

Part One

WHAT'S IN OUR INTERESTS?

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1

PLEASURE

Even if some people (usually parents and administrators) seem to think so, 1.1
studying ethics doesn't *necessarily* improve the quality of your life or make
you a better person. It will, however, give you useful resources for thinking
about some of the most important things in life more clearly. If you get
your head around these tools and apply them in real life, this can make a
real difference to how you will live. Philosophical tools can help you to
make important decisions in life and even sometimes to become a better
person. In this sense, ethics isn't just an abstract and theoretical academic
discipline. It isn't just about talking a lot about nothing.

The two main practical questions philosophers have thought about are 1.2
how you should treat other people and what goals you should have in order
to live well yourself. It is easier to begin from the second question, which
concerns your own life only. When you think about how to live well, you
don't have to take other people into account, at least to begin with. All you
need to ask yourself is: how can I make my own life go better? This will be
the main focus of Part One of this book. The second part will then consider
what kind of constraints morality sets on you when you pursue your own
good. What are the things that it would be wrong to do when you consider
not only your own life but also the lives of others?

So let's start from the question of how you can make your life go better. 1.3
Consider the following kinds of concrete questions:

- Should you pursue a career in journalism or health care?
- Should you practice an instrument or play computer games?

- Should you study hard or hang out with friends?
- Should you have passionate affairs or a stable relationship?
- Should you travel or volunteer?

How you answer these questions will, in many ways, decide what your life will turn out to be like. Get the answers right and you will prosper. Approaching these questions can be daunting because it's not immediately obvious how you could even begin to tackle them. What is it that you should be thinking about when you are trying to decide?

1.4 The first two chapters of this book will offer you philosophical tools for finding answers to these basic questions about how you should live. They are some of the first philosophical questions which philosophers started to think about thousands of years ago. The main ethical works of **Plato** and **Aristotle**, the founding fathers of philosophy who lived in Ancient Greece, are entitled *The Republic* and *Nicomachean Ethics* respectively.¹ These famous books, which were written about 2500 years ago, both consider the question of how to live a good life. Following Plato and Aristotle, it is natural to approach the previous questions by considering the following kinds of things:

- what you would enjoy;
- what would make you happy;
- what would improve your life; and
- what would make your life more meaningful.

Studying philosophy can clarify what you should be focusing on when you make important life choices by using these natural standards. It can also help you to weigh how important pleasure, happiness, well-being, and a meaningful life are. This chapter will focus on **pleasure** and how important it is. The next chapter will then discuss **happiness, well-being, and the meaning of life.**² The topics of these chapters are then directly relevant for how we are to live.

Three Questions about Pleasure

1.5 When you consider the connection between pleasure and living a good life, you should **follow Aristotle**³ and distinguish between three sets of different questions. These are:

1. What are the sources of pleasures? What gives you pleasure?
2. What is it to experience pleasure? What does pleasure consist of?
3. How important is pleasure? Should you pursue pleasure?

These questions can be illustrated with a simple example. Ann is suffering from the common cold. In this case, we also can ask the previous three questions. How did Ann get the cold? This is a question about the causal origin of her cold. An answer to it might tell a story about how Ann met people who were already suffering from the cold or a story about how viruses move from one body to another.

The second question would in this case focus on what it is for Ann to suffer from the cold. In virtue of what does Ann count as a person who is suffering from the cold? This question is not about Ann's symptoms. It is rather about the nature of her disease. The correct answer to it would tell a story about upper respiratory tract infections which are usually caused by hundreds of different species of viruses.

The final question about Ann's cold is about how bad it is for Ann to have the disease. This is an evaluative question about **good and bad**.⁴ The answers to it should tell Ann how much effort she should use to try to avoid getting the cold. You can then ask exactly the same questions about pleasure. What are the things that give you pleasure? What constitutes experiencing pleasure? And, how important is it to experience pleasure?

The correct answers to these questions might well depend on one another. Views about the nature of pleasure have significant consequences for how valuable pleasure is. However, we should at least attempt to treat these questions separately. **As Descartes advised us, we should pursue clarity in philosophy by dividing philosophical problems into smaller parts that can be considered separately.**⁵

Philosophers are rarely interested in the sources of pleasure because you don't need philosophy to tell you what gives you or other people pleasure. We all know what gives us pleasure personally. You probably get pleasure from eating ice cream, seeing friends, sunbathing, and so on. You are also aware that other people do not enjoy the same things as you. They might get pleasure from lifting weights or dancing samba. Different people thus get pleasure from different things.


