

Critique of Hedonism

Simanchala Pradhan

Hedonistic Values: The term ‘Hedonism’ derives its origin from the Latin word *hedone* which means pleasure. This implies that hedonistic values subsists in pleasure, i.e, pleasure is the highest good. This is how man augments his actions with a view to derive maximum pleasure. The exponents of hedonism are J.S. Mill, James Bentham, David Hume and Epicurians. These thinkers assert that pleasure is the ultimate objective or *Summum Bonum* of life. So it is an obvious phenomenon that according to these thinkers man always hankers after pleasure and avoid pain. Again according to these thinkers pleasure is that quality of mental process which man gets after the successful completion of an action entailing pleasurable perception with regard to a stupendous fortune.¹

In view of the above we shall quote here the views of Bentham and Mill which are elucidated as follows.

“Bentham observes “Nature has placed mankind under the sovereign masters, viz, pleasure and pain; that man always seeks pleasure and pain.”² It is because of pleasure and pain only we do what we ought to do and what we shall do, i.e, our prospect is always some pleasure for which the action is facilitated as a means to produce pleasure thereby some pain are prevented with fruitful actions. Our motive is substantially nothing more than pleasure and pain acting in a particular manner. It is evident the, according to Bentham, actions are to be carried on keeping in view of pleasure /pain considerations. J.S. Mill also expounds “desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful are phenomena are entirely inseparable, rather two aspects of the same phenomena³”. The statement of Mill holds that attaining pleasure is the main objective of every action to which we are going to materialize.

Hedonism emphasizes supreme importance to the heretic aspect of human nature. This reveals that feeling or perceptual knowledge is the vital action of mental process. “Reason and will are good only as means of procuring and maintaining feeling; but feeling itself is good only in so far as it is pleasurable.”⁴ All that are not withstanding hedonistic values are basically perceptual or sensualistic by nature. In view of the above we may quote the aphorism of a British poet which are elucidated as follows.

Whate’r the motive, pleasure is the mark
For her the black assassin draws his sword;
For her dark statesman trim their midnight.
For her the saint abstains, the miser lamp; starves
The stoic proud for pleasure, pleasure scorns;
For her afflictions daughter grief indulge
And find, or hope, a luxury in tears;
For her, quit, shame, toil, danger, we defy.⁵

Most of the hedonists are unanimous with regard to the term ‘good’ which stands for pleasure expect a single proposition. Under the following four propositions hedonists are agreed with regard to the term ‘good’.

A-Happiness= Pleasure or Happiness= Pleasentness

B-All Pleasure are intrinsically good, or whatever is pleasant is itself is good in itself. A hedonist may admit that some pleasures are morally bad or wrong or that some are bad because of their results.

C- Only pleasures are intrinsically good, or whatever is good in itself is pleasant in itself. A hedonist may allow other things or even pain to be good as means or even morally good or right.

D-Pleasantness is the criterion of intrinsic goodness. It is what makes things good as ends. It is not just a coincidence that what is pleasant is good in itself and vice-versa.

In the following point hedonists Mill and Bentham differ with regard to the term ‘good’ which perpetuates pleasure.

E- The intrinsic goodness of an action or experience is commensurate with the quality of pleasure it contains (or to the quantitative balance of pleasure over pain contained in it or intrinsic to it).

Hedonists differ in ‘E’ proposition in view of the fact that mental pleasures are varied from corporeal (bodily) ones. But Epicurus and Bentham advocate that such differences in quality make no effects to their goodness or value. As the latter puts it, “ quality of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry “. But

J.S. Mill maintains that differences in quality of pleasure entail differences of value that mental pleasures are superior to corporeal ones just because of the kind of pleasure affixed to them that is qualitatively excelled.

