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NARROW HEDONISM

ABSTRACT. Narrow hedonism is defined and defended, as a view according to which pleasurable states are individuated as concrete and total experiential situations of a sentient being at a time. Typical of such situations is that, when we are in them, we are at a certain hedonic level. They feel in a certain way for the creature in them. On this understanding of narrow hedonism, which is the only one making good sense of the theory and which was probably also intended by classical hedonists such as Bentham and Edgeworth, standard objections to hedonism, based on the claim that different pleasures have nothing in common, can be set to one side as misplaced and irrelevant. It is also hard to see how this kind of hedonism can be refined, or revised, in the direction indicated by J.S. Mill, when he wants to distinguish “higher” pleasures from “lower” ones. On this understanding of hedonism, we must claim that, those who want to follow Mill will have to rely on non-hedonistic intuitions and thus desert the hedonist camp altogether.

KEY WORDS: experience machine, hedonic tone, higher and lower pleasures

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper I will explain (the often misunderstood) doctrine of narrow, simple or straightforward ethical hedonism, and I will defend it against some common objections. I will also try to show that one kind of modification by it, proposed by J.S. Mill to the effect that it is much too simplistic, fails. If we want to be true to his basic moral intuition we will have to abandon hedonism, rather than revising it. I feel no inclination to abandon hedonism myself, but it is not part of the present project to try to defend hedonism against all kinds of objections, let alone to give positive arguments for the doctrine. I will defend narrow hedonism against *the* most influential recent argument against it, however, to wit, Robert Nozick’s experience machine argument.

In order to render possible a clear and comprehensible discussion of narrow hedonism a few terminological points should be made.

Narrow hedonism is a theory intended to answer a certain question, but it is not obvious which this question is. In contemporary discussion we often learn that hedonism is a theory about “intrinsic value.” I am not happy with this way of putting things. I doubt that there is such a thing as intrinsic value. Moreover, this way of phrasing things invites all sorts of complication and misunderstanding. If we speak in terms of intrinsic value, then we are invited to ponder questions such as: Are intrinsic values dependent solely on intrinsic qualities? How do we distinguish intrinsic qualities from extrinsic qualities? Are intrinsic qualities held by necessity? These questions tend to boggle our minds. If there is no intrinsic value, then, of course, there is no need to go into these problems at all. And indeed, in the present context, there is no need to enter into a discussion about them. Instead we may conceive of hedonism as part of a normative theory of some kind, such as utilitarianism, egoism, or the priority view. According to such theories, there is something we should maximise or optimise in the universe or our own lives. Hedonism, as I conceive of it, is intended to answer the question what it is we ought to maximise in this sense. We want to make best sense of each normative theory. Being a utilitarian, my interest is in the universe. On my understanding, an action performed by an agent in a situation is right if, and only if, in the situation, there was nothing the agent could have done such that, had the agent done this instead of the action he or she actually performed, the universe would have contained a larger sum-total of happiness. But what should we mean by “happiness?” By making this clear we give content to a certain form of utilitarianism, hedonistic utilitarianism. Rather than speaking in terms of happiness, however, I will use the general term “subjective well-being” and I will try to arrive at a meaning of this term by clarifying what constitutes the hedonic “state” or “situation” of a sentient creature.