The best way to tell what gives other people pleasure is to ask them. This is why it is the job of the psychologists and social scientists rather than philosophers to tell us what the sources of pleasure are. **The empirical**

study of the sources of pleasure has already revealed many interesting facts⁶ Scientists now know that about 25% of people have tongues with a higher density of receptors (Bloom, 2010, pp. 27–29). Because of this, they are called **supertasters**.⁷ If you are a supertaster, then everything will taste more intense to you. There are things that many other people find pleasant (such as whiskey, beer, black coffee, hot spices, sprouts, cabbage, and grapefruit) which the supertasters find unpleasant. So, if you don't like these things, then you probably are a supertaster.



- 1.11 It is not news that different people find different foods pleasant. We have always known this. However, that different foods systematically taste unpleasant for people who have more receptors in their tongues is interesting and something you can't know from the armchair. You need science to reveal this interesting fact about the sources of pleasure.
- 1.12 There are also many interesting questions about how you should investigate what the sources of pleasure are. Should you ask people or scan their brains when they are engaged in various activities? Moral philosophers should at least be aware of what the causal origins of pleasure are. Such information will be relevant when you try to answer questions about the nature of pleasure and its importance.


What Is Pleasure?

- 1.13 Sometimes the simplest questions are the most difficult to answer. One such question is: What is pleasure? Many philosophers have assumed that this question has an obvious answer. This has led them to state their answers too rashly. More recently, this question has become a focus of intense philosophical speculation (**Katz, 2006**⁸; Crisp, 2006, pp. 103–111). This section will consider three basic views about what pleasure is.
- 1.14 You have already experienced pleasure. You have hugged your parents, eaten ice cream, and taken a bubbly bath. You are therefore personally acquainted with pleasure in the same way as you are also acquainted with your friends. This matters because whatever this chapter ends up saying about pleasure should fit what you all already know about positive experiences.
- 1.15 We also use many other words such as “joy,” “enjoyment,” and “delight” for pleasure. All these words refer to the experiences which you have when you feel good and happy. The flip side of these pleasant experiences are the negative experiences of pain and suffering. We have them when we feel sad

and unhappy. Psychologists use the terms **positive affect and negative affect**⁹ for pleasures and pains in this broad sense. In virtue of what, then, does an experience count as a pleasure? 


The sensation view

According to the sensation view, pleasure is a simple sensation of its own kind. This answer was defended by **David Hume** and **Jeremy Bentham** (**Hume, 1739–1740, book II, I.i; Bentham, 1789, ch. 4**).¹⁰ Consider other simple experiences like hearing the C note played on piano. There is something it is like to have this experience. This experience is unique, because it doesn't feel like any other experience. It is also difficult say how this experience is different. 1.16 


The sensation view says the same thing about pleasure. According to this view, all you can say about pleasure is that it is a **warm fuzzy feeling**.¹¹ People who accept this view therefore think that pleasure is a simple and unanalyzable experience which doesn't feel like any other experience. 1.17 

This view fits with the idea that there are different sources of pleasure. You can have the sensation of pleasure because you are eating chocolate, whereas perhaps your friend gets that same sensation from playing with dogs instead. This view also leaves room for important differences between different experiences of pleasure. The pleasure you get from eating chocolate can be shorter and be more intense than the pleasure your friend gets from playing with dogs. More intense and long-lasting pleasures are presumably more valuable than shorter and less intense pleasures. 1.18


The attitude view

The previous view has an obvious problem, which has led many people to adopt a more complex theory called the attitude view (**Brentano**,¹² 1981 [1929]). The motivation for this view is that many pleasures are not simple sensations but rather more complex attitudes. 1.19 

You can be pleased about your friend's new job or take pleasure in using your new phone. The main distinguishing feature of these more complex pleasures is that they are not merely bodily sensations but rather experiences that have complex content. They are pleasures *about* how things are. The previous simple view is unable to make sense of these pleasures. 1.20