Principles of actions in Hedonistic Calculus

According to hedonistic calculus an action is performed in accordance with the principle of greatest possible pleasure. Here it may be reiterated that the goodness of actions shall be directed towards their tendency to accelerated the greatest possible pleasure of man. In hedonistic parlance actions are to be verified good or bad keeping in view of the supreme end of life, i.e., to eat, drink and be conjugate as we may not be here tomorrow.

Hedonistic principles, again, expounds "an action consistent with and conducive to the great end of life is good or right; an action inconsistent with or subversive of it must be pronounced as bad or wrong".⁶ This we must obviously affirm actions are good only in proportion as they are conducive as means towards the ultimate end or good. Henceforth we must judge an action is right or wrong as it intends to produce pleasure or pain or sufferings. In this context we may quote Mill who proclaims "actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."⁷ By happiness Mill observes it is none other than pleasure and unhappiness which pertains to pain or misery. But Bentham in a single proposition exhorts man's actions are always determined by his own interest.

Now a question crops up in our mental spectrum that what is the modus operandi or principles through which we could measure maximum pleasure of an individual? The answer is this: while evaluating the maximum pleasure with regard to a particular action we have to follow two principles. The first principle is the intensity or degree of pleasure inflicted by an action and the second principle is the duration or length of time that a pleasurable experience continues to exist. However pleasantness of an action could be observed through following principles:

- (i) Certainty: An action is more pleasant when the probability of its giving a pleasant experience is in high degree.
- (ii) Probability: An action is more pleasant if there is a possibility of its bearing a good result in near future.
- (iii) Facundity: An action must have the power to produce further pleasure from it.
- (iv) Extent: If more numbers of persons are motivated by an action the action is considered as pleasant.

To sum up we may quote the following paragraph:

We can represent possible future pleasures of ourselves and others in idea, compare them in respect of value, choose beforehand the best and adopt our actions so as to realize the best. That our action requires, an estimation of the value of future pleasures. Hence the question arises by what standard are we to evaluate the values of pleasures."⁸

Forms Of Hedonism

- (A) Psychological Hedonism: Psychological hedonism reveals the normal behavior of life that pleasure is the natural end or motive of every human action. Hence everybody intends what he thinks will be pleasurable. This is how the only natural object of desire or the motive of action is pleasure. While performing an action we always have the idea and desire of some pleasure in our minds as motive. For this reason only things are sought not for their own sake but for the sake of pleasure. The predominant predisposition in man is the gratification of sensibility. As a result of this Mill, Bain, Hume, Bentham, talk with exhilaration "life is continuous pursuit of pleasure."
- (B) Egoistic Hedonism: Egoistic hedonism strictly holds that happiness of the individual is the only principle or the criteria through which we evaluate the moral value of an action. In other words an action shall be performed keeping in view of maximum pleasure pertaining to one's body. In view of the above it is an obvious fact that we ought to seek our own pleasure. Pleasure is the only good for us, it is because of the fact that everybody is to seek his greatest pleasure. For this reason we perform an action in conformity with our own happiness. If an action is not in conformity with our happiness it will definitely lead to pain. This is how the principle of egoistic hedonism is "everyone for himself."

Egoistic hedonism, furthermore, gets its sanctions from altruism. There are four types of altruistic sanctions which are enumerated below:

Political Sanctions: Political sanctions vent to those pains which are inflicted following the dereliction of existing principles or norms. It is because of the apprehension of punishments and the inquisitiveness towards honour insists in man to be benevolent and performs every action in such a manner which holds good for the society.

Physical Sanction:Physical sanction comprises bodily pain. Bodily pain consists of the violation of natural laws or principles. Human nature demands that his appetite should be satisfied, his health must be taken proper care of .If a man violates these principles by over indulgence he is bound to suffer.

Social Sanction:

Social sanction is that sanction which perpetuates a man to act for the pleasure of the society. It is because of the fact that unless a man acts for the pleasure of the society , his pleasure will be in jeopardy.

Religious Sanction:

The last sanction is religious sanction. Bentham says that such a sanction emerges due to fear of punishment in hell and the hope for honour in paradise. However the fear of punishment in hell is more effective than that of the honour in paradise.

