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Hedonism, Preferentialism, and Value Bearers

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Abstract: Hedonism and preferentialism are two popular theories about what has final value, i.e. is valuable for its own sake. The latter theory is customarily portrayed as the wider of these, in that it ascribes value to much more than pleasures, viz., to any object of a final preference. By examining the metaphysical underpinnings of these views, it is argued that a fundamental issue between these theories concerns the question “what are the fundamental bearers of final value?” While hedonism is here defined as the view that ascribes final value only to *concrete* sensations of pleasure, preferentialism is initially understood as claiming that final value accrues to the objects of preferences. Given that such objects are often assumed to be abstract entities, hedonists might launch a possible argument against preferentialism, viz., that since value on a preferentialist reading only accrues to *abstract* objects (states of affairs), preferentialists are debarred from valuing what hedonists value (concrete sensations). Various replies with which a preferentialist might counter this objection are examined. However, it is concluded that these suggestions are not convincing.

1. Introduction

While hedonism has been subjected to much criticism over the years, it is still a widely endorsed axiological view. One objection that appears to be generally recognised as especially troublesome to hedonists is that their central claim, that final value accrues only to experiences of pleasure gives us a narrow view of value. Much more than pleasure is valuable for its own sake. A competing theory, preferentialism, is another widespread theory about value. According to one version of preferentialism, only the objects of preferences carry final value, and since not all of our preferences have pleasure as their object, preferentialists accuse hedonists of overlooking a great deal that is of value. For instance, if someone has a so-called external preference to the effect that, say, the Californian redwood forests should go on existing, then the world contains more value if the forests continue to exist.¹ Given this, the possible pleasure someone would experience on

¹ See Ronald Dworkin, “We Do Not Have a Right to Liberty,” in R. Cunningham, ed., *Liberty and the Rule of Law* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1979).

learning that his preference is satisfied has nothing to do with this kind of value. Preferentialists therefore conclude that the hedonist perspective is not wide enough.

Numerous philosophers have taken this position. What has attracted no interest is the question “Are hedonists entitled to reverse the argument?” and the claim that preferentialists are restrained by not being able to recognize the object of value that is cherished by hedonists. The line of reasoning of hedonists is that preferentialists endorse these claims: final value accrues only to the objects of final preferences; preferences have only obtaining states of affairs as their objects; and final value accrues only to obtaining states of affairs. Hedonists formulate a counter-claim that final value accrues to experiences that are not states of affairs. Hedonists submit that preferentialists, by having to say that value accrues only to states of affairs, miss what hedonists value for their own sake. From this counter-claim hedonists draw the conclusion preferentialists are debarred from valuing everything hedonists value for its own sake.

On certain plausible assumptions, regarding what pleasures and preferences are, the hedonistic conclusion ought to force a preferentialist to reconsider his position. Not just hedonists but preferentialists as well need therefore to enlarge their axiological perspective. We have reason to endorse a view on what are the non-derivative bearers of final value that incorporates the insights of hedonism as well as of preferentialism. Such pluralism about value bearers strengthens a value-pluralist position.

2. What Hedonists Value

One of the possible issues among hedonists derives from the fact that pleasure can be brought about in a number of ways. The most obvious example is sensory pleasure. But there is also non-sensory pleasure such as what we might experience when we believe we have done something good. If we think there is a difference between these kinds of sources, we may think there is also a difference between the kinds of pleasure. Accordingly, we face the possibility that hedonists may diverge depending on whether they value both types of pleasure, or exclude or down-grade non-sensory pleasure. We may, however, leave the question open of how encompassing hedonism should be. At the outset it seems reasonable to demand that a formulation of hedonism must comply with the following condition: an understanding of pleasure and pain must be such that it will not leave us baffled with respect to why people should seek and value that which gives them pleasure. We may understand this condition either as a claim about the strongest kind of hedonism, or as a claim about the best way of analysing pleasure. It might be that in setting up what is the best

or strongest kind of hedonism we would have to lean on a notion of pleasure that might be implausible or wrong. But is the notion of pleasure which hedonists demand, at all plausible or should we reject hedonism because hedonists argue their case from an implausible view of what pleasure is? Suppose, for instance, that sensory pleasure is not conceived of as an experience that has a distinctive phenomenological sensory quality, what some philosophers have referred to as the hedonic tone of the experience.² Sensory pleasure should instead be analysed as the state in which the person is taking non-sensory pleasure, so-called propositional pleasure, in the fact that he or she is having a certain sensation.³ Or to take yet another view, what we might refer to as the desire account of pleasure, according to which an analysis of pleasure must somehow refer to a person's desires. It is easy to imagine a version inspired by the thought of John Stuart Mill that desiring a thing and finding it pleasant is in fact "two modes of naming the same psychological fact."⁴ Such a version of the desire account shares with a view advanced by Fred Feldman the idea that pleasant experiences are not something that has any special hedonic tone. Pleasure would instead be viewed as consisting of two components: a state of the mind and a desire or preference directed towards this state of the mind. An experience is pleasant, for example, if and only if we desire that the experience should obtain or be prolonged. According to this version of the desire account, there is no hedonic tone to resort to in order to explain why we desire just such particular states of affairs. This need not necessarily be a drawback. The explanation may very well come from elsewhere such as the evolutionary survival value of the desires.⁵