- 1.21 If you like the simple view, you could respond that when we talk about these more complex pleasures we really are talking about the causes of the relevant, simple, pleasure sensations. When you are pleased about your friend getting a job, this would only mean that her getting the job is causing you to have the simple sensation of pleasure. This idea does not work, though. What causes you to experience pleasure is not always the same thing as what you are pleased about. That something bad happens to someone you know can cause you to be pleased about how things are in your own life. If your neighbor hadn't lost his job, you perhaps would not be so pleased about your own job. Despite this, it is not true that what causes you to experience the pleasure (your neighbor's misfortune) is what your pleasure is about (your own job).
- 1.22 A better theory of pleasure needs to make sense of the fact that you can be pleased about things and take pleasure in doing things. The attitude view does this by saying that an experience of pleasure is a special attitude toward thoughts, objects, and activities. The attitude represents the relevant thoughts and objects in a certain positive way. When you are pleased about your team winning, you represent the thought that your team has won in a way that feels a certain good way.
- 1.23 Consider the attitude of fear. Instead of just being afraid, you are usually afraid of things. You can be afraid of snakes or that you will lose your job. Feeling fear consists in part of having a certain sensation – there is something it is like to be afraid. Despite this, fear is not just a sensation. It is an attitude toward things that are the objects of fear. Having this attitude toward things represents them in a way that feels a certain negative way.
- 1.24 According to this model, pleasure is likewise an attitude that represents things in a way that feels good. It is possible for different people to have different attitudes toward the same thing – you can be afraid of a horror film while your friend takes pleasure in it. These are different attitudes because they do not feel the same.

The desire view

-  1.25 The previous two views are problematic in the same way (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 127).¹³ Consider different pleasures: the pleasure of having sex, the pleasure of eating a nice meal, the pleasure of dancing, and the pleasure of talking to friends. The previous views assume that all these pleasures feel the same.

The sensation view assumes that different things cause us to have a unique positive sensation which always feels the same. The attitude view claims that different pleasures are attitudes toward different things and that these attitudes always feel the same. There is always a unified positive tone to what it feels like to represent the relevant objects in the relevant way. 1.26

You might wonder why the previous two views need to assume that pleasures are either sensations or attitudes that feel in a certain unique positive way. The reason for this assumption is that both these views use how pleasures feel to explain what makes a certain state of mind a pleasure. They use the distinct positive tone of pleasures to explain what is supposed to make a pleasure a pleasure. 1.27

The main problem of these views, then, is that not all pleasures feel the same. When you consider what it feels like to have sex and what it feels like to talk to your friends, these experiences feel very different and yet both these experiences are pleasures. 1.28

According to the desire view, in all cases of pleasure there is first some more basic experience of its own, be it the experience of having sex or talking to your friends. These experiences are not pleasures as such, but they are experiences which you desire to have for their own sake when you have them (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 127;¹⁴ Kagan, 1992, p. 170; Sumner, 1996, p. 90; Feldman, 2004 (Feldman calls his theory “attitudinal theory” of pleasure and his view combines the elements of the attitudinal and desire theories as described here). This desire toward the relevant experience makes all these experiences pleasures. In other words, the fact that you desire to have an experience when you are having it explains why this experience is a pleasure. 1.29

This view avoids the problems of the previous views. It can explain what is common to all pleasures without assuming that all pleasures feel the same. This is because it does not feel the same to desire different experiences. It can also tell us why we want to have pleasant experiences. If to experience pleasure is to have an experience you want to have, how could you fail to want to experience pleasure? So, the fact that you want to have pleasant experiences is just a trivial truth based on the nature of pleasure on this view. 1.30

The defenders of the other two views have used an analogy for responding to the objection that not all pleasures feel the same (Kagan, 1992, 172–175). Consider the **loudness**¹⁵ of sounds. We can rank sounds by how loud they are. Yet you can compare how loud different sounds are even when these sounds have nothing else in common. They can have 1.31

different timbre, pitch, and so forth. In addition to loudness itself, there is nothing in common between the sound of a guitar and the sound of a saxophone.

1.32 Pleasantness might likewise be a dimension on which experiences vary. Like the case of loudness, perhaps there is nothing in common between equally pleasant experiences of sex and talking to your friends other than their pleasantness. Do you think that this analogy works? Here's just one reason to worry that it doesn't. When it comes to different sounds like the sound of a guitar and the sound of a saxophone, there is a genuine single dimension of loudness in experience on which they vary and you can put a finger on what that dimension is. It is hard to put into words, but if you think about it, there is a genuine similarity between loud sounds. In contrast, it is more difficult to find a genuine similarity in very different kinds of pleasant experiences. For example, not all very pleasant experiences are very intense experiences. Because of this difference, trying to understand pleasantness of experiences using the analogy of loudness of sounds doesn't seem to be very illuminating. It's not easy to put a finger on what that unique dimension of pleasantness would be like in all your experiences.