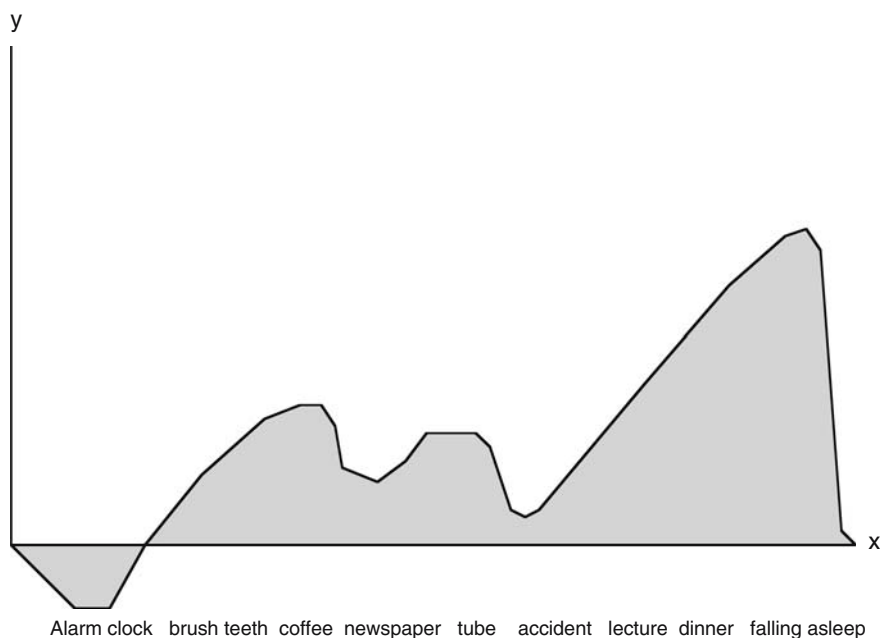
WHAT IS IT THAT WE OUGHT TO MAXIMISE?

According to classical hedonistic utilitarianism we ought to maximise the sum-total of happiness (or, as I prefer to put it, subjective well-being). This version of utilitarianism is usually called narrow hedonistic utilitarianism. Many contemporary utilitarians have abandoned it, but in my personal opinion this is the most plausible version of utilitarianism. Let us see what it amounts to more exactly.

What is presupposed by hedonistic utilitarianism is that each sentient being, at each time, is at a certain level of subjective well-being. We may speak of this as the hedonic level of the individual. The hedonic level or state of the person is a characteristic of the total experience of this person at a certain time: the hedonic level is characterised by the “feel” of the situation. Sentient beings with self-consciousness can be aware of their hedonic state, i.e., aware of how it feels. But the state is different from any experience *of* it. When we are aware of it we can answer questions such as: How are you? Are you any better than you were a moment ago? Or, are you roughly the same? Or, are you perhaps worse? Questions like these are meaningful according to hedonistic utilitarianism, identifying welfare with subjective well-being.

According to hedonistic utilitarianism there are also situations that it is worse to experience than not to experience anything at all. What the theory presupposes is that the following kind of representation of, say, the day of an individual is meaningful. Let us assume that this is a day of *my* life.

On the *y*-axis we can plot the degree of well-being, and on the *x*-axis the passage of time. The day starts when my alarm clock goes off. I leave a state of dreamless sleep and, for a moment, my situation is worse than it would have been, had the alarm bell remained silent. When I brush my teeth I begin to see some meaning in my life, however, and as soon as I taste my morning coffee the situation looks quite pleasant. However, once I start to read the morning newspaper things become worse. I am reminded of the miserable state of the world



(in many respects). In particular, when I read about a famine in the aftermath of a war in Sudan, I feel despair. But when I catch the tube and embark on my journey to work, once again I feel fine. However, when I leave the tube station near my office, I see a child being knocked over by a car. I rush to her rescue and for a short while I stand there, holding the unconscious child in my arms, feeling the weight of her head on my shoulder. I feel miserable. An ambulance arrives and the child is taken care of. I continue my walk to my office. I start preparing a lecture. I call the hospital and learn that the child has not been injured seriously. I give my lecture and get a stimulating response from my audience. I go home by tube and prepare the dinner. My wife, who is a nurse at the hospital, returns home in the evening. We have dinner together, I tell her about the accident, and we go to bed early. The last thing I feel, as wakefulness merges into unconsciousness, is intense well-being.

This narrative, and the diagram representing the hedonistic aspect of my day, the “feel” of each moment, is meaningful, according to hedonism. What is plotted on the y-axis is my hedonic level at each moment. To the extent that it is known to

me, it is known “from inside,” so to speak. The (grey) area between the curve and the x -axis can be said to represent the sum-total of my subjective well-being this day. And the sum-total of all such areas is the amount of well-being in the universe. Corresponding sums exist for all possible worlds, rendering it possible for us, in principle, to compare the outcome of various different alternatives facing an agent in a situation.

