

## Psychological Hedonism : — (G-B)

A theory of psychology that has had a great influence on ethical thought is the view that the sole object of human desire is pleasure. Men may appear to seek such other things as wealth, learning or virtuous character, but actually they are seeking such things as means to getting pleasure. This theory of psychological hedonism is a description of human nature learned by empirical observation and not like ethical hedonism, what the psychological hedonist needs to show is that all men in all their activities are seeking pleasure. The American realist, Hall, bases this on the ~~psychological~~ physiological fact that a stimulated part of a body reflexly seeks more stimulation for itself. There is such a fundamental tendency in human nature, but what the psychological hedonist would need to prove is that this is the only tendency

determining human theoretical hedonism, the first two of these are not at all.

a) The pleasantness of desire at the moment of desiring may be the factor which determines action. The desire of a starving man for food may be extremely painful and yet be a desire most likely to produce action.

b) A man always does what gives him most pleasure at the moment to do. This might explain the action of the starving man in getting food, but it is obvious that we sometimes do actions which do not give pleasure at the moment. eg: we go to the dentist for the painful business of having a tooth extracted.

c) The motive that determines action is always the desire for some future pleasure. This is the most reasonable form of psychological hedonism.

There are however several good reasons for considering psychological hedonism even in this most reasonable form to be false.

i) The strongest argument against psychological hedonism is that from introspection. When we desire, we are not always consciously desiring pleasure. We may be desiring food or music or exercise without any thought of the pleasant feeling that their attainment will bring us. It is true that the satisfaction

So all desires for these things is normally accompanied by pleasant feeling, so much so that in some cases we refer to the object which satisfy our desires as pleasures. Yet it is evident that what we desire is not merely the pleasant feeling, but the object arousing it. Love music and get pleasure from listening to it, music would not satisfy us if what we desire at the moment is food.

iii)  
ii) Even in the animal world a mother animal will endure pain and sacrifice her life for the sake of her young. When a human mother engages in similar conduct the psychological hedonist maintains that she does so for the sake of future pleasure either so that she may enjoy later the society of her child or that she may have herself from the painfulness of remorse, or even that she may give herself a momentary thrill of satisfaction over her extreme sacrifice on behalf of her child. Even if we admit that all human self-sacrifice could be explained by such explanations, it does not follow that these are the only possible explanations of it; explanations by a natural instinct to sacrifice oneself in certain circumstances would be a still more plausible explanation. The explanations given by the psychological hedonist on the animal world would suggest a far higher level of development in

the animal world than we have. scientific grounds for accepting, and would seem a simpler and more reasonable view to hold that the aim of the mother whether animal or human, is to have her young free from danger, the discovery that there is pleasure even in such self-sacrifice is something which comes later.

iii) Maternal self-sacrifice is only one case of what we may suppose to be a general rule that wants come before satisfactions. This would appear to be true in the biological evolution of conduct. Plants and the lower forms of animals have needs or wants, e.g. of air and moisture, but there is no evidence that they have any consciousness of these wants or their satisfaction, so that in no sense can they be said to desire pleasure. From these unconscious wants there seems to be a gradual development through dim appetites to conscious desires, the satisfaction of which is certainly accompanied by pleasant feeling. The same would appear to be the order of development in the case of certain desires in the individual human being. The child seems to have an innate tendency to imitate the activities of grown-up people. A boy imitates the grown-up activity of smoking and generally on the first occasion finds it extremely unpleasant, but imitative and self-absorbed.

until it gives him satisfaction. There are certain experiences like the satisfaction of the bodily appetites and the enjoyment of perceiving beautiful objects which are so universally pleasant that it is plausible to accept the view of the psychological hedonist that men desire these experiences for the sake of the pleasure they give. The other things that give us pleasure, and there are many of these in human life without taking such an extreme example as an angry man killing his neighbour, depend on our having desired them beforehand, and not on their own intrinsic pleasantness.

ii) An argument which suggests but no means demonstrates the falsity of psychological hedonism is known as the 'paradox of hedonism'. Sidgwick pointed out that the best way to get pleasure is to forget it. The player of a game who is continually thinking of the enjoyment that he is getting out of the game will probably miss that enjoyment to a great extent, while the player who gives all his mind to the playing and winning of the game gets the fullest enjoyment out of it. It is possible, however, for people without attending all the time to the pleasantness of their experiences to make the attainment of pleasure their aim, and such people do get a great deal of enjoyment in spite of

the paradox of hedonism. The argument provided by the paradox of hedonism is that, if psychological hedonism be true, it is difficult to explain why there should have been such a strange development as that implied by the paradox of hedonism. If we accept the other view that desires may be for many different objects and activities, then it would be in accordance with what psychology teaches us about association or conditioning that the desire for pleasure should need frequently to be reinforced by the conscious desire for the object or activity which originally gave the particular pleasure. It is to this necessity that the paradox of hedonism calls attention.

Our conclusion is that we do not desire things because they give us pleasure on the contrary, they give us pleasure because we desire them. The idea of climbing a mountain, e.g., is pleasant only if there is already a desire to do so in our minds. The fact that we do a thing because we ourselves desire to do it does not mean that all our desires are selfish, as psychological hedonists suppose. We may have an entirely unselfish desire for such an object as our neighbour's success, and the satisfaction of that desire may give the unselfish man more pleasure than his

not the fact that the satisfaction  
his desires give him pleasure, but  
the kinds of objects which give him  
pleasure and the kinds of desires that  
he has in his mind. The well-being  
of others may be what a man desires  
most and what gives him most pleasure,  
and this is just what we mean by  
calling the man unselfish.

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