



# **HEDONISM : THE GROSSLY MISCONSTRUED BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the best applications of Practical Psychology is fixing certain parameters to understand the complex nature of human beings. Generally the analysis of human nature is based on the standard principles which are theoretically approved by the society we live in and the culture voluntarily adopted by us. It should be admitted that not all truly and cent percent qualify to be adjudged as perfect or ideal beings. Psychologically there are temptations, physical and mental handicaps, diffidence in certain paths of life and temporary enthusiasm, which constitute our personality. Despite this, with no exception, all the virtues and vices accompany everyone in certain measures. Obviously the warring spirit between them continually creates confusion or chaos at the mental level owing the the results surfacing. We easily label a person with our own judgement which has a rigid moral platform. Our inference is mostly based only on the effect than the cause which had prompted the person to act so. Many times it is the circumstances which burden a person to deviate from the normal path. Therefore, our yardstick may not be faultless in an absolute manner. In this regard Lucifer Effect is a guideline for us to get a clarity regarding why good people deviate from the standard social principles, which have earned accreditation.

Generally there is an attempt to place hurriedly a blame on the mental frame of the evil-doer. Onlookers are ever critical about the choice of the 'ism' preferred by the person without knowing it properly. The most commonly mistaken behavioural science in this regard is Hedonism. It is very casually taken for granted that Hedonists have been striving only for Pleasure irrespective of the circumstances. It is also abruptly concluded that Hedonism does encourage even wrong doing just for the sake of gaining pleasure. This paper attempts to present the clear picture of Hedonism with Psychological and Ethical aspects so that this ism can be used in the present age for the benefit of the society in an agreeable manner.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychological Hedonism, Ethical Hedonism, Lucifer Effect.

## INTRODUCTION

Stretching back to the past centuries we realize that there had been always an attempt by the reformers and philosophers to put forth a concrete theory which could satisfy man's ethical consciousness. This is because despite so many erstwhile theories regarding standard human behaviour, the confusion rallies as new circumstances arise periodically. Psychologically there are certain elements which prompt voluntary actions. Therefore, it is necessary to take on psychological analysis of the chosen moral deliberations. In brief it could be our desires and subsequently the judgement drawn thereof. The major one could be the tussle between the opposing desires and the resulting consequence. Many times it so happens that the distinction between Desire and Will, is not clearly made out. Sometimes the same happens with regard to Character and Conduct or Motive and Intention. In fact the function of the Will is to promote only the tendencies which are in the dormant stage. At times when a person becomes a victim of his tendencies, the result is obviously detrimental to self and sometimes to the society too. Therefore it is the Will which is necessary to guide or direct the person. With this, Character of the person is properly constituted by the strength of the Will. The baser instincts need to be controlled and this is done by the ethical superiority shown by the Will.

At this stage we understand the importance of psychological analysis of character. Basically character is erected or guided by the Will nurtured within. It is a mental tendency. The voluntary actions also signal the dormant tendencies. Therefore, character building does not take place without the sanction and support of the Will growing within. Most of the times nature of the person and character are synonymously referred to. We need to remember that nature is an innate entity while character is steadily built exclusively by own choice. It is quite possible that during its formation there might have been unseen efforts by the person to control emotions and even the dominating instincts by own reasoning power. This would lead to the rationale for selecting certain chosen principles. Generally Ethics play an important role in this process. We may arrive at the conclusion that ultimately character is nothing else than organization of our sentiments having a proven rational base. This is because the choice of primary and secondary sentiments is our own sole responsibility. Character indeed is reflected through our disposition. Our volitions also indicate the same. Character is obviously based on our free Will and therefore, works that are carried by us under a given situation by force cannot be considered as a genuine reflection of our character. In brief, we can infer from this that there is an intimate relationship between the Self, Character and Desire. This is chiefly because human desires have an object alloyed with emotions. This is where we differentiate between Emotions and Passions. Human life cannot be taken up like a natural phenomenon for a general scrutiny. The difficulty is because of the two adjoining segments, viz; Intelligence and Sentience, that are present in such a way that they continually diffuse into each other. A clash between the pragmatic approach which is within every living being and intellectual desires or speculations is ever an ongoing process. That is why there is always a sort of confrontation going on at the mental level. When the moral consciousness is awake then it compromises with none. Even our reasoning power gets paralysed. Although at times, alternatives are present, it is the confusion for most to pick up judiciously the right one. Majority times it is the practical need which dominates and therefore rather forces the man to make a decision. However, rarely there are cases wherein it is the moral responsibility that consciously prompts the person to act irrespective of the results.

