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Against the Intrinsic Value of Pleasure

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Hedonists hold that pleasure is the only thing of intrinsic value and, thus, that a person's well-being is reducible to the amount of pleasure she experiences.¹ One way to challenge hedonism is to contest the claim that only pleasure is intrinsically valuable; a well-known argument of this form is found in Robert Nozick's experience machine thought experiment, which suggests that other things matter to us in addition to "how things feel on the inside."² A plausible reading of the notion of other things mattering to us is to understand this as a way of saying that other things besides pleasure, or how things feel, have intrinsic value. If this is correct, then hedonism is mistaken. What goes unchallenged with this kind of argument is the assumption that pleasure has intrinsic value. However, the view that pleasure is intrinsically valuable can be challenged by considering the evolutionary role of pleasure as an experiential signal that both tracks individual well-being enhancing activity and motivates an individual to pursue things which contribute to his or her well-being. These ideas should hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for pain. Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson have argued that evolutionary psychology provides grounds for rejecting psychological hedonism.³ However, the argument we will consider is that reflecting upon an evolutionary account of the emergence of the capacity for pleasurable experiences provides a reminder of the important relationship pleasures, as a kind, have to other goods, and thus cannot have their value intrinsically. This is an argument against normative hedonism. If it is correct, then pleasure has value, but not intrinsic value, and thus is not the *summum bonum*. As a result, hedonism, in its normative sense, fails to provide a plausible conception of well-being.

Let us consider two ways in which we might define "intrinsic value." The first way, following Moore, is to claim that something is intrinsically valuable if and only if it is valuable for its own sake, or in itself, in virtue of its intrinsic properties, rather than because of its usefulness in attaining some other good.⁴ On this conception, something has intrinsic value if its

total value cannot be reduced to its extrinsic, instrumentally valuable, properties.

A second way to define “intrinsic value,” taken, for instance by Richard Brandt, is to say that something is intrinsically valuable if and only if it is desirable for its own sake, or intrinsically desirable.⁵ On this conception, something has intrinsic value if what makes it desirable cannot be reduced to its extrinsic properties. It is important to distinguish between something being desirable for its own sake and something being desired for its own sake, insofar as it is possible that we might desire something for its own sake without what we desire actually being worthy of such desire.

What the two conceptions of intrinsic value share is the idea that something has intrinsic value if its total value, or desirability, cannot be reduced to the extrinsic, instrumentally valuable, properties it has. They differ in that a proponent of the prior conception is not committed to defining value as a function of desirability; someone might instead, for example, define “intrinsic value” as a *sui generis* property, as G. E. Moore is sometimes thought to have done in *Principia Ethica* with respect to what he took “good” to signify. Pleasure, it would appear, is a plausible candidate for having the status of intrinsic value on either definition, since it seems to be, by its very nature, a positive thing, and we often seem to desire pleasure for its own sake. That does not imply that pleasure is desirable, but let us assume that the apparent reasonableness of many of our actual desires for pleasure makes the intrinsic desirability of pleasure *prima facie* plausible.

Let us briefly consider the origin of the experience of pleasure. A plausible evolutionary account can be roughly set out as follows: pleasurable experiences are a way of motivating an organism to keep doing what it is doing, or to do things like what it is doing in the future; the organism receives the experiential reward, because what it is doing contributes to its fitness. Similarly, painful experiences motivate the organism to quit its current activity and to avoid such things in the future, because such activities or things lower its fitness. Thus, pleasant experiences emerged as a way of tracking and signaling resources and behaviors which contribute to the organism’s fitness, a large part of which is characterized by its physiological well-being, since an organism that is not faring well physiologically does not stand as good a chance of successfully reproducing. For psychologically and socially complex beings such as ourselves, however, it is reasonable to suppose that in addition to physiological well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being are also typically essential to our overall evolutionary fitness. On this account, both pleasant and painful experiences have instrumental value,

since such experiences serve to track beneficial activity and to motivate an organism to pursue that which is beneficial and to avoid that which is not.⁶ Importantly, from an evolutionary point of view, pleasure has only instrumental value.

However, it might be objected that this causal account of the origin of pleasure, which would have us place the usefulness of pleasure in the service of reproductive fitness, fails to take into account the value that pleasure has for an agent as a conscious, experiencing being. If the agent enjoys pleasant experiences, then does this not suggest that pleasant experiences have some further value in addition to their instrumental value? It could then be suggested that even if we put considerations of fitness aside, and with them the physiological, psychological, and social well-being which are associated with fitness, the fact that an experience is enjoyable indicates a further value that the experience has, simply in virtue of the kind of experience it is, a pleasant experience. Such experiences are preferable to painful experiences, and presumably also preferable to their simple absence; presumably, it is preferable to be having a pleasant experience than not to be. This preferability seems, on the one hand, to be something that is due to the intrinsic nature of such experiences, and on the other hand, to be what makes such experiences desirable in themselves.