1.33 We should recognize, however, that the desire view also has its own problems. There are experiences which you desire to have for their own sake even if they are not pleasant. Imagine **a person who has never experienced pain**¹⁶ (Crisp, 2006, p. 107). She could desire to continue to have her first experience of pain for its own sake just because it is a new experience. According to the desire view, this experience of pain would therefore be a pleasure. This must be wrong.



Physiology of pleasure*

1.34 The previous views are three ways to understand what pleasure is. Which one of these theories is correct is a controversial and interesting philosophical question. At this point, you might wonder why this question about what pleasure is can't simply be answered by considering what is going on in our brains when we experience pleasure. Why can't the philosophical question about the nature of pleasure be answered by considering the **physiology**¹⁷ of pleasure?



1.35 **The physiology of pleasure**¹⁸ can be summed up like this. When you experience pleasure, your body releases chemicals called **endorphins and enkephalins**.¹⁹ They belong to the opioids group, which also includes

heroin. Your brain has receptor cells that are sensitive to these chemicals. These receptor cells are located in a region deep in your brain called the **ventral pallidum**.²⁰ Some of the receptor cells are also in an area just behind your eyes called the **orbitofrontal cortex**.²¹ When you experience pleasure, there are a lot neurons firing in these areas of your brain.



You could suggest that pleasure is just the physical event of neurons firing in the relevant regions of the brain. This simple view used to be popular in the philosophy of mind.²² The problem is that views like this seem unable to capture the fact that experiencing a pleasure *feels* like something. Even if we knew everything there was to know about what happens in the brain of a person who is having a pleasant experience, it seems that this doesn't amount to understanding very much about pleasure. For that, you have to experience pleasure yourself and you have to know what role pleasure plays in people's lives.

This is why many philosophers believe that there must be something more to pleasure than merely certain neurons firing in your brain. The previous views about pleasure attempt to capture what this additional element is. Of course, they too face similar challenges. If a crucial element of pleasure is the way it feels, then in understanding pleasure it may not be very helpful just to know that pleasures are the experiences we want to have. This means that the philosophical views, too, need to have a more informative story to tell about how pleasures feel.

Value of Pleasure

Let us then consider how good pleasure is. Is pleasure so important that you need to think about the amount of pleasure you will experience when you make important decisions in your life? When you ask this question, you must first decide what kind of value you are interested in. A single joke can be both funny and insulting. Such a joke has a lot of comedy value but little moral value.

This section is only interested in the **prudential value** of pleasure. Prudential value is a technical term. When philosophers consider the prudential value of pleasure, they are interested in whether having pleasant experiences makes your life go better. Is having these experiences in your interests and good for you? It is also important to keep in mind that some things have **intrinsic** prudential value whereas other things have only **instrumental** prudential value (and some have both).²³




- 1.40 The things that have merely instrumental value do not make your life go better in themselves. They only help you to get other things that improve your life. Money is like this. Having it in itself is not that great, but it does help you to get other things that are good for you.
- 1.41 Intrinsic prudential goods are, in contrast, fundamental elements of living a good life. Many people, for example, think that having close personal relationships is a constituent of a good life in itself. You do not want to have such relationships merely because having them enables you to have some other goods. Having close personal relationships itself improves your life.
- 1.42 The question then is whether pleasure has intrinsic prudential value. Does having pleasant experiences make your life go better in itself? There are three answers to this question. **Hedonism**²⁴ claims that only pleasure is good for you. Pluralism agrees that pleasures make your life go better, but it adds that other things can do so too. Pessimism, in contrast, argues that pleasure cannot make your life go better at all.




Hedonism

- 1.43 As we saw above, pleasures are either attitudes that feel a certain positive way or experiences which you desire to have when you have them. It seems plausible that such attitudes and experiences are an important element of living a good life. Likewise, all pains either feel a certain negative way or they are experiences which you do not want to have. Having these experiences obviously makes your life go worse.
- 1.44 However, hedonists add that *only* pleasures can make your life go better and *only* pains can make your life worse. Nothing else matters. Consider having friends and family, being healthy, knowing things, and seeing beautiful works of art. According to hedonists, these goods cannot make your life go better as such. They can only improve your life insofar as you can get pleasure from them.
- 1.45 Hedonism has a number of advantages (Shafer-Landau, 2010, ch. 1). It can explain why there are many different kinds of good lives. According to hedonism, this is because different things give different people pleasurable experiences. Hedonism also fits the idea that you know best what would improve your life. Hedonists argue that this is because you know best what gives you pleasure. There are, in addition, two even stronger reasons to accept hedonism.