It is sometimes said that hedonistic utilitarianism is incoherent since it operates with scales that are hard to reconcile. Even if, from a hedonistic point of view, pleasure is positive and pain negative, how can we assess *how* positive and *how* negative these feelings are, and how can we calculate their respective contribution to the total hedonic state of a person at a certain moment?

But the version of hedonism stated here does not presuppose that we have to perform such calculations. According to the interpretation of hedonistic utilitarianism discussed here, it is only assumed that there is *one* hedonistic dimension of our lives. At each moment we feel what we feel and that is it.

Note that on this understanding of happiness, or a hedonic state, happiness is not intentional. It has no “object.” In the relevant sense, we are not happy “at” anything. Rather, we are “in” a hedonic state, in a “mood,” of some sort. This is not the only sense of the word “happiness,” of course. It makes perfectly good sense to say that I am happy that my mother is alive, for example. And my being happy with my mother’s being alive may contribute, causally, to my being in a particular hedonic state. However, this is not the way classical hedonists used to use the word “happiness.” And, if we want to make most sense of their doctrine, we should avoid such an intentional understanding of happiness (or subjective well-being).

It is true that all sorts of experiences can contribute to the hedonic state I am in at a certain moment. While listening to the comments from my students I remember what it felt like to hold the child in my arms and I can also look forward to tonight’s supper, and so forth. All this contributes to bringing me into the hedonic state where, as a matter of fact, I am at present. This does not mean that I try to ascribe an independent

value to my reminiscence of holding the child, or listening to the comments of my students and looking forward to supper, respectively, in order to *calculate* what kind of state I am in right now. I am in the state in which I am, I feel what I feel, and, to the extent to which I am capable of introspection, this is something I introspectively *experience*.

To sum up. The hedonic level of a sentient creature at a time is a characteristic of a concrete and total experience. It is not intentional. It is rather the way it *feels* to the creature who is in it. However, to the extent that we are capable of introspection (it is probable that not all sentient creatures are capable of introspection) we can make our total experience the subject of our observation and recognise it for what it is. In that way we can assess our hedonic level.

Some philosophers have found it hard to believe that it is possible for us, introspectively to get a hold on our hedonic state. They prefer to think that what I have here called a certain level of well-being should be understood, rather, as a certain degree of liking on my part of the state in which I find myself – for its own sake. The number of such revisions of narrow hedonism is legion, each giving a slightly different twist to the relevant pro-attitude on behalf of the beholder of the state in question. Yet, they all get the phenomenology up side down. It is *because* a certain total mental state at a certain time feels pleasant, and I recognise this, that I like it for its own sake, not the other way around.¹

Many arguments against hedonism of this simple kind depend on misunderstanding. The arguments depend on a different understanding on happiness or well-being, like the one just alluded to. These objections take as their point of departure the idea that *aspects* of our experiential states at a certain moment can be distinguished somehow, for example with respect to their intentional content or causal origin. We can speak of such aspects of our experiential states as various different pleasures. Then they go on to claim that, according to hedonism, we have to find something in common between these different pleasures, distinguished by their different content or causal origin. Those who raise such a kind of objection ask such things as: is there anything in common between my feeling happy with my mother's

being alive and my feeling sexual satisfaction when having sexual intercourse with my spouse? The assumption is that there is nothing in common. Here are two well-known and often quoted examples of this kind of criticism. Derek Parfit, for one, writes:

Narrow Hedonists assume, falsely, that pleasure and pain are two distinctive kinds of experience. Compare the pleasure of satisfying an intensive thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that one's child is happy. These various experiences do not contain any distinctive common quality (Parfit, 1984, p. 493)

And here is another representative quotation, this time from James Griffin:

The trouble with thinking of utility as *one* kind of mental state is that we cannot find any one state in all that we regard as having utility – eating, reading, working, creating, helping. What one mental state runs through them all in virtue of which we rank them as we do? (Griffin, 1986, p. 8).