## HEDONISM

It is but natural for everyone to find out a way of life which can assure comfort and happiness. There are two hurdles. Primarily it is the segment of the society we live in, where the societal culture may not match our aspirations. Secondly, although one is placed at a particular rung of the society which may be envious for others but there is no scope for the free-will. This shows many times despite knowledge and social status, people suffer inwardly. At times as generally it is said, ignorance proves to be a sort of blessing in disguise. However, so long as the mind with consciousness does not approve, the comfort drawn through our actions may not be lasting. That is why Moral Consciousness has gained the utmost importance in life. There are scores of isms which insist upon a particular way of life to live as the best ever suggested. Even then it does not seem to be the end of the dilemma. This is because there are so many permutations and combinations, which one has to try to tackle a situation. Still there does not seem to be any complacency worth mentioning. This is definitely because these isms provide satisfaction only at the mental level but the results evolved thereof are not worthy enough to take into account. Very few have recommended our efforts to be directed only for gaining pleasure and happiness in life. Hedonism in this context shows a strong trust that only pleasure in life is worth pursuing. The word 'Hedonism' etymologically shows is taken from the ancient Greek word 'Hedone' for pleasure.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONISM

"With Aristotle, the period of great speculative systems comes for the time being to a close. In his successors the course of philosophy took a new turn, which it was to follow for several centuries... From Socrates to Aristotle philosophy had made an attempt to stem the current and to give a rational basis... For the next few centuries, accordingly, philosophy assumes an intensely practical aspect; it aims to be nothing more nor less than a complete art of living. You pretend that you are not calculated for philosophy? says Diogene; why then do you live, if you have no desire to live properly? "Philosophy" writes Seneca, "is not a theory for popular acceptance and designed for show; it is not in words, but in deeds." It is not employed to help us to pass the day agreeably or to remove ennui from our leisure...(it) directs our actions, shows what ought to be done and to be left undone.<sup>1</sup>

Theoretically, Hedonism has two categories within viz; Psychological and Ethical. If we refer back, in history we realize the necessity of making distinctions as ancient or old form and the modern or the present form. Despite the division, in any category the chief aim of life suggested by Hedonism is seeking only pleasure in life. Further "Self" is assumed to be always sentient. This naturally becomes the fundamental postulate for all the types that are recognized. This would mean 'Self' having all the common shades of personality, comprising of feelings. When the feelings are settled, there could be an instinctual approach wherein domination of emotions might take place. Once these sensations express themselves through actions the development of passions takes place. Reason may also get subordinated. Under these circumstances man is left with no choice other than following the dictates of the passions and this is sometimes referred to as instincts. For all this transaction man tries to justify his actions performed. For an onlooker it might seem like Socrates' outlook but then Socrates' impetus was more on living life first by knowing self and then trying to gain happiness on a moral platform than seeking pleasure as the only ultimate goal at any cost. Hedonists do believe in the common psychological tendency ever present in all for pursuing because that is quite natural. It would be totally wrong to criticize the very tendency. Obviously man hunts for the objects which can provide pleasure but hedonism prefers to place pleasure as an objective of all our desires. Therefore Psychological hedonism may be equated to Reality, while the Ethical type may strictly go with utility or be considered as value based. Many of the philosophers and psychologists have agreed to the existence of the two dominating forces in life, pleasure and pain. Since everyone tries to avoid the latter and gain supremacy so that the former pervades, it is an undeniable psychological reality. Therefore, all our actions are tending towards only pleasure in life. With an ascetic viewpoint it is always considered



wrong or a faulty idea because the principles of ascetic life dismiss the very act of pleasure seeking. It is even considered as something sinful. With due regards, one should know that ascetic life is exclusively meant for those who are in the path of evolved beings. Common man does not bother much about those strict principles of life.