Gross Egoism:

Gross hedonism is a hedonistic practice expeditated by Helvetiousand Mandeville. This practice is the sporadic outcome of the present industrial society. Mandeville holds that ‘‘ Man centers everything in himself , and neither loves nor hates but for his own sake’’.Hence according to him self love is the only virtue. Selfishness, luxury, pride, enjoyment are all part and parcel of the emerging industrial society.

Gross egoism, moreover, holds that we should fully enjoy the present spectrum. To sacrifice the present to the future is unwarranted and foolishness. The present is ours as the so called future never may be . For this reason ‘Man’ has to cultivate to the utmost all possible capacities of enjoyment and gratify them to the utmost. The past is no more, it has gone for ever. The future is doomed in vague. This is how the present is all that we have. Let us convert present for the utmost pleasure for man. Let us eat drink and copulate, for tomorrow we may not be in this mundane world.

Refined Egoism

Refined egoism is a hedonistic practice which is found in the teachings of Epicurus (341-270 B.C). This type of egoism enunciates a mere reflective of pleasure which is sought by every man. Epicurus fully recognizes the inevitability of reason for the conduct of life. According to him reason is the proper guide for the attainment of true happiness. Again he reiterates (to borrow the words of Prof. James Seth)’‘the end is pleasure, but this end cannot be attained except under the guidance of reason, feeling would be nothing but a blind and perilous guide to its own satisfactions’’.This is how it is the reason that makes possible the most perfect gratification of sensibility.

Altruistic Hedonism/Hedonistic Utilitarianism

This type of hedonism reveals general happiness or happiness of the greatest number of individuals as the moral standard. In this hedonism utility or usefulness is the sole criterion for the goodness of an action. Hence it is an obvious fact that usefulness of an action only gives rise to pleasure. This is how it is said that actions are right or good if they are conducive to greatest happiness of the greatest number .

Bentham’s altruistic hedonism concedes the principle of maximum pleasure for the maximum numbers. According to Bentham the maximum pleasure could be measured quantitatively . This is how puspin is as good as poetry as there is no distinction of quality of pleasure between these two. Hence the volume of pleasure in altruistic hedonism based on the principle of greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Bentham conciliates his egoistic hedonism to altruistic hedonism . The peculiarity lies in him is that egoistic hedonism obtains its sanctions from altruism. Nothing is valuable to an altruistic hedonist if an action does not provide pleasure. Virtue, knowledge, truth are valuable if and only if these phenomena are conducive to pleasure. Similarly motives like kindness, pity, sympathy are valued if they are able to augment pleasure only. Pleasure and pain are two feelings under which man reels on. This is also the locus standi of psychological hedonism which is the foundation of ethical hedonism that the objective of every rational being is to excel his own pleasure.

Egoistic Ethical Hedonism

HenerySidgwick an English utilitarian expounds this hedonistic practice. According to him the ultimate good is to obtain pleasure. Sidgwickholds that pleasure and happiness are synonymous terms. He reiterates virtue like truth, beauty and knowledge are subservient to pleasure.

Human intuition demands that man ought to seek his own pleasure. This is how the volume of pleasure must be in maximum form. The pleasure sought for one’s own sake stands on the principle of rational self love. But this rational self love(Ethical) and egoistic(Hedonism) reaches its climax when it is supported by three principles, namely, prudence , benevolence and justice.

The principle of prudence holds that each one ought to seek his own pleasure. But the maximum pleasure can be derived from a total pleasure, i.e., not a momentary one. If the momentary pleasure is predominant than it defeats its own aim. For this reason we have to sacrifice our own happiness for the greater interest of mass happiness. As Sidgwick observes "the rational self love dictates an impartial concern for all parts of or conscious life." The principle of benevolence holds that the pleasures of others are to be regarded as equal as that of our own. Here Sidgwick overturns egoistic ethical hedonism to altruistic hedonism. Human reason demands that the maximum happiness of an individual is possible only when the happiness of others is considered valuable. The principle of benevolence demands that we must sacrifice our pettish desire for the greater good of the maximum number.