However, this is not the way the classical hedonists such as Bentham and Edgeworth used to think. Bentham seems to hold that pleasures are concrete total experiences, held at certain times. They are pleasures if, on the whole, they have a certain tone, which we can recognise as an agreeable feeling. He also suggests a measurement of well-being, which builds on this kind of ontology, which was elaborated on by Edgeworth. According to Bentham, “the degree of intensity possessed by that pleasure which is the faintest of any that can be distinguished to be pleasure, may be represented by unity: such a degree of intensity is in every day's experience.” (Bentham, 1973).

I have discussed and modified this notion of a hedonistic unit elsewhere and will not pursue this theme in the present context.² The idea of a hedonic unit goes well together with the kind of ontology of hedonic states here taken for granted, however. A view of pleasures as aspects of experiential states, distinguished with respect to content, would make a mess of our moral mathematics. For, certainly, at one and the same time I can experience an enormous amount of pleasures and pains of the kind thus described. How do we go about when we want to sum them up? Moreover, with respect to this kind of pleasures,

Parfit's and Griffin's criticism sticks. But this is a reason to avoid this understanding of pleasure.

So the answer to Parfit and Griffin must be that, even if the items on their list have nothing experiential in common, this is irrelevant to a narrow hedonist of a Benthamite bent. Actually, what these items do have in common is that, very generally speaking (allowing that there be some rare exceptions), when they are present in a total experience of a person at a time they tend to contribute (causally) to a high hedonic level of this person at this time.

Of course, Parfit and Griffin can be taken to deny that there is any such hedonic level, or "feel," characteristic of each concrete and total experience that we have. But then they are denying the existence of something of which *I* am very well acquainted. It would come as a surprise indeed to me, if it would turn out somehow that they are not aware of it, just as I am. They too know the answer to the question: "How are you?"

The appropriate way of individuating pleasures and pains, then, is as here described. We focus on concrete and total experiences held by a sentient creature at a particular time. Such an experience has a certain quality, a "feel" or a hedonic "tone." If the experience is positive in nature, then it is a "pleasure." If it is negative in nature, then it is a "pain." At least this is how we could put things, if we want to stick to the words "pleasure" and "pain." As I have noted, however, in order to avoid misunderstanding I prefer the term "degree of subjective well-being" or "hedonic level." In particular, it is a good feature of the term "hedonic level" that it allows for the possibility that we are *below* the point where life is worth experiencing.

The fact that I can directly experience (introspectively) what hedonic situation I am in, does not presuppose that I can always make correct judgements about it. It is certainly true that, at any time, I feel what I feel, but this does not mean that my *description* of my state must be correct. And when I compare the state I am in right now, and the state I was in some time ago, I may very well reach the wrong conclusion. Unbeknownst to me my hedonic level may have deteriorated slightly. However, what *is* presupposed by hedonistic utilitarianism as

here explained is that there is a truth in the matter (there is something to be right or wrong about, when I describe it).

Jeremy Bentham was a straightforward narrow hedonistic utilitarian. According to his version of utilitarianism, what should be maximised was the sum-total of felt well-being (what he called “happiness”). J.S. Mill did not concur in this narrow form of hedonistic utilitarianism. According to Mill, we should distinguish between higher and lower forms of well-being, and according to his form of utilitarianism, we should seek to maximise higher forms of well-being rather than lower ones. I now turn to a discussion of Mill’s objection to the narrow form of hedonism, defended by Bentham.

MILL’S OBJECTION

According to Mill, it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool. One objection that arises immediately is: How does Mill know this? His answer is a certain test. This test is intended to enable us to decide whether a satisfaction is of a high or a low quality: consult an individual who has experienced both, he said, and accept the verdict of this person. A person who has both read Ovid and seen the porno movies on cable television can tell what kind of pornography engenders the highest form (if any) of pleasure. We ought to go for the higher quality rather than the lower one, at least if they are equally pleasant.

But can the test really guide us, one may wonder. What if two persons reach conflicting verdicts on a certain kind of pleasure, which of them are we to trust? In particular, how do we know that they have had the *same* experience? The same stimulus can have produced different reactions in them. Moreover, even if the test works, why abide by it? Why search the higher pleasure rather than the lower one, if the lower *feels* more satisfactory? Suppose that a mentally retarded person feels pleasures of a lower kind than does a Nobel Prize laureate, but feels them more intensely — is it really true that, from a hedonistic point of view, the Nobel Prize laureate leads a better life?