Argument in favor of hedonism 1: Discernible differences Many people believe that only things that you can notice can make your life go better. Whatever improves your life must make a discernible difference to your life from your own perspective. 1.46

Derek Parfit²⁵ invented a famous example to illustrate this (Parfit, 1984, p. 494). Imagine that you meet a stranger on the train. He tells you that he is seriously ill. Naturally, you want this stranger to get better, but, sadly, you will never hear what happens to him. The stranger will either get better or he won't, but you will never know which. What happens to the stranger after you leave the train makes no difference to what your life will look like from your own perspective. 1.47 

Many people think that in this situation, what happens to the stranger later on cannot influence how well your life is going. According to them, only things that affect how things seem to you can make your life go better or worse. Hedonism nicely fits this idea. It says that only pleasures and pains can make your life go better or worse. These clearly are things that you can notice. Hedonism does not, therefore, leave room for things that could improve your life without you noticing them. Many people find hedonism convincing for this reason. 1.48

Argument in favor of hedonism 2: Motivation Many philosophers believe that nothing can make your life go better unless it is something that motivates you. If you then also think that we are all biologically hardwired to pursue pleasure, we get a powerful argument for hedonism. We can find traces of parts of this argument again from Bentham: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (**Bentham, 1789, ch. 1**).²⁶ 1.49 

This quote nicely illustrates the popular view that pleasures and pains motivate you to pursue the sources of pleasure and to avoid the sources of pain. If you then also believe both that (i) what makes your life go better must be able to motive you and that (ii) nothing else than pleasures and pains moves you, you are forced to accept that only pleasures and pains have prudential value. 1.50

Higher pleasures There are thus many good arguments for hedonism. Before we move on, we need to discuss a famous objection to it and John Stuart Mill's equally famous response to this objection. 1.51

1.52 As mentioned above, hedonists used to believe that there are differences between pleasures only on two dimensions: length of duration and intensity. This leads to a problem that can be illustrated by a choice between the life of **Joseph Haydn** and the life of **an oyster** (Crisp, 1997, p. 24).²⁷ Haydn lived for 72 years and his life contained many intense pleasures. The oyster can only experience the most primitive mild pleasures. Imagine, then, a magic oyster whose life lasts for a million years. Would its life be better than Haydn's?

1.53 According to the simple hedonist view, the life of this oyster would be better than Haydn's even though Haydn's pleasures are more intense than the oyster's. At some point, the length of the oyster's pleasures will compensate for the fact that its pleasures are less intense. So if the intensity and duration of the pleasures are the only dimensions on which pleasures vary, if you make the mild pleasures last long enough they will always outweigh short intense pleasures in value. Many people find this consequence unintuitive. They think that Haydn's life must be better than the oyster's life no matter how long the oyster lives. For this reason, we must find another dimension on which pleasures vary such that no matter how long the mild and trivial pleasures last they will never be as good as Haydn's pleasures.

1.54 **John Stuart Mill** suggested that the previous problem can be avoided if you think that pleasures can be evaluated on a third qualitative dimension (**Mill, 1861, ch. 2, paras 4–8**).²⁸ Thus, according to him, some pleasures are qualitatively higher than others, just as some pleasures are more intense than others. For example, you might think that the pleasure of reading a novel is qualitatively higher than the low pleasure of watching reality television. The higher a pleasure is qualitatively, the better it makes your life. This helped Mill to claim that the oyster's life will never be as good as Haydn's because Haydn's pleasures are qualitatively so much higher than the oyster's trivial lower pleasures.

1.55 How do you know which experiences are higher pleasures? According to Mill, we must consider an experienced, competent, and sensitive person who is familiar with both types of pleasures and able to attain them both. If she "calmly and knowingly" chooses to have one pleasure over another, then that pleasure is a higher, more valuable pleasure. So, if this type of a special judge really chooses, after careful consideration, to compose music instead of just staying in the jacuzzi, then the former pleasure is qualitatively higher.

1.56 Does this response solve the problem? Many people worry that it either fails to deal with the Haydn/oyster case or it gives up on hedonism.

Remember that hedonism is the view that only pleasures can make your life go better. According to Mill, pleasures now vary on three dimensions: duration, intensity, and quality. The more an experience scores on these dimensions, the more pleasantness it has and thus the more value it also has. Haydn's pleasures are intense and qualitatively high but they last for only a short time. The oyster's pleasures are mild and qualitatively low but they last for a very long time. If we make the oyster's pleasures long enough, then it seems that the length of these pleasures should compensate for both their low intensity and their low quality so that the oyster's life once again becomes better than Haydn's.