Let us focus upon the view that pleasures are intrinsically valuable because they are intrinsically desirable. The motivation for this view is the idea that, as a kind, pleasant experiences are preferable to their absence. They are enjoyable in themselves, and this seems to be true even when they do not contribute in any clear way to our evolutionary fitness, as with the pleasure of sex with contraceptives, beer, and cigarettes. As we have seen, the fact that we happen to desire particular pleasures for their own sake does not necessarily imply that such pleasures are desirable for their own sake. But let us focus on the claim that, as a distinct kind, pleasant experiences are intrinsically desirable. If that can be established, then a hedonist can solve problems about specific pleasures that lead to later pains by saying that while the pleasure itself, as the kind of experience it is, is intrinsically desirable, the means through which some particular pleasure is achieved are not desirable because they increase the likelihood of later pains.

The problem with the claim that pleasure is intrinsically desirable has to do with the fact that our natural attraction to pleasant experiences is generated by the existence of a fairly stable relationship between things that produce such experiences and their conduciveness to our fitness. If pleasant experiences emerged as a way of tracking and signaling things that are conducive to fitness, which includes, for us, our physiological,

psychological, and social well-being, then, from this perspective, pleasant experiences are instrumentally valuable because of what they track. Even if we are not particularly concerned with our evolutionary fitness, it is reasonable to assume that we are concerned about our physiological, psychological, and social well-being. Someone might then say that what justifies our concern with these dimensions of well-being is that faring well along them increases the likelihood of overall pleasure. In fact, this is what hedonists must say. But the reasoning then becomes circular: we are naturally configured to desire pleasant experiences, because they contribute to our physiological, psychological, and social well-being, and we desire faring well along these dimensions because doing so is likely to contribute to our overall pleasure. To break the circle, and to explain which goods have the more fundamental value, the hedonist then adds that we desire pleasure for its own sake, because it is intrinsically desirable.

But if we are configured to desire pleasure, then to say that pleasure is intrinsically desirable can mean nothing more than that we find pleasure desirable, because that is the way we are configured. However, we are configured that way for a reason, and it is not because pleasure is intrinsically desirable, but because pleasure emerged as a means for tracking things that are conducive to our fitness, and our physiological, psychological, and social well-being. This is not entirely correct, evolutionarily speaking, since we may be configured to make certain kinds of self-sacrifices in the interest of our genetic legacy. Let us assume that such self-sacrifices are exceptional cases, since typically a human being must be faring well physiologically, psychologically, and socially in order to pass on its genes. Let us also assume that physiological, psychological, and social well-being are themselves desirable goods, not just because of their role in evolutionary fitness, but more importantly because they seem to be reasonable grounds for assessing the quality of a person's life. Presumably, even a hedonist can accept this stipulation.

If pleasure emerged as a way of tracking fitness via physiological, psychological, and social well-being, we can say that typically, and by proxy, pleasant experiences track these forms of well-being. Since, as has been assumed, these forms of well-being are themselves desirable, then pleasant experiences seem to derive their desirability from the good things which they track. This implies that the desirability of pleasant experiences as a kind depends upon their stable relationship to things and activities that are conducive to these forms of well-being. It appears, then, that pleasure has only instrumental value.

The issue here is not whether pleasure is desirable, but whether it is intrinsically desirable. The desirability of pleasure cannot be intrinsic

because its desirability is dependent upon the relationship between pleasant experiences and things that are conducive to physiological, psychological, and social well-being. Since the connection between pleasure and that which is conducive to these forms of well-being is a relational, and contingent, feature of pleasure, this is necessarily an extrinsic property of pleasure. Thus, it is possible that pleasure as a kind might have been stably associated with things that are not conducive to these forms of well-being. Since pleasant experiences motivate us to pursue things that provide such experiences, the pursuit of such pleasantries would lead to an early grave. This is not something that any normal person desires or would think desirable under normal circumstances. Thus, if pleasures, as a kind, were not reliably connected to things that are conducive to these forms of well-being, it would be quite implausible to claim that the experiences themselves are intrinsically desirable, even if beings configured to desire such pleasures could not but help desiring and pursuing them. In a well-known experiment by James Olds and Peter Milner in which rats repeatedly pressed a lever to stimulate the pleasure centers in their brains, the rats desired the pleasure, but it seems reasonable to claim that the pleasure is not really desirable, because it motivated the rats to engage in a behavior that, if continued indefinitely and to the neglect of nutriment, would lead to their demise.⁷