One may even be tempted to ask whether Mill's position is a consistent one. G.E. Moore famously claimed that it was inconsistent:

... if you say, as Mill does, that quality of pleasure is to be taken into account, then you are no longer holding that pleasure *alone* is good as an end, since you imply that something else, something which is *not* present in all pleasures, is *also* good as an end. (Moore, 1962, p. 80)

Some philosophers have agreed with Moore. Others, such as Fred Feldman most recently, have tried to defend Mill's position.³ In order to assess who is right about this we need to be more careful when we explain Mill's position. According to Mill there are different kinds of satisfaction. How do we distinguish them? How do we individuate them?

I take it that what Mill wants is to revise Bentham's narrow hedonism. This means that his point of departure should be concrete and total experiential states, held by a person at a time. He should also be taken to agree with Bentham that it makes sense to say of such states that they have a definite "feel," that they are at a certain hedonic level. He now wants to go on to claim that aside from their hedonic level such states can differ in kind or quality. Some are "higher" than others. What are we to make of this?

To make sense of him, we need to resort to an idea of happiness, which makes the notion intentional. We need to resort to what I have called "aspects" of concrete and total experiential states. The idea seems to be that, what distinguishes a mental state in kind from another one has to do with some aspect of it, something "in" or "behind" it, so to speak. Depending on what is going on in a state, or depending on which faculties are involved in the production of it, it can be classified as high or low.

How do we know if a state is of a high or a low kind? I think there are at least three possible approaches we could take here, when we try to make sense of Mill. We can focus on the object of some aspect of the state, or of the causal origin of some aspect of the state (what "faculties" are involved in producing it, as he often puts it), or on some felt quality of some aspect of the state.

Let us think of an example. Suppose I have a good dinner, drink some good wine, take part in a vivid discussion, and then go to the opera. I listen to a superb performance of Figaro. I'm enjoying myself. My hedonic state is almost perfect, near +100, say. What kind of pleasure is this? Is it a high or a low one?

If we focus on the content of aspects of my experience we will have to admit that we are confronting a mixture of many such aspects. Suppose I take pleasure *in* the singing of Figaro. My taking pleasure in his singing certainly means that, in Mill's terms, my "higher faculties" are engaged. I use my ear for music. Does this mean that my hedonic status counts for a higher one? This may seem so, but wait a minute, I also feel sexually aroused *by* viewing the deep décolletage of the singer who is creating Suzanna. Here my "lower faculties" are indeed engaged. Does this render my total hedonic state an unworthy one? Moreover, it is no doubt that a factor contributing causally to my being at such a high level of subjective well-being now, at the opera, is my having had the superb dinner, the good wine, and the nice discussion an hour ago. Does that disqualify my present hedonic experience as a "low" one?

Could Mill say that *each* such aspect of my total experiential situation contributes *its* share to be taken into account when we try to assess my total situation? I doubt that there is any way of making sense of this complex mathematics.

Could he rather take a strict view and claim that, unless my experience at the opera, with respect to *all* its content, is a "clean" one, it is of a low quality? To disqualify it, it is sufficient if some lower faculty has been engaged? But this seems to me to be too stern.

Or, should Mill perhaps be taken to hold a more lenient view admitting that, if *some* aspect of my experience is, with respect to content, of an aesthetic kind, engaging my higher faculties, then my entire experience counts as a high pleasure? But this may seem only too lenient.

This is not very promising. Irrespective of how Mill is interpreted along these lines, either in the strict way or in the more lenient one, it seems to be a fact that Moore's objection sticks. According to these interpretations Mill does say that we ought

to prefer one experience to another, even if, hedonistically speaking, they are at a par, simply because of something having nothing to do with how they *feel*. This is not hedonism.

Could Mill's test help us to a better understanding of his position?