In this situation, Mill seems to have to admit that something other than mere pleasantness makes Haydn's life better than the oyster's life. Mill himself sometimes wrote about how noble certain experiences are. This would allow him to say that Haydn's life is better because even if his life is less pleasant than the oyster's, it is better because it is a nobler life. The problem is that if you are a hedonist you can't say this, because, according to hedonism, only the pleasantness of our lives counts. 1.57

Pluralism about prudential value

You probably agree that having pleasures and avoiding pains makes your life go better. If you are a **pluralist**, you think that other things can improve your life too. In addition to pleasures, getting what you want, having friends, and achieving things can make your life go better. **Pluralism about prudential value**²⁹ is the view that many different things are good for you in themselves. 1.58

Different versions of pluralism will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. This section focuses on one influential argument in favor of pluralism, which is supposed to show that pleasures and pains can't be the only things that affect how good your life is. This argument was first presented by **Robert Nozick** in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick, 1974).³⁰ It is based on a thought experiment of an **experience machine**.³¹ 1.59

Nozick's experience machine argument Here is Nozick's influential argument in full: 1.60

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neurophysiologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making

a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? ... Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how would lives feel from the inside?* (Nozick, 1974, pp. 42–43)



If you have seen *The Matrix*,³² you'll know what Nozick is imagining. If you haven't, you should, as it's a great sci-fi film (but skip the sequels that aren't as good).

1.61 Here is the crux of Nozick's argument. In real life, you experience a mix of pleasures and pains. You are then promised a life which would contain more pleasant experiences. The only downside is that you would have to live this life in a computer simulation. Nozick claims that you would not want to plug yourself into the machine, because this wouldn't improve your life.

1.62 According to hedonism, if you have more pleasant experiences in the machine, then your life will be better in it. Hedonists, after all, think that only pleasures and pains affect how good your life is, and yet most people say that they prefer to live in the real world. If you agree with this intuition, you should conclude that hedonism is mistaken. There are other things besides pleasures and pains that make a difference to how good your life is.

1.63 Nozick himself concluded from this case that there are at least three other things that must matter as well. Firstly, he thought that we want to do things and not merely have the experiences of doing them. In the experience machine you can only have the experience of swimming, whereas in the real world you can actually swim.

1.64 Secondly, Nozick believed that we want to be certain kinds of persons. Your life goes better the more courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, and loving you are. You can't realize these character traits in the machine. Finally, Nozick claimed that it matters to us that we are in actual contact with a deeper reality. You can have this contact in the real world. You can talk to real people and admire genuine works of art. In the experience machine you can only have simulated experiences, which are not the same.

1.65 *Two responses to Nozick* Although many people agree with Nozick's argument, it also has its problems. The first problem of the argument is that it assumes that our intuitions about the case are a reliable indication of what is good for us. There are empirical reasons to doubt this (De Brigard, 2010).³³ One reason is that we have been shown to suffer from **status quo bias**.³⁴ People have a strong preference for keeping things the way



they are used to even if a change would be an improvement for them. The suggestion then is that this prevents you from seeing how good things would be for you in the experience machine.

This first response has a serious problem. De Brigard is saying that our intuitions about what kind of life is good – and, more importantly, our intuitions about the experience machine – are flawed because they reflect the fact that we just happen to like the way things are now. Unfortunately, if this were true then we would be more generally prevented from knowing what things are good for us, including whether pleasures themselves make our lives go better. The worry is that if the hedonist uses the status quo bias to respond to the experience machine objection then she has no way left for arguing for her own view either. Anything she might say for hedonism too would be based on her flawed intuitions. Fortunately, the hedonist has a better response to the experience machine objection. 1.66

Nozick's argument assumes that you could have equally pleasant experiences in the machine. This is the reason why hedonists have to accept that experientially slightly superior lives in the machine are better than lives in the real world. The problem for Nozick is that hedonists do not need to accept this idea (Feldman, 2004, p. 111). 1.67

Take the desire theory of pleasure. According to this theory, an experience is a pleasure if you desire to have the experience when you are having it. Assume that you want to have genuine experiences rather than simulated experiences in the machine. You have this desire even if you can't tell the two types of experiences apart from the inside. 1.68