The principle of justice expounds that whatever action man performs keeping in view of the interest of others. It may be noted here that Kant advances his moral theory on the basis of this principle "act in such a way by which your action could be considered to be good universally."9

Evolutionary Hedonism

Evolutionary hedonism projects the society as an organism where in individuals are the constituent parts. Every individual can contribute to his own perfection by contributing to the life and the perfection of the society. It is by mutual interaction and co-operation the members of the society keep themselves physically, mentally and socially well equipped.

Again evolutionary hedonism holds that there is gradually establishment of conduct in itself by reconciling individual and social interests. However Herbert Spencer confidently constructs a 'Utopia' where in the happiness of the individual and the interest of the society will perfectly coincide. The disinterested social feelings have been developed by the successive experience of ages, as the necessary condition of the growth of social organisms and have been registered in the structure of the physical organism and brain and handed down with it by inheritance, so that they are now hereditary, innate and instinctive in every individual.

In view of the above deliberation it is obviously true that social evolution has provided man with hereditary altruistic feelings. Hence the antics of hedonistic calculus is misnomer here. Spencer the chief exponent of evolutionary hedonism concedes the right method of ethical enquiry is to deduce principles from biological and social stream. In a letter to Mill he writes "I conceive it to be the business of Moral Science to deduce from the laws of life and the conditions of existence; what kind action necessarily produce happiness and what kind of action tend to produce unhappiness. Having done this, its deductions are to be recognized as laws of conduct, and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery."

It is conspicuous from the Spencer's letter that the method of evolutionary hedonism is deductive while the antic utilitarians adopt inductive method. Moral law according to utilitarians is empirical generalization. According to evolutionists moral laws are derivable from bio-logical and sociological sciences. The upholders of Evolutionary Hedonism assert that sympathy (or, as it is sometimes called, social, altruistic or benevolent feeling) which is a product of evolution is a necessary condition for the growth of social organism. It is this feeling which unites or hold together the different members of a society. But so far as our experience is concerned altruistic feeling does not evolve universality for which regulation of principles of conduct or principles for different types of actions are barely needed. These are the principles for various actions that enable man to perform his actions in right direction.

Critical Assessment Of Hedonism

We have already deliberated different hedonistic theories. Let us examine the hedonistic calculus of comparative values namely the concepts of pleasure and pain. Here we shall perceive that unlike the meta-ethicists hedonists strive to deliver an ethical standard by resorting the subjective phenomena, viz., pleasure and pain. This is how hedonists advance their moral theory taking the help of pleasure, the only objective of life. This again shows that it is the moral duty of man to seek pleasure and pain. As we know that pleasure and pain are subjective concepts. These concepts vary from person to person. Whatever is pleasure to me may be pain to others. This is evident that pleasure and pain are not absolute but abstract terms. There is no measuring instruments to scale the parameter of pleasure and pain. These concepts can only be realized differently by different people. The hedonists surprisingly advance their theory considering the consequences of an action that produces either pleasure or pain. Pleasure and pain are not tangible objects so they cannot be valued either qualitatively or quantitatively. What is the criterion of maximum pleasure. Hedonists answer is not satisfactory. Furthermore human desires are so vast that it is very obstinate to garner maximum pleasure or gratification of our sensuous greed of man by observing hedone guidelines. On the contrary there is no guarantee that a person will definitely derive pleasure when an action is performed and a desired is fulfilled. As Michael Stocker observes "hedonistic egoists take their own pleasure to the whole justification of acts, activities, ways of life: they should recognize that love, friendship, affection, fellow feeling and community are among the greatest (sources of) personal pleasure. Thus, they have good reason, on their own grounds to, to enter such

relations. But they cannot act in the ways required to get these pleasure, these great goods, if they act on their motive of pleasure-for-self.”(Virtue Ethics, edit. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, ch.iii,p.69)