MILL'S TEST

In his test, Mill speaks in terms of preferences, which is perplexing. A state is higher than another one, if it would be "preferred" by a competent person, he claims. But, certainly, preferences are of no relevance from a hedonistic point of view. However, he also speaks about the "intrinsic superiority" (Mill, 1962, p. 260) of the higher pleasure, as compared to the lower. And he indicates that this intrinsic superiority can be "appreciated" by an expert, who has experienced both kinds (*ibid.*). What are we to make of this?

Once again it seems as though, if this is how he should be understood, Mill would be deserting the hedonistic camp. For does this talk of "intrinsic superiority" mean anything else than: even though the "higher" pleasure does not feel more pleasant than the lower one, we can appreciate (understand) that this is the one we ought to go for, if we have a choice?

But this is not hedonism in a more refined version – it is not hedonism of any kind!

Mill does also say:

On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of the two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. (Mill, 1962, p. 260)

It seems as though Mill would be claiming that there is a fact of the matter here, which experts can judge about. What is this fact of the matter? Which of the two pleasures is "best worth having?"

This only throws us back to the discussion above. A fact being "best worth having" must mean that it is the one we ought to prefer, if we face a choice between them. Mill, then, seems to have left the hedonist camp.

What of the other way of phrasing the point? What of: Which of the “two modes of existence are the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences?”

But does not this signify the hedonic status of the mode of existence, as I have here clarified it? And if we have assumed that two people are, at a certain time, at the same level of subjective well-being, i.e., are having modes of existence equally grateful to the feelings of them both, why then go for one of them rather than the other (apart from moral attributes or the consequences from opting for the one rather than the other)? This seems to throw Mill back into the *narrow* hedonistic camp.

It seems as though Mill, when he wants to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures, is in fact relying on a non-hedonistic intuition of some kind. Perhaps he thinks that it is better to live a more “dignified” life as a Nobel Prize laureate than as a mentally retarded person, irrespective of one’s hedonic situation. I disagree. But that is not my point in the present context. My point is only that Mill has not made a case for his position from any *hedonistic* point of departure.

But what if Mill is merely making the simple point that some aspects of a total experience, identified through their contents or causal origins, feel in a special way different from others. He makes a *point*, so to speak, of what have later become Parfit’s and Griffin’s objections. And he goes on to claim some such ways of feeling are, as such, of a more noble sort. The happiness I receive *from* reading good poetry feels differently than the happiness I receive *from* a good dinner. It is just a contingent fact that I come to these experiences this way. If there were a creature who could take the kind of pleasure I take from poetry from a good dinner instead, then it would still retain its higher quality.

All this means that, even if each partial experience contributes just as much to putting me at the level of subjective well-being where, as a matter of fact, I am, the former, which is typically associated with poetry, is of a more noble sort than the latter, which is typically associated with food (for ordinary people like you and me). If I can choose between two

situations, at the same hedonic level, I ought to go for the one where I'm reading poetry rather than the one where I'm enjoying a good dinner.

According to this interpretation, Mill has indeed adopted a kind of hedonism, which is different from the narrow one defended by Bentham. Perhaps we could make sense of it by some kind of three-dimensional representation, where a certain weight is given to bits of my hedonic situation at each moment depending on what kind of experiences (high or low pleasures) dominating it. But even if it would be possible to make any mathematical sense of this, which I very much doubt, why accept it? Where is the rationale behind this kind of modification of hedonism?

My conjecture is that those who find that we should opt for a total hedonic situation containing, say, aesthetic pleasure, rather than a total hedonic situation containing, say, sexual pleasure, even if they are at the same level, have some kind of preference for the former *activity* over the other one, or for the faculties engaged in the former activity rather than the ones engaged in the latter activity.

Is there any way of testing this conjecture? Well, if it is true, then those people who adopt Mill's view would be at a loss if they really came across a person who could take aesthetic pleasure from sexual intercourse. They would be hard put to admit that this was the kind of pleasure they wanted to favour.