The desire-version of pleasure allows for the possibility that hedonism should be turned into a restricted version of preferentialism, on the plausible assumption that preferences and desires belong to the same genus of mental states. Given this, the hedonist counter-argument fails. The counter-claim as well as the conclusion of hedonists turns out to be false. The counter-claim is false because the value that hedonists ascribe to pleasure can be reduced to what preferentialists value. Moreover, since there is no hedonistic pleasure, preferentialists cannot be debarred from valuing it. Nevertheless, hedonists need not be concerned about this line of reasoning. We do have sensations with hedonic tones, and analyses of such sensations will therefore be incomplete if there is no mention of hedonic tones. Since the desire account has removed this feeling element in their

² See C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930), and T.L.S. Sprigge, *The Rational Foundations of Ethics* (London: Routledge 1988).

³ See Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures," *Ethics* 107 (1997).

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, (1979), p. 49.

⁵ Cf. Richard B. Brandt, *Facts, Values, and Morality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

account of pleasure, it cannot account for these instances of hedonic tone pleasure. We may question the scope of experiences with hedonic tones, but to completely deny that there are these kinds of experiences is phenomenologically counter-intuitive. Of course, we need not claim that all pleasant experiences have such hedonic tones. A mixed view between the hedonic tone version of pleasure and the desire-version of pleasure may well be what in the end best captures our use of “pleasure.” But that is a merely a verbal matter.

Given a certain perspective on the question “Why should I value pleasure?”, desire accounts of pleasure may account for the fact that we desire pleasure without having to invoke any special hedonic tone. A backward looking, causal explanation in terms of, say, the evolutionary survival value of such desires may well be correct. But what if we changed the perspective and asked the same question but this time looking ahead to the pleasure? Do both accounts show why we value pleasure as much as we do? The forward-looking justificatory perspective clearly tilts the balance in favor of an account in terms of hedonic tones. The value that we do in fact ascribe to pleasure cannot, without a considerable loss of intuitive appeal, be transferred to what a proponent of the desire-account understands by “pleasure.” There is no reason why we should value desiring that we have a sensation and the sensation. We may perhaps instrumentally value that we desire having such sensations. But why is it valuable we desire having such experiences? An account of pleasure in terms of hedonic tones is more plausible. While it seems understandable why we should value an experience that has a positive tone, it is unclear why we would find it of final value that we desire to have a certain experience and that such an experience should obtain. T.L.S. Sprigge, in his criticism of Gilbert Ryle’s idea that pleasure is not an experience with a distinct feeling tone, put his finger on what is the problem, from an axiological perspective, with the desireaccount of pleasure: “[I]t gives a strikingly joyless picture of pleasure or happiness”.⁶

Someone might reply that this argument rests on a notion of valuing that is alien to preferentialists. For fairness sake, let us therefore suppose valuing should be analysed as a case of desiring. This seems to be in the spirit of an axiology such as preferentialism. But such an analysis coupled with a backward- looking explanation of our desires would not make the issue comprehensible. An analysis of valuing in terms of desires would not help when it comes to understanding the value we ascribe to pleasure. Far from strengthening the preferentialist position, such an analysis rather weakens its case. We often invoke as a reason for our final desire for something one of its goodmaking

⁶ Sprigge op. cit., p. 132.

properties. But what we desire may be another desire, such as the desire to have a certain experience. Desires seldom figure in the foreground of a subject's deliberation. Phillip Pettit and Michael Smith have convincingly argued for this. To appeal, for instance, to our desire that is directed toward a particular sensation, as our reason for desiring that we desire to have the sensations, is not convincing. When it comes to final desires it is difficult to see how they could but remain in the motivating background of an agent's decision.

According to Richard Brandt there is a conceptual link between desires and certain sensations. On his view, "Why should I value pleasure?", can be answered by pointing to the alleged linguistic fact that if someone experiences pleasure, then for conceptual reasons the person desires to maintain having the sensations. Bearing in mind that Brandt defends a dispositional view of desire, his definition of "pleasant" appears when he says:

What it is for an experience to be pleasant for a person is for it to make him want its continuation (or to make him tend to act in a way which normally would contribute to this continuation). Notice that pleasantness is conceptually related to wanting or valence: the experience makes one want something.⁷

On Brandt's view, being pleasant is conceptually tied to being causally efficient in eliciting maintenance tendencies in the subject. But the connection between desires and what is pleasant is not conceptual. Experiences may have hedonic qualities and there are no conceptual obstacles to imagining someone having such experiences that do not respond by having a desire to continue the experience. The reason may be that there are other ways of responding to pleasure than by having desires. Furthermore, a subject may lack the ability to form desires in the moment she experiences a sensation with a hedonic tone.⁸