According to the desire theory of pleasure, you could not in this situation have pleasures in the experience machine. You would probably believe in the machine that you were having pleasant experiences. This belief would be false, because you would not be having the genuine experiences that you want to have. This theory of pleasure thus enables the hedonists to explain why you would have fewer pleasures in the machine and why your life would therefore be worse in it. 1.69

Pessimism about the value of pleasure*

If you agree with Nozick, then you think that both pleasures and other things can make your life go better. Pessimists about pleasure argue that this view is false because pleasures have no value at all. The best argument for this was offered by a fairly cryptic and strongly pessimistic German philosopher, **Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer, 1844, book IV, sections 56–57)**.³⁵ 1.70



1.71 The starting point of Schopenhauer's argument is that you only want things because you experience a lack in your life. According to Schopenhauer, such experiences amount to suffering and when you suffer you want to do something about it. For example, hunger is an experience of lack of food. It is an unpleasant experience which makes you want to eat food. So initially, when you start to want things, you are suffering and thus your life is not going well. The question then is: is there any way in which your life could get better?

1.72 In some cases of suffering you fail to get what you want. In these cases the lack in your life continues and you thus continue to suffer. In other cases you manage to get what you want and this removes the deficiency in question. On these occasions you experience a brief moment of pleasure and satisfaction and so momentarily you might think that your life can go better. Yet Schopenhauer's most striking claim is that pleasure and satisfaction in these cases is simply a removal of an absence and for this reason it doesn't get you to the positive side of the scale of making your life good. You have returned to the neutral baseline state that existed before you started to experience the given lack, and so you are not any better off than you were at the beginning.

1.73 If this is what pleasure and satisfaction is, then it is easier to believe that these experiences do not have at least very much prudential value. Experiencing pleasure only means that you are in the same neutral state as before, which doesn't sound all that great. According to Schopenhauer, pleasure also tends to lead quickly to boredom. It is not thrilling merely to have what you previously lacked. This is why we continuously think of new things that we lack. This only makes us suffer in new ways. Despite this pessimism, Schopenhauer thought that most people can find a balance: "This is the life of almost all men; they will, they know what they will, and they strive after this with enough success to protect them from despair, and enough failure to preserve them from boredom and its consequences" (**Schopenhauer, 1844, sect. 60, para. 3**).³⁶



1.74 Schopenhauer's argument is important in at least three ways. Firstly, it gives you a genuine reason to think about what matters in your life. We often too easily assume that our life is going well if we just enjoy it. Schopenhauer challenges this complacency and also directs us to consider what things other than pleasure can make our lives better. Secondly, Schopenhauer's argument asks you to consider whether your life will really be made better by all the latest gadgets and other consumer goods you might want. He warns that you'll be quickly bored of these too.

Finally, Schopenhauer's argument is also good target practice for critical philosophical thinking. The argument has several weak spots, which you should consider. For example, you might ask why removing an absence from your life that is making you suffer could not be very good for you. Or, is it really true that we always get bored of having the things in life that we want to have? Do you get bored of your friends and family, for example? By considering these questions you can better understand both Schopenhauer's philosophy and what matters in your own life. 1.75

Summary and Questions

This chapter started with three questions about pleasure. You can first ask what gives you pleasure. This is a question about the causal origins of pleasure. You can then ask what makes a given experience a pleasure. This is a question about the nature of pleasure. You can furthermore ask how important it is to experience pleasure. This is a question about the prudential value of pleasure. 1.76

The rest of the chapter focused on the most important philosophical answers to these questions. There are three views about what pleasure is. According to the sensation view, pleasure is a simple positive sensation of its own kind. According to the attitude view, pleasure is an attitude that represents thoughts, objects, and activities in a positive light. Finally, according to the desire view, pleasure is any experience you want to have when you are having it. 1.77

The remainder of this chapter considered the prudential value of pleasures. Do pleasurable experiences make your life go better? According to hedonism, pleasurable experiences, and only those, are in your interests. Nozick's experience machine argument is often used to argue that there must be other things that matter to us too, such as a genuine connection to the world. This has led many people to accept pluralism about prudential value. This last section of the chapter then explained Schopenhauer's pessimist argument, to the conclusion that pleasures have very little value in themselves. 1.78

Based on the philosophical resources introduced in this chapter, consider the following questions: 1.79

1. In the first section, we distinguished between three types of question about pleasure. How would you pose and answer similar questions about (i) breakfasts, (ii) family, and (iii) religion?

