

**BUTLER'S REFUTATION OF HEDONISM.** Sober and Wilson argue that Butler's argument (dealing with the distinction between desiring external things and desiring pleasure) fails because of the confusion between pleasure and desire for pleasure that causes desires for external things. It's true (or at least the hedonist may assume so) that pleasure results from desires for external things. But these desires for external things are themselves explained by the desire for pleasure. Therefore, the hedonist may well accept that people desire external things. He only insists that this desire is explained by the desire of pleasure. So it is wrong to claim, like Butler did, that there is no pleasure unless a person desires an external thing. 278

Is this a compelling refutation of Butler's refutation? Sober and Wilson propose the causal schema in which the desire for pleasure is antecedent to the desire for food (for example). They say that Butler rejects this causal link 'for no good reason'. Is this so? 279

Suppose that I want a cake at  $t$ . One hedonist view is to say that right before  $t$ , at  $t'$ , I wanted a cake-pleasure. That is, I wanted a cake-pleasant experience. This doesn't seem right: you give me a cake, I want it, period. I don't develop the desire for a cake-experience, and *then* want the cake itself. Only on some very rare occasions it is the other way round. Perhaps an LSD user wants an LSD-pleasant experience first, before he develops the desire for LSD itself.

Let's stick to cakes, though. Is the hedonist done? Not necessarily. His reply may be: you want the cake at  $t$  only because at some much earlier time  $t''$  you tasted cake and found it pleasant. So that much earlier pleasure, which you may not be aware of now, explains why you want the cake at  $t$ . We should look further into your gastronomic history to explain why you want the food that you actually want.

But how did you come to desire your first cake? Well, perhaps that's what was available in your environment, and you just hit on it. Or perhaps you followed someone's example. If so, the hedonist's job is a difficult one, since he has to show that this choice was also driven by the desire of pleasure in all kinds of situations. Alternatively, the hedonist may argue that the cake-desire is innate in you. You are attracted to cakes and meat before actually tasting them, since your ancestors developed the 'taste' for some items and not for other on the basis of their pleasant experiences. This explanatory route isn't straightforward either. In particular, one might say that pleasant sensations derived from  $\phi$ -ing evolved to correlate with evolutionary advantages conferred by  $\phi$ -ing.

**THE PARADOX OF HEDONISM.** Sober and Wilson are more convincing in dealing with another of Butler's claims. A hedonist is portrayed as someone unable to achieve happiness because of his 'monomaniacal' focus on pleasure. But of course, there is no such requirement. A hedonist may have well-managed proximate goals (that include desires for external things) to achieve the ultimate desire of pleasure. 280

By the same token, there is no argument against *descriptive* hedonism. Even if a hedonist shouldn't be monomaniacal, this is no proof that hedonists in fact are not. 280

**THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE.** Here is a famous argument against hedonism:

- (i) If hedonism is true, then every person's ultimate desire is desire for pleasure.
  - (ii) So, if a person is offered to plug into the experience machine, he will (gladly) agree.
  - (iii) However, many of us would refuse to plug in.
- ⇒ Hedonism is false.

Sober and Wilson accept the factual premiss (iii). Usually this is taken to mean that people prefer the 'real life', the engagement with the world, rather than merely subjective feelings. Hence hedonism, if it is committed to premiss (i), is false. 282

Sober and Wilson then sketch possible hedonist replies. The most sustained one is based on the distinction between the preferences within the experience machine and the preferences accompanying the decision *prior* to plugging in. To explain people's reluctance to plug in, the hedonist must argue that the quantity of pain (or: negative pleasure) between the decision and plugging in (that is, when 282–283

you do decide to plug in) is far greater than the quantity of pleasure when you do not plug in:  $a \ll n_1$  in their notation. 284

Yet, Sober and Wilson argue, the hedonist may have a viable reply roughly similar to the reply just rejected. There is also pleasure and pain generated by the *process* of deliberation prior to the decision. So the hedonist may argue that the quantity of pain of such deliberation when you consider abandoning your real life and all its (real) accessories is much greater than the pleasure or pain when you contemplate carrying on with your life. That is: the idea of virtual life is painful, and much more so than the idea of real life. 285

This is an implausible reply. We are all familiar with the situations where you have to go through unpleasant experiences for some future satisfaction (pleasure). So why can't people do the same here? In fact Sober and Wilson concede exactly this. With this reply hedonism is forced to become the hedonism of the 'present moment'. In effect, the hedonist is forced to argue that people can't resist the pull of immediate gratification. 286