### ARISTIPPUS' HEDONISM

A native of Cyrene, Aristippus promoted gross Hedonism which is said to be inspired or influenced by Socrates' principles. Being an ardent follower of Socrates he vociferously supported the main theme of life as bliss. Every action is supposed to be ethically qualified and capable of producing good in future as its reflection. Therefore, being a materialist, he felt that it is our prime duty to perform those acts which promise pleasure as the outcome. He felt right acts are only those which eventually exhibit pleasure producing capacity. At this stage we can afford to see in particular Aristippus' mainstay in the belief that all pleasures are essentially the same but they differ in their capacity and lasting flow. He thought in case of Socrates, the term 'bliss' was restricted to physical pleasure. Many times due to this followers of Aristippus commonly known as the Cyrenics, were considered to be pure hedonists or egoistic, supporting more of a sensualistic approach. However, any pleasure which has intensity and is capable of having permanence, should be termed as the best type. Aristippus pulls out a pragmatic sense from such an adaptation. He insists, it is wrong to brood over the past and foolishly revel in imagining future. Living in the present with certain sane objectivism is always wise and that is indeed a healthy habit. Getting engrossed in the wishful thinking of the future and repenting over the irreparable past which is not redeemable is definitely foolish. All our behaviour must be directed to the path which would transform every act into pleasure. Therefore pleasure ever remains a source of motivation and the sole purpose of living. That which results into pain is not at all a qualified act. Therefore knowledge of ethics is a must. It would surely take us to the realm happiness and make corrections on time, when any action is inadvertently performed producing pain. Here again we find this philosopher laying emphasis on the Ethics and Culture based knowledge. To him genuine pleasure is obviously the one which dismisses pain for self and also the society we live in. Although he was a clear supporter of materialism placing it exclusively as an ideal, at no point his philosophy would encourage wrong doing. This might have attracted criticism because of his handling, though efficiently, two opposing theories. This is the reason as to why his approach is also said to be erected over Ethical Scepticism. One of the reasons could be owing to his basic leaning towards materialism.

### REFINED HEDONISM OF EPICURUS

Any type of Hedonism would finally aim for the pleasure in life. However, the different types of Hedonism would clash over the difference in their approaches for selecting path. Although drawing pleasure from our activities is common to all yet there are varieties in the pleasure itself. Unless we supervise the nature of the efforts employed and also the intentions underlying our efforts, philosophically not all types of Hedonism can gain an approval. "Epicurus disagrees with some of his hedonist predecessors in distinguishing between active and passive pleasures or dynamic and static pleasures. Dynamic pleasures consist in attainment of a desired end, the previous desire have been accompanied by pain. Static pleasures consist in a state of equilibrium, which results from the existence of the kind of state of affairs that would be desired if it were absent."<sup>2</sup> Epicurus looked into this behavioural science from a psychological point of view and to a large extent in the interest of the society too. To begin with he agrees that human beings are bound to seek pleasure in every phase of life and there is nothing wrong or objectionable in it. But then according to him, we need to make a distinction between emotion and passion. Getting attached or drawn to a particular thing for the sake of comfort is definitely a normal act but having the tendency to grab it at any cost requires a strict examination. Our pleasure seeking should not go down to an extent wherein we may be tempted to apply inhuman ways. Our pleasure hunt can continue solely on moral basis and further ethical thinking to back up always. It is at this stage that Epicurus

felt the necessity of examining our intentions. If our desires fulfill this condition in the interest of physical and intellectual well-being, then only the pleasure drawn would be a Qualified Hedonism.

This is very clear because we know that often we do come across two types of pleasure viz; Sensuous and Intellectual. It goes without saying that from the ancient times the latter is held in high esteem by all. The former might be quite intense and a trap but momentarily. On the other hand the Intellectual type may not be of immediate effect and capable of producing benefits at the end of the chosen acts. However, it is laced with a lasting sense of satisfaction. In the mart of the world it may be appearing as a loss but it has a solid base of Ethics and Moral. It is definitely a superior one because it creates a trustworthy path for the future. There is a great amount of comfort at the mental level which is incomparable. A mental calm descending out of our actions is the fruit gifted by this type of Hedonism. In fact, Epicurus had extended his philosophy further more to clarify the very design of the world, concept of God and Death. With morality as the essence and base, Epicurus brings out his hedonistic approach by highlighting certain qualities or virtues. He lays a strong emphasis on Relations, Friendship, Feelings and Justice, Control over the mind and a few more to make life happy. Happiness and later pleasure are truly the outcome of our pure actions. If our pleasure produces pain to someone, then no genuine type of Hedonism can accommodate or certify it as correct. Therefore, Prudence is always required before performing an act. Selfish pleasure, obviously does not find any place in Epicurus' hedonism. It can never be considered as supreme good.