2. What are the main differences between (i) the sensation view, (ii) the attitude view, and (iii) the desire view of pleasure? Which one of these views is most plausible and why?
3. Can the loudness of sounds analogy be used to defend the sensation and attitude views of pleasure against the objection that not all pleasures feel the same?
4. Would you plug yourself into the experience machine? Why? Why not?
5. Where does Schopenhauer's pessimist argument go wrong? Why?

Annotated Bibliography

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- Shafer-Landau, Russ (2010) *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Very clear, accessible, and up-to-date textbook, which covers many of the same topics as this book. Highly recommended to be used alongside this book.
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Online Resources

- 1 For the life and works of Plato and Aristotle, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/> and <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/>. For information about *The Republic* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_\(Plato\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_(Plato)) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean_Ethics.

- 2 For overviews of how these concepts are understood in philosophy, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pleasure/>, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/>, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>, and <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/>.
- 3 For a quick explanation of Aristotle's notion of four causes, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_causes.
- 4 Evaluative questions are investigated in value theory. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-theory/>.
- 5 Descartes gave this advice in the second section of his *Discourse on the Method*. See <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm#part2>.
- 6 Paul Bloom's lecture "How Pleasure Works": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lWOfP-LubuW>.
- 7 A nice article on supertasters: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2013/feb/12/are-you-a-supertaster>.
- 8 Katz's incredibly detailed overview article on philosophy of pleasure: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pleasure/>.
- 9 Russell and Carroll's 1999 article, "On the Bipolarity of Positive and Negative Affect": <https://www2.bc.edu/~russeljm/publications/psyc-bull1999.pdf>.
- 10 For the lives and works of Hume and Bentham, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham. For the relevant sections of the *Treatise and Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, see http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H_4_0047 and <http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/bentham/morals.pdf>.
- 11 See the student smiling on the background: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXMy7S-azYA>.
- 12 The life and works of Franz Brentano: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/brentano/> and Fred Feldman's homepage: <http://people.umass.edu/ffeldman/>.
- 13 For the relevant page from the *Methods of Ethics*, see <http://archive.org/stream/methodsofethics00sidguoft#page/126/mode/2up>.
- 14 For the relevant page from the *Methods of Ethics*, see again <http://archive.org/stream/methodsofethics00sidguoft#page/126/mode/2up>.
- 15 This is a rare jazz recording that was originally done for testing sound on different levels of loudness: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMvUipwABzU>.
- 16 There is a rare disorder that can make people insensitive to pain: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congenital_insensitivity_to_pain.
- 17 Explanation of physiology: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physiology>.
- 18 Helen Phillips' 2003 article "The Pleasure Seekers": <http://www.wireheading.com/pleasure.html>.
- 19 Wikipedia article on endorphins and enkephalins: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endorphins>.
- 20 Information about the ventral pallidum's roles in reward and motivation: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2606924/>.

- 21 Explanation of orbitofrontal cortex: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orbitofrontal_cortex.
- 22 J.J.C. Smart's 1959 famous article defending the type-identity version of physicalist monism: https://mywebspaces.wisc.edu/lshapiro/web/Phil554_files/SmartIDTheory.pdf.
- 23 Thorough explanations of intrinsic value and instrumental value: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/> and http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/center/rome/RoME_2009_full_papers/Dale_Dorsey_What%20is%20Instrumental%20Value_.pdf.
- 24 A useful encyclopedia entry on hedonism: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/>.
- 25 The exciting life and works of Derek Parfit: http://www.cas.umt.edu/phil/documents/HOW_TO_BE_GOOD-PARFIT.pdf.
- 26 Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*: <http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/bentham/morals.pdf>.
- 27 The life and works of Joseph Haydn and oysters: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Haydn and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oyster>.
- 28 The life and philosophy of John Stuart Mill and the second chapter from *Utilitarianism*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/> and http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm#CHAPTER_II.
- 29 Overview of pluralism in value theory: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-pluralism/>.
- 30 Robert Nozick's life and works: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Nozick.
- 31 Shelly Kagan explains the experience machine argument: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSs5waj3h2Y>.
- 32 IMDb on *The Matrix*: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>.
- 33 De Brigard's article "If You Like It, Does It Matter If It's Real?": <http://www.unc.edu/~brigard/Xmach.pdf>.
- 34 Information about status quo bias: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_quo_bias.
- 35 The life and works of Schopenhauer and the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer/> and <http://www.naderlibrary.com/lit.schopenwill.4.htm>.
- 36 See <http://www.naderlibrary.com/lit.schopenwill.4.htm>.