three types of hedonism: ethical hedonism, psychological hedonism, and rationalizing hedonism (Crisp, 2006). Ethical hedonism combines welfarism and hedonism, which yields a view that claims that what individuals should do, depends exclusively on the effects of their actions on the well-being of other individuals. Ethical hedonists advocate for reducing suffering and increasing pleasure for all beings that can experience them (Partif, 1984). Alternatively stated, ethical hedonism refers to the notion that all individuals have the right and freedom to take measures geared toward achieving pleasure. It also refers to the notion that all individuals’ pleasure should be greater than their pain. Psychological hedonism maintains that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain is inherent among all humans and that humans cannot conduct themselves in other ways apart from this. Humans will always conduct themselves in ways that, according to them, yield the greatest pleasure to safeguard them from unwanted pain. Psychological hedonism is not founded upon observations of human behavior or a shared notion of what “desire” means (Crisp, 2006). However, psychological hedonism can be classified as a form of egoism (Shaver, 2002), which focuses on fulfilling individual, as well as societal pleasure. Psychological hedonism has an altruistic version that involves deep-rooted religious and cultural beliefs, as well as convictions that motivate individuals to act for the good of society or family or with the afterlife in mind. Contrastingly, Rationalizing hedonism is a school of thought that defines value in terms of pleasure. This type of hedonism suggests that all human pursuits are driven by the desire to minimize pain and increase pleasure (Partif, 1984). Rationalizing hedonism determines value based on the pleasure an individual experiences, without considering the future pain or pleasures that a certain action can cause.

Different Greek philosophers had their own unique opinions of how pleasure constitutes to the achievement of the “good life.” Greek philosophers such as Epicurus, Democritus, Aristotle, Aristippus, and Plato developed numerous expressions regarding the notion that “pleasure is the good.” Aristippus’ version of hedonism claimed that the “greatest good” was derived from the pleasure experienced in a certain moment. He also advocated for a life of sensual pleasure based on the principle that all human beings avoid pain and pursue pleasure (Irwin, 1991). His position was aimed at showing that people should enjoy the pleasure of the moment and that worry or concern about future or past events only caused anxiety and uncertainty and should not be given any form of attention.

Democritus and Socrates’ version of hedonism holds that pleasure is a state of euthymia (tranquility of mind) and that certain pains and pleasures need to be selected based on how they affect tranquility (Nodelman & Anderson, 1995). In “Protagoras,” Socrates presents a method of calculating pains and pleasures. He argues that an individual’s own good should not be pleasure that is short-lived and that it is vitally crucial to distinguish between pleasures that promote harm and pleasures that promote good (Zeyl, 1980).

Aristotle disputed the widely held concept that that pleasure is a process through which individuals remedy a natural deficiency (satisfying thirst or hunger). He challenged the pre-existing definitions of pleasure that were prevalent in his time and established his own definition of pleasure, which declared that “pleasure occurs when a natural potentiality for thought or perception is realized in perfect conditions” (de Landázuri, 2012). Aristotle went on to explain that all forms of actualization have their own pleasure: bodily pleasures, the pleasure of art, and the pleasure of thought.

Epicurus argued that pleasure exists in two forms: the pleasure that results from satisfying a deficiency (such as a desire or hunger) and the pleasure that results from being in a stable and free state, devoid of any form of disturbance or pain (O’Keefe, 2005). Epicurus gave supremacy to being in a state of freedom without any form of pain and gave little importance to the attainment of pleasure. He stated that the highest pleasure that an individual can achieve consists of a moderate and simple life spent in philosophical discussions and in the company of friends (Gordon, 2012). Epicurus went as far as discouraging overindulgence of any kind, claiming that overindulgence ultimately results in instability or pain (Kenny, 2004). In *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus writes that:

We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure, we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure, we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good” (Epicurus, 2004).

Christian philosophers did not accept Epicurean hedonism on claims that its views went against Christian views; however, Erasmus and Thomas More revived Epicurean hedonism. Christian philosophers claimed that Epicurean hedonism was not consistent with Christian aims of adhering to God’s will, avoiding sin, seeking a reward after death for suffering and sacrifice on earth, and cultivating virtues such as faith and charity. Erasmus revived hedonism by maintaining that it was God’s will for humans to experience pleasure (Botley et al., 2004). When describing his ideal society (utopia), Thomas More stated that “the chief part of a person’s happiness consists of pleasure” (More, 2011). He further stated that God made humans to be happy and that He motivates moral behavior using humans’ desire for pleasure. More distinguished pleasures of the body and mind, encouraging humans to pursue natural pleasures and not pleasures generated by artificial luxuries.

The nineteenth century saw the establishment of new definitions of hedonism from a utilitarian perspective. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (British philosophers) established their own definitions of hedonism, which were founded upon their ethic theory of utilitarianism, which shares similar values with hedonism, such as actions that should be performed with the main goal of achieving the greatest good for the greatest proportion of people (Driver, 2014). As argued by Mill, pleasure exists at different levels, and high-quality pleasure is of more value than low-quality pleasure. Mill claimed that simpler beings (such as pigs) could easily access the simple things in life. This is because they are unaware of other aspects that exist in life; thus, they can take part in any activity without having to give much thought to their actions. Contrastingly, elaborate beings take more time to think about their actions hence lessening the time they spend enjoying the simple pleasures that life has to offer (Driver, 2014).

Christian hedonism made it possible for Christians to pursue pleasure. In 1986, pastor, Dr. John Piper coined the term “Christian hedonism,” which appeared in his book “Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian hedonist.” In the book, Piper asserts that human beings were created by God, who purposed for them to enjoy and know him more intimately through serving, praising, and worshipping Him (Piper, 1986). Christian hedonism encourages individuals to pursue their own happiness with God as the ultimate pleasure (Piper, 1968). Like the Epicurean view, Christian hedonism describes the highest pleasure as something that is long-lasting and not short-lived. Both views also suggest that pleasure is not something that can be achieved through indulgence.

Epicureanism and Hedonism have this in common: they both uphold the concept that pleasure is the most significant pursuit of humankind and that humans should do everything possible to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. These two schools of thought advocate for seeking modest pleasure, which results in tranquility, aponia, ataraxia, and euthymia. The combination of these states constitutes pleasure in its highest form. Both Epicureanism and Hedonism describe pleasure as something that yields long-lasting outcomes and not something that can be achieved through meaningless indulgence. Epicureanism and Hedonism are philosophies that maintain that the most important pursuit of human beings is pleasure, and it is the only pursuit that is good for individuals.

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