#### BENTHAM'S HEDONISM

When different viewpoints or types of Hedonism are under study, the reader might get an impression that a shade of Truth lies in all but in varied percentage. Usually only Psychological and Ethical Hedonism are considered for understanding hedonistic attitude and that too mostly on an individual level. Bentham clearly exerted for a sort of a compromise because he declared human nature always under the governance of Pleasure and Pain, as sovereign masters. Furthermore though indirectly he has acknowledged the fact that human nature at times remaining under dilemma. Since the responsibility lies with the owner he has supported both psychological and ethical standpoints. Avoiding pain and gaining pleasure, Bentham thinks, is an ethical duty for one and all. It is but natural for every human being to try for happiness or pleasure. But then Bentham extends or rather encourages this attitude to a larger area, so that it turns out to be a Gross Utilitarianism. One may term it as a selfless act but in Bentham's theory behind every act of selfless service there is bound to be a selfish motto. No person would select a zone of discomfort or disadvantage voluntarily. This is because we all go with our own chosen priorities as there is an inborn motivation. Therefore, all the virtues also gain importance only when they prove to be advantageous. Despite the fact that he speaks about human temperament and personality as quite selfish, at any point, he does not support the attitude which prompts such a behaviour. Much owing to the Utilitarian outlook, he thinks, that which is providing maximum good to the majority is the best and ethical Ideal. So in addition to the personal pleasure it must disperse to cover the maximum number in the interest of humanity. It could also be understood as the true standard of Morality. "Bentham notes that even if people claim they do not support the principle of utility, they apply it into their lives: to order their actions and consider the next action to take and judge other people's actions. We are basically machines for seeking happiness and we judge others on whether they are likely to increase or decrease our own store of happiness...Along with Adam Smith, Bentham saw human beings as essentially self-interested."<sup>3</sup>

#### BENTHAM'S CALCULUS

Most of the times more than the type of pleasure, the intensity of pleasure is considered as an important facet. It is difficult to make any measurement as usually done in science for a given characteristic. Bentham is confident in placing or at least suggesting a yardstick which can convincingly provide the measurement of the intensity of pleasure. He

thinks weighing should not be subjected to only pleasure. It must be done to its contrast also i.e. pain also. One should never permit emotions to take the charge while doing this exercise. Bentham felt it could be done in a similar way as done mathematically. Therefore, certain dimensions were suggested just as we work out in Derivatives and Integration methods in Calculus. They are Certainty, Purity, Fruitfulness, Duration, Intensity, Nearness and Extent. Herein the last one is picked up due to the Utilitarian outlook because it expects a larger mass of the society to be benefitted. That is why all these seven characteristic dimensions are popularly referred to as Bentham's Hedonistic Calculus or Moral Arithmetic. Therefore a superior pleasure has to pass through these rather testing dimensions. At this point, Bentham further clarifies by suggesting this as a sort of journey from selfishness to selflessness, with regard to pleasure as the chief aim.

### MILL'S QUALITATIVE HEDONISM

It is a fact that John Stuart Mill drew all inspiration from his father James Stuart Mill and Bentham, for pushing Utilitarianism as the foremost theory needed in the interest of the society. However, it also goes without dispute that his Utilitarianism had certain inputs on a qualitative base. In general this outlook is always looked upon as a theory in the interest of the mass, promising maximum happiness. But then when it is analysed to the core, it would easily be realized that not all virtues and discipline are accepted by maximum people because these qualities demand efforts. Psychologically there is always a temptation for the majority to benefit self at the cost of others efforts. Therefore merely having a pleasure seeking attitude may not suffice. It must undergo a test of validity with a concrete base of morality. It is at this point where Bentham and Mill differ with each other. Bentham pays hardly any heed to the qualitative distinction before performing the act. Mill has his reservation regarding this because he is highly concerned about the ethical principles in the interest of humanity. However a fact to be noted is that both have same ultimate aim of considering happiness as the result of human actions. This could also be because Mill makes no distinction between happiness and pleasure. Any activity capable of generating happiness is bound to be good and as a contrast pain is the result of wrong or evil doing. Therefore, we may find all the shades of Hedonism covered in Mill's theory, viz; Psychological, Ethical and Altruistic.