Hedonistic ethical standard is based on a single principle ,i.e , seeking pleasure is the only object of life. In other words man ought to seek pleasure . This single principle only points to non-moral action, left to moral and extra-moral actions hay and dry. These hedonists conceive that a single principle which is held good for a single action will hold good for actions of all types. This type of thought of the hedonist is untenable as it is the violation of the law of identity. As actions vary from one another it requires different principles for different types of actions. As non-moral values entail Man’s sensual gratification lead to pleasure of man arise out of non-moral actions. For this reason hedonism cannot be a moral standard.

Hedonists do not state clearly from Man’s need verses Men’s greed. Our observation shows that whenever a particular need of a person is fulfilled, he gets satisfaction but not pleasure. However a particular greed is fulfilled he gets pleasure. Pleasure, Satisfaction and happiness are similar terms, these terms must be stucked to their specific use. According to G.E. Moore(Principia Ethica) term like good cannot be defined at all as it does not come under any genus. Again if good is defined with any particular activity such as searching of pleasure than it leads to naturalistic fallacy. Noswell Smith suggests “ the hedonists would have done better to express their theory in terms of enjoyment ; since it is a word which can be used for most observing, profound and noble purpose or pursuits as well as most trival.”But the suggestion of Noswell is untenable ‘enjoyment’ is also a subjective phenomenon. It could not be absorbed with any other term. So the term ‘enjoyment’ could not be subservient to deliver a moral standard. The most notable reason is that people enjoy various things differently keeping in view of the circumstances where they survive with their heart and soul. We have instances that people sacrifice their lives for the interest of their fellow brethren ,i.e, to facilitate the social responsibility. It may give them pleasure, but hedonists should not argue that pleasure is the only motive of our sacrifice; it is the interest of the society we sacrifice ourselves as we are what we are it is because of the society. Performance of social responsibility gives us pleasure, in this case hedonists should not advocate that we perform social duties for the sake of pleasure only. Again Sidgwick holds that the more we seek pleasure the less we derive it as for the sake of gross sensualistic pleasure we can go to any extent, i.e, rape, murder, corruption, vandalism. Many people could see rightness or wrongness in the actions of others .But none in his senses imagines that it is his moral duties to seek his own pleasures. The hedonists cannot act for the sake of the intended beloved , friend and so on . To achieve these great personal goods they have to leave their selfish motive.

Bentham reiterates “Man is basically egocentric . Gratification of sensual urge automatically leads to pleasure.” This is how Bentham most remarkably a psychological hedonist. But he vehemently introspects how to recede pleasure for the for the man’s selfish gain. As he holds that too much of indulgence in the sensual pleasure causes deterioration of body for which he invokes altruism in order to safeguard the selfish interest the selfish interest. The hedonism of Bentham, whatsoever, is predominantly based on Man’s selfish interest which entail only non-moral actions. Therefore hedonism cannot deliver a moral standard.We know that Men differ in respect of their susceptibility to pleasure and pain, i.e, what is pleasurable to me may be painful to other. So how could there be a perfect moral standard taking on account of pleasure and pain consequences of an action. Hankering after an object and finding it makes a person full of pleasure. But our cravings are many and it is very difficult on our part to materialize all of them. As a result our cravings remain unsatisfied thereby we are left discontent.

One of the major weakness of refined egoism is discouragement of active strenuous life as it is inconsistent with the Epicurean claim of mind. It forgets that life is to be judged, not simply by feeling but by our actions, viz, moral, non-moral and extra-moral actions.