NOZICK'S EXPERIENCE MACHINE

In his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick invites us to contemplate the following possibility. We are invited to plug into an experience machine. If we do, then neuropsychologists will stimulate our brains so that we think and feel that we are writing great novels, or making friends, or reading interesting books. All the time we are floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to our brains. According to Nozick, we do not want to plug into this kind of machine. And there is a lesson to be learnt from this fact:

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. (Nozick, 1974, p. 44)

And Nozick goes on to assert:

Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves, in contact with reality. (Nozick, 1974, p. 45)

This argument has been extremely influential and it has been accepted by many good thinkers. Here is one example, once again from James Griffin:

The trouble with [the hedonist] account is that we do seem to desire things other than states of mind, even independently of the states of mind they produce. This is the point that Robert Nozick has forcefully made with some science fiction... The point does not need science fiction; there are plenty of examples in ordinary life. I certainly want control over my own fate. Even if you convince me that, as my personal despot, you would produce more desirable consciousness for me than I do for myself, I shall want to go on being my own master, at least as long as your record would not be much better than mine. (Griffin, 1986, p. 10)

However, even if this argument has been influential it is, in an almost obvious way, unsound. First of all, it is far from clear that the premise of the argument, the claim that we would not plug in, is *true*. Perhaps many people would as a matter of fact opt for the machine (or a personal despot). And perhaps some people, who would not, would not opt for it because of an (unreasonable) fear that those in charge of the machine (or the personal despot) would take advantage of them in some nasty way. Moreover, those who hesitate to opt for the machine (or the despot) may do so because they do not like the fact that the option seems to be irrevocable. This is an unnecessary defect in Nozick's argument, however. He could allow that people now and then become conscious of their present situation; once a year they could be offered the possibility of opting out of the machine. By Griffin's personal despot we might be offered the same possibility. If this is how the machine or the despot works are we to expect that people will not opt for it or that, if they do, they will opt out of it as soon as a possibility of doing so arises?

I am not sure of this. After all, many people choose to use drugs they know are dangerous, such as alcohol, in spite of the fact that they know that it is difficult to give up the habit of using them. So why not opt for a perfect experience machine (that you can opt out from if you like) with no bad side effects – and stay plugged into it?

Even the validity of the argument can be questioned. At least on a strict reading, where the argument is taken to *prove* the conclusion, the argument begs the question. By stressing the putative fact that we do not want to plug in, and then using this as an argument to the effect that it would not be a good thing for us if we did, Nozick takes for granted what is highly controversial, to wit, that preference satisfaction is what matters. This view is often called “preferentialism,” and it is a view in competition with narrow hedonism. Even more importantly in the present context, it is in competition with the “objective” notion of well-being defended by Nozick himself!

Nozick seems to have become aware of this problem for, later, in *The Examined Life*, he makes the following comment:⁴

Notice that I am not saying simply that since we desire connection to actuality the experience machine is defective because it does not give us whatever we desire ... Rather, I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it – that is *why* we desire it – and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn’t give us *that*. (Nozick, 1989, pp. 106–107)

Nozick here makes clear that he does not rely on preferentialism in his argument. Our desiring contact with reality does not make contact with reality desirable. However, it is less clear what positive claim he wants to make. If we take him literally he seems to claim that the fact that contact with reality is important (valuable) makes (causally?) us desire it. But it is a moot question whether moral facts can have this kind of causal effects. So even if Nozick’s way of phrasing his point invites it, it is probably far-fetched to make this interpretation.

Suppose Nozick only wants to claim that contact with reality *is* important. And he goes on to claim that, to the extent that we understand this, we desire (for this reason) contact with

reality. But then he has not given any argument at all for his position he has merely stated it.

Yet, one more way of understanding Nozick's thought experiment remains. Perhaps he does not want to *prove* his point by presenting his thought experiment. Perhaps he is just suggesting that we use it to test our moral intuitions. When we use it we come to understand that contact with reality matters. And this understanding makes us desire it. After all, this is how most moral philosophers try to support their favoured moral views. They see moral principles as a kind of "hypotheses" to be put to (crucial) tests against (the content of) considered intuitions in thought experiments. On this interpretation, we should not take Nozick's talk of "desires" too seriously. The point now is rather that, when confronted with his experience machine, we are supposed to think: it would not be wise to plug in. The content of this thought, the idea that it would be unwise to plug in is best (morally) explained, then, according to Nozick, but the putative (moral) fact that contact with reality does matter.