### A BRIEF SURVEY OF EVOLUTIONARY AND RATIONAL HEDONISM

There is a visible attempt in the writings of philosophers supporting Evolutionary Hedonism, on the basis of morality and further its implications. The same is extended in Universal evolution. Herbert Spencer deduces moral principle using the principles of biological evolution. He feels moral science is necessary to gain happiness and also by virtue of it we can know the causes of unhappiness. Therefore human beings ought to exert to develop a guiding principle from morality for general disposition and the rules for conduct. Further he thinks morality as an instrument for bringing up happiness. The interactions with Nature would finally yield happiness only. Therefore instead of getting over-optimistic, Spencer feels it would be wise to seek a balance or attain an equilibrium using own prudence. What an idealistic viewpoint suggests is taken up by Spencer and presented practically by emphasizing on the expected harmony between man and his environment. In addition he extended this to man and the society also. Philosophically this may be summed up as trying to develop an evenness between the internal and external relations, so that happiness could be generated within self. Pleasure and Pain are the two realities of life but trying to eliminate or reduce the latter becomes our moral duty through behaviour. For this striving hard to gain harmony between self and environment becomes essential. This gives us a clue that Evolutionary Hedonism is very much akin to Ethical Hedonism because morality remains as a strong base with human welfare as its aim.

Henry Sidgwick's Hedonism also suggests that Pleasure should be the supreme or ultimate goal of life. The virtues which we have been taught from ancient times may be considered as instrumental in developing happiness. Therefore,



an object is good only when it qualifies itself to be potent enough to generate happiness. Having merely a theoretical value or appreciation is not in the least good enough to produce happiness or pleasure. In this context Sidgwick thinks reason or even intuition is always the key factor. Therefore his philosophy is tending more towards result-oriented qualities or acts. When our conscious life makes everything good and desirable, it is worth to follow the dictates. If our acts fail to produce pleasure they have lost importance or cannot be considered for any value. There could be a sort of paradox when we just look for pleasure. Pleasure would always be the result of our efforts. Hunting for good qualities could be one of the right endeavours and further it should be reasoned out because it has to be without any selfish motto. Therefore if everything is according to a strong impulse emerging from within, then there could be a danger of getting trapped into an unreasonable act. Therefore despite having same objective as other hedonistic approaches Sidgwick has remained firm on being a rationalist with reason as the main tenet.

### CONCLUSION

Although hedonistic philosophy seems to be slightly unorthodox, yet its postulates cannot be overlooked. One of the root causes of unhappiness even in the modern world is chiefly because of our own different nature and the fear of death while living. Some of the eastern philosophies had been so ascetic that even considering pleasure in life was stamped as almost a sin. People have preferred the drudgery in life than mustering courage to combat rationally and remain happy. The major problem is because of the failure or limitations of many philosophies to provide a guideline for living happily. Some of them have gone to such an extent of academic discipline that their arguments could provide knowledge to only researchers. A common man looks to philosophy to solve his mundane problems. He is always hopeful that a perfect and concise knowledge for healthy living would be reached through philosophy. Unfortunately often he is disappointed. The impact of religiosity had been in a disproportionate manner and the propounders were never tolerant towards any minor deviation. As Radhakrishnan puts it, "Whatever happens to us in this life we have to submit in meek resignation, for it is the result of our past doings,"<sup>4</sup>

Right from Aristotle's Eudaimonia some schools of philosophy felt the necessity of concentrating on "Happiness" as the sole purpose of living. Unfortunately the other viewpoints got so much support and publicity that happiness had been forced to take a backseat. There had been criticism levelled against Hedonism only because of a rigid way of thinking. It has been commented that Psychological Hedonism is not the source of Ethical Hedonism because the very term Psychological Hedonism is Psychological as there with that there could be a paradox created in hedonism. Bentham's Psychological Hedonism is not free from defects because it is difficult to accept wholeheartedly the passage suggesting a pathway from selfishness to selflessness, Hedonistic Calculus because it is not feasible and pleasure is not the only motive of all our actions.

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