Bizarrely, Sober and Wilson conclude not that hedonism is refuted, but the opposite—that the experience machine scenario does *not* refute hedonism. Well, technically yes, but at a very high cost. 287

**THE HEDONIST'S POSSIBLE RESPONSES.** Let me sketch two hedonist responses that, I think, are somewhat more plausible. First, observe that the last reply was of the following kind: the hedonist argues that people's judgement is *clouded*. Being in the grip of the present moment, they can't see the bigger picture. Now, the clouded-judgement response may be developed differently. Begin by saying that we *are* familiar with experience machines—that is, with *failing* experience machines. You take drugs, you feel good for a while, then not so much. You eat cakes, you feel good for ten seconds, then not so much. And so on. Plugging into a cheap source of gratification never lasts in the real world. Why, then, should we believe that in a fancy experience machine this will be different?

This counter-argument has the following form. We have an intuitive aversion to cheap experience machines, and aversion forged by past experience. We then manufacture various 'fake-rational' judgements to justify our aversion.

Another line of argument is to challenge the factual premiss (iii). When Sober and Wilson, Nozick, and others ask whether we prefer to plug into the machine, they imagine people whose lives go relatively well (university professors, graduate students). But what of people who suffer greatly? In other words, there may be a probabilistic calculation involved. The first group of people may hope that they can reach some decent satisfaction without the experience machine, thank you very much. But the latter group of people will have a different judgement altogether. So, for people to jump at the opportunity to plug in some further conditions must be satisfied. ES

To this argument from bad life the anti-hedonist may offer the 'transformation machine'. Suppose I offer you a chance to change your actual, active life in a good way. Then surely you won't plug into the experience machine before or after that! That's because, the anti-hedonist argues, you want to actually *be F*, not merely to experience virtually how to be *F*. This argument seems to beg the question, at least given the aversion argument above. You don't have the same aversion to the transformation machine as you do to the experience machine, since the transformation machine doesn't require you to be plugged into it forever. It's rather like a gym: you go in, you train, you leave as a (relatively permanent) athlete. ASU.44

ASU.43 **THE SUICIDE MACHINE.** Following Nozick, Sober and Wilson argue that plugging into the experience machine resembles suicide. The lessons they draw are different from Nozick's, however. They claim that, because of this resemblance, people may be morally repulsed by the experience machine, and that is another reason for them to refuse plugging into the experience machine. 285

Can't the hedonist bite the bullet, though? Suppose you are offered a pill with the following properties: you take the pill, you immediately forget all about the present offer and its discussion, you go to sleep tonight as if nothing happened, and you never wake up. If you decline to take the pill, your life goes on as usual, fraught with dangers and uncertainties, also with a possibility of pleasure and success. How good is the offer? Well, first there are the earlier worries about the pill effects. You have to trust some shady dealer and put your own life at stake! This doesn't seem very rational at all. But suppose that you have evidence that the pill works, what then? The hedonist may insist that, when all *prejudices* are removed, the pill is a good idea. After all, you don't care that you weren't alive before you were born. The non-existence itself doesn't bother you. Death (or equally, complete

inactivity) are only problematic because of the experiences and dangers they expose you to. As well, you are averse to it probably because of some innate mechanisms that make suicide (merely) appear terrible.

**LOCAL EXPERIENCE MACHINES.** The suicide machine highlights some intrinsic weaknesses in the global experience machine where you decide in the situations so unusual and risky that the favoured route may simply be to stick with the familiar. Yet the familiar reasons are, on reflection, nothing but prejudices. Or so the hedonist may argue. Therefore, what of the *local* experience machines that do not require you to act in extraordinary circumstances?

*Unfaithful partner:* Suppose you are offered three scenarios. (i) Your partner is fantastic at the rate of 100 (gives you great experiences), but cheats behind your back. However, you never ever get a whiff of that. (ii) Your partner is fantastic to the extent of 80 (not so great experiences), but never cheats. (iii) Your partner is fantastic to the extent of 100, and never cheats.

*Hidden ailment:* You have a terminal disease. (i) The truth is hidden from you, you are oblivious to the real situation, some weeks later you pass away in your sleep. (ii) You learn the truth, understand your condition well, and spend your last weeks in fear and agony.

*Absent child:* Your only child goes to Australia, and you never see him again. (i) He dies, but postcards are arranged to arrive regularly. (ii) He lives and sends you postcards. (iii) He dies, and you learn of his death.

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