

HEDONISM

(notes taken from Catholic Encyclopedia, 1910)

...the name given to the group of ethical systems that hold, with various modifications, that feelings of pleasure or happiness are the highest and final aim of conduct; that, consequently, those actions which increase the sum of pleasure are thereby constituted right, and conversely, what increases pain is wrong.

The father of Hedonism was Aristippus of Cyrene. . . . His followers reduced the system to a plea for self-indulgence.

The School of Epicurus followed emphasizing the superiority of social and intellectual pleasures over those of the senses. Combined his doctrine with the atomic theory of matter and this synthesis finds its finished expression in the materialistic determinism of the Roman poet Lucretius. Taught that pain and self-restraint have a hedonistic value; for pain is sometimes a necessary means to health and enjoyment; while self-restraint and prudent asceticism are indispensable if we would secure for ourselves the maximum of pleasure. . . . Epicurianism was one of the forces that resisted Christianity.

Hedonistic principles found in Hobbes, Hartley, Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill . . . Alexander Bain, who are popularly known as Utilitarians. Herber Spencer adopted into his evolutionary theory of ethics the principle that the discriminating norm of right and wrong is pleasure and pain, though he substituted the progress of life for the hedonistic end.

Contemporary Hedonists are sometimes classed into egoistic and altruistic. . . . Whose happiness? . . . Perhaps the only thoroughgoing egoistic Hedonist is Thomas Hobbes, though in many places Bentham too proclaims himself the uncompromising apostle of selfishness . . .

Transit from egotism to altruism is made by law of association of ideas--we come to love for their own sakes objects which in the first instance we loved from a selfish motive.

Criticism: 1) Rests on false psychological analysis The happiness or pleasure attending good conduct is a consequence not a constituent, of the moral quality of the action.

2) Falsely suppose that pleasure is the only motive of action. Makes pleasurable and desirable interchangeable terms.

3) Impractical standard. Pleasures are not commensurable with one another, nor with pains; besides no human mind can calculate the quantity of pleasure and pain that will result from a given action.

4) Egoistic Hedonism reduces all benevolence, self-sacrifice, and love of the right to mere selfishness. It is impossible for altruistic Hedonism to evade the same consummation except at the cost of consistency.

5) No general code of morality could be established on the basis of pleasure. . . . What is more pleasurable for one may be less so for another. Hence, on hedonistic grounds. . . there could be no permanently and universally valid dividing line between right and wrong.

6) Hedonism has no ground for moral obligation, no sanction for duty. The worst reproach I can get no matter how base my conduct is that I have made an imprudent choice.

"The greatest good for the greatest number" may be credited to its democratic rather than to its hedonistic character.