A hedonist might respond, in the case of the experiment by Olds and Milner, that while the effects of the particular way of pursuing pleasure is negative, this does not imply that the particular pleasure itself, considered in itself regardless of its causes or consequences, is not intrinsically valuable. But we are supposed to be considering pleasure as a kind, rather than any particular pleasure. If it turned out that all pleasures were reliably associated with things that thwart the forms of well-being at issue, we would see clearly that pleasures are not intrinsically desirable, because it is entirely unclear how something which reliably thwarts our well-being along the dimensions we have considered could still somehow make an independent contribution to our well-being in some other sense. This is a distinctive problem for a hedonist who claims that pleasure is the only thing of intrinsic value, because the claim is supposed to support the hedonist view that we can analyze well-being in terms of aggregated pleasure. But if the general pursuit of pleasure posed a serious threat to the livelihood of an individual, which is the locus of this aggregation, then hedonism would be absurd. That hedonism does not seem absurd in the real world is due to the fact that pleasure, as a kind, is not linked to these sorts of things. However, the fact that the value of pleasure seems to depend on the nature of its source seems to show that the prospects for pleasure being intrinsically valuable, rather than simply valuable, are dim.

Since the desirability of pleasure depends upon an appropriate link to something beyond the pleasure itself, it is clear that its desirability is not intrinsic. Since the prospect of pleasure is a deeply motivating force, we are fortunate to the extent that pleasures are linked to things that are conducive to the other forms of well-being. If the link had been otherwise, our craving for pleasure would have been such as to put us more often into dire straits. In a land of plenty, our craving for pleasure often does just this. This is where we have to take note of the fact that the conditions of modern living, and the resources available to individuals living in affluent societies, differ greatly from the conditions of the ancestral environment, where resources were either scarce or difficult to attain, and thus where the risk of gorging ourselves on resources to the point of harm was less likely to occur.

Someone might again raise the objection based upon the enjoyableness of pleasures from an agent's perspective, and argue that this type of simple enjoyment indicates a value that pleasure has which is additional to the value it derives from tracking and signaling behavior that is conducive to these other forms of well-being. However, the point of this argument is not to show that pleasures are not valuable or desirable, but only that their value or desirability is not intrinsic. The enjoyment of harmless pleasures is desirable and not simply desired, because such enjoyments contribute to the other forms of well-being already mentioned. The enjoyment of our life and activities is an important component of psychological well-being; furthermore, to the extent that enjoyment contributes to psychological flourishing, it also likely has some effect on our physiological well-being. Recent research suggests significant relationships between positive affect, in which we can include aggregated experiences of pleasure, and various indicators of physical health.⁸ In addition, people who partake of such pleasures tend to be enjoyable to be around and show us how to appreciate life in its many details. Enjoyment is a contributor to our well-being, but not the foundation of it.

If pleasure is but one of many desirable things, and its desirability must be accounted for in terms of its relationship to other things of value, then there is no reason to claim that the value it has is intrinsic value. But hedonists seem committed to the claim that pleasure is not simply valuable, but intrinsically valuable. If a hedonist attempted to drop the adverb "intrinsically," and to claim that pleasure is the only thing that is valuable, that would seem implausible. The foregoing argument may actually point to a deeper problem with the very notion of intrinsic value and the thought that anything of value, or anything worthy of desire, can be isolated and articulated without bringing into discussion a whole web of values, needs, and interests that allow us to put any particular claim to

value into context.⁹ Thus, if a more general argument against the coherence of the very notion of intrinsic value can be provided, then the particular arguments offered here against hedonism will prove to be unnecessary. In this respect, the foregoing arguments may be regarded as a case study in the difficulties in a common application of the notion of intrinsic value, one of which is a problem of how we are to appraise the value of a thing or state, in this case pleasure, in itself.¹⁰

Notes

1. See Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures," *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No. 3, (1997), p. 448; see also Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Roger Crisp, "Hedonism Reconsidered," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 73, No. 3, (2006), and Torbjörn Tännsjö, "Narrow Hedonism," *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (2007).
2. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 42; also see Nozick, *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 99–117.
3. See Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
4. See G.E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).
5. See Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory: The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 302–303.
6. See Randolph Nesse, "Natural selection and the elusiveness of happiness," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B* 359, (2004); see also David Buss, "The Evolution of Happiness," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 55, No. 5, (2000), and Björn Grinde, *Darwinian Happiness* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 2002).
7. See James Olds and Peter Milner, "Positive reinforcement produced by electrical stimulation of the septal area and other regions of rat brain," *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, Vol. 47, (1954).
8. See Sarah D. Pressman and Sheldon Cohen, "Does Positive Affect Influence Health?" *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 6, (2005).
9. See Monroe Beardsley, "Intrinsic Value," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (1965).
10. I would like to thank Aleks Zarnitsyn, an anonymous referee, and Thomas Magnell, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, for their comments and help.