But if this is how we are to understand Nozick's thought experiment, then I have to confess that I do not share Nozick's intuition about the case. I have already indicated that many people seem to be prepared to plug into Nozick's experience machine. I'm personally no different from them.⁵

Bengt Brülde has suggested (in conversation) a version of Nozick's thought experiment, where the hedonic situation in or outside the experience machine is assumed to be *the same*. According to Brülde, we are not indifferent to a life in or outside the machine. Many people would find the life outside the machine at least *slightly* preferable to a life in the machine. This disproves narrow hedonism.

Again I find this observation, even if true, irrelevant. But *is* it true? Some philosophers have entertained Cartesian doubts. Perhaps we *are* indeed in a kind of experience machine, or we are "brains in a vat." I have sometimes tried to present these sceptical arguments to people not well versed in philosophy. The standard reaction I have received is this: "So you mean that there is no way for us of telling whether we are brains in a vat or not? Well, in that case, who cares?"

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have defended a certain interpretation of narrow hedonism, according to which pleasurable states are individuated as concrete and total experiential situations of a sentient being at a time. Such total experiential situations lack any intentional object and their existence and form always have a lot of very diverse causes. Typical of such situations is that, when we are in them, we are at a certain hedonic level. They feel in a certain way for the creature in them. If we are self-conscious sentient creatures, we have at least a rough introspective access to the hedonic level or hedonic “tone” of our total experiential states. We can acknowledge how they feel. We may thus speak here of the experienced hedonic state of a sentient creature at a certain time. However, irrespective of how it is experienced, the state is what it is, it has the “feel,” i.e., the hedonic quality it has.

On this understanding of narrow hedonism, which is the only one making good sense of the theory and which was probably also intended by classical hedonists such as Bentham and Edgeworth, standard objections to hedonism, based on the claim that different pleasures have nothing in common, can be set to one side as misplaced and irrelevant. It is also hard to see how this kind of hedonism can be refined, or revised, in the direction indicated by J.S. Mill, when he wants to distinguish “higher” pleasures from “lower” ones. Moore exaggerated his case, when he claimed that Mill was inconsistent, since there exists a way of understanding Mill as classifying aspects of our total experiences with respect to how they feel into higher and lower ones, but it is not only difficult to see how we should use this information to qualify our assessment of the value of a certain hedonic state, it is hard to believe that this normative idea can strike anyone as plausible, unless he believes that the *origin* of these various different ways of feeling can be of higher or lower kinds. And *this* idea is inconsistent with hedonism of any kind, of course. On this understanding of hedonism, we must claim that, those who want to follow Mill will have to rely on non-hedonistic intuitions and thus desert the hedonist camp altogether.

This is not advisable, I have submitted, but I have in no way tried in the present context to establish *that* claim. However, I have rebutted *one* very influential argument against narrow hedonism, to wit, the argument from Nozick's experience machine.

Finally, it should be pointed out that, even if the version of hedonism I have put forward here is, in a sense, a narrow one, it is liberal in another and very important sense: it allows that everyone becomes happy in his or her own fashion. It may well be the case that what makes a pig happy would not have the same effect on Socrates. And what makes Socrates happy might well make the pig sad. But then here is not a good idea to have any one of them trying to live the kind of life that is good, not for him, but merely for the other one.

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NOTES

¹ To give just two influential examples of this, (Brandt, 1967) and (Alston, 1967).

² Cf (Tännsjö, 1998), Chapter 5, about this.

³ Fred Feldman is among those who have defended Mill against Moore's accusation, in (Feldman, 1996). In that paper he refers to Dahl (1973). Dahl has defended Mill's position, and in his article he has given William Frankena and Ernest Sosa as examples of philosophers who has done the same. Dahl quotes A.C. Ewin, Raziel Abelson, and Richard Taylor and others as examples of philosophers who side with Moore.

⁴ I owe this observation to Bengt Brülde.

⁵ Provided my close ones are given the same opportunity meaning that we can keep artificial contact with each other. For all sorts of elaboration of the example, see (Glover, 1984), Chapter 7.

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