Psychological Hedonism, again, is an independent doctrine . Hence there is no need to connect it with ethical hedonism. In this context Sidgwick observes “No cogent inference is possible from the psychological generalization that the agent’s pleasure and pain are the universal motives, to the ethical principle that his own greatest pleasure is for each of the ultimate rational end.”. But multiple questions crops up here that if it is natural for everyone to seek his own pleasure than how can we explain the origin of society and that of social feeling? How is that human being , though naturally egoistic, have come to combine and co-operate in society(where in each individual is forced to subordinate his own interest, more or less, to those of others) ? How is it that we are often led to promote the good of others ? Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau advocate that it is for the preservation of rights, liberty and property of the men a co-operative was formulated on the basis of social contract. As a result of this the primitive nature of man is replaced by “a state ofwelfare.” Whatever the hedone calculus of pleasure/pain it may be, hedonists are unable to supply us a uniform standard of ethical discipline ,i.e, an adequate criterion or means of distinguishing right and wrong actions. Altruistic hedonism judges the rightness and wrongness of actions by their bearing on the pleasure and pain of others. However there are many forms of wrong actions which inflict no appreciable pain of others. Are they to be called innocent ? In many cases fraud and dishonesty may be conducive to be pleasure of some,

without causing any considerable pain to others. In many cases injury and injustice to one person may be made the means of pleasure to many others. How can we condemn such actions strictly on hedonistic principles.

Mill, however, admits that `` The actions of individuals could not be predicted with scientific accuracy, were it only because we cannot foresee the whole of the circumstances in which those individuals will be placed.`` Hedonism, whatsoever, its altruistic stand cannot restore as a moral standard taking on account of pleasure/pain consequences of the actions of various individuals. It is because of the following enumerations hedonism cannot provide us a moral standard.

- (i) Hedonism is based on a single principle, i.e., pleasure is the ultimate object of man. This single principle only serves individual values which entail non-moral action.
- (ii) Hedonists does not typically differentiate among moral , non-moral and extra-moral actions as they conceive that a single principle which is meant for a single type of action will hold good to all sorts of actions. Hence it is fallible to conceive that actions are of the same type. To our observations actions vary from one another. This is how it needs different principles for different types of actions.
- (iii) Hedonists do not categorically tell us to which action do their principle act upon. So far as our analysis is concerned their only principle is only acted upon to non-moral action. It is the non-moral action that serves the individual interest.
- (iv) Taking in to account of subjective phenomena, viz , pleasure, pain, happiness and the selfish interest of man one cannot establish a moral standard . As subjective phenomena are not subject to verification for which they cannot be evaluated.

The `purushartha Theory, keeping in view of the above, can resolve the problem of the hedonism as the purushartha theory advocates that an action could be performed not in accordance with pleasure/pain consequences but in accordance with the `Dharma', the right principle that protects the interest of the society. It is on the part of the individuals to be loyal to their duties, i.e , to perform their actions with a view to Social Good as an individual is what he is, it is because of the society. Hedonists only advocate for the rights of the individuals which make them nasty , brutish and selfish. It is the Dharma that denotes the totality of moral and non-moral obligations, the totality of prescriptions and prohibitions which govern the network of social relationship. It includes the obligations that one has to fulfill by virtue of his position in the society , the contractual transactions he has entered into with some other members of the society.

References

- [1]. Padhi, N. C. and Panigrahi S.C ; Basic Principles of Ethics, Ch. VI, P. 80
- [2]. Shina, J ; Manual of Ethics, Ch. VIII, P.71,72
- [3]. Mill, J.S; The Logic of Moral Sciences, Ch.III, P.33
- [4]. Wallace's Epicureanism, Ch. II, P. 29
- [5]. Chatterjee, p ; Principles of Ethics, Ch. XI, P.144
- [6]. Crisp, Roger and Slote, Michael ; Virtue Ethics, Oxford Uni., Ch.III, P. 69
- [7]. Mill, J.S ; Methods of Ethics, Ch.II, P.44
- [8]. Spencer, Herbert ; Data of Ethics, Ch.II, P.34
- [9]. Mackenzie, J.S; Manual of Ethics, Ch.III, P.139.