Brandt also recognizes that experiences may have hedonic tones. However, he thinks that an account of pleasure in terms of hedonic quality is elusive. Brandt makes it clear that his way of understanding "pleasure" is not intended to correspond to the common use of this term. His definition is intended to be "suited for a scientific psychological explanatory conceptual framework" and for that reason he seems to think that a hedonic tone account is disqualified. Whatever its merits, even if the notion of a hedonic tone is difficult to fit into a scientific conceptual framework, this does not mean that we can leave it out of an axiological framework. It is not clear why a definition such as Brandt's should be the only one of interest to a person who is interested in the

⁷ Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 89.

⁸ Cf. L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness & Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

axiological question “What has final value?” If there are experiences with hedonic tones, they should surely be strong candidates on anyone’s list of possible valuable objects. Thus, for a hedonist, what is of importance to notice is that value accrues to experiences that have hedonic tones. How they are connected to a person’s desires is another issue. Brandt may have put his finger on a conceptual link between desires and pleasant experiences, but his view fails to bring out what is valuable with pleasure.

3. Are Preferentialists Debarred from Hedonic Value?

Preferentialists may try to resist the conclusion that they are debarred from valuing what hedonists value, by denying that pleasure is an experience with a certain quality. However, it would be a mistake to think that the disagreement between preferentialists and hedonists would actually disappear if preferentialists could convince hedonists that there was no such thing as an experience with a hedonic tone. To draw this conclusion is to overlook that the disagreement between preferentialists and hedonists goes deeper than whether or not there are experiences with hedonic tones. What preferentialists actually have in mind when they speak of the value of experiences is the value that accrues to the obtaining of some abstract entity involving the experience. Hedonists, on their part, whether or not they maintain that there are hedonic tones, would be ill advised if they gave up the idea that pleasure is a concrete entity.

The idea that pleasure is something abstract squares badly with how we ordinarily regard pleasant experiences, namely as particulars that exist in space and time. Hedonic qualities are not properties of states of affairs. Such abstract entities do not have phenomenological qualities. The only plausible entity is a sensation, which is a concrete experience. But turning the value of pleasure into the value of something abstract is not the last defense against the hedonistic argument. One alternative would be to deny at least one of the three theses that hedonists ascribe to preferentialists.

There is semantic evidence for a kind of hybrid position, according to which preferences may have as objects not only states of affairs but also concrete entities such as experiences. If this were the case, then preferentialists could value concrete entities after all, and hedonists would have to withdraw their conclusion. What seemingly supports this idea is that “preference” only sometimes seems to refer to a propositional attitude. For instance, someone may prefer that Sweden beat Denmark in football than that Denmark beats Sweden. However, the same person may also prefer a Jaguar to a Volvo, where the preference objects are two things and not states of affairs. But,

examples like this one are hardly serious counter-examples to the normal preferentialist claim that preferences have only the obtainings of states of affairs as their objects. A well-known reply by advocates of that claim is that a proper analysis would eventually reveal that what we prefer in such cases is something to the effect that the Jaguar rather than the Volvo is in our possession, or that we drive the Jaguar rather than the Volvo, or that we show our neighbors that we own an expensive car. Again, on the most plausible analysis, what we prefer when we prefer, say, a pleasant experience to an unpleasant one, is something to the effect that we have a pleasant experience rather than that we have an unpleasant one. Our preferences do not range over objects but over propositional like entities such as obtaining states of affairs.

A different approach turns from a purely attitudinal perspective to what the agent reveals in his actions. Such a view, which is notably endorsed among economists dealing with welfare issues, is that persons reveal their preferences by their choices. People who take this view need not deny that there are attitudes, but their focus is clearly on behavior rather than on mental entities such as attitudes. In its crudest form, the view is that a preference in the end is always a question of overt behavior, what a person *de facto* chooses to do that reveals his preferences. Such a view does not have anything to do with what is of final value in any obvious way. What a person *de facto* chooses to do is affected by the options that happen to be available to the person at the time of choice. But it is highly unreasonable to let such contingent facts determine what is of final value. More sophisticated versions include the idea that a person's choices in certain favorable, hypothetical situations reveal his preferences. In one sense, this is an obvious step to take. Too many things that we can be said to prefer in any reasonable sense, were omitted in the crude version.

Whether or not we speak of *de facto* or hypothetical choices, what such choices are about to a large extent are actions, or the obtaining of states of affairs rather than objects. What we choose between are alternative actions that will lead to obtaining some states of affairs such as, for instance that we are driving a Jaguar or that we are driving a Volvo. Establishing this would not serve a preferentialist against a hedonistic argument. After all, the point made by hedonists is that experiences rather than actions or states of affairs or some other ontological entities are of value.

However, preferentialists may reply that it is reasonable to regard experiences as events. Moreover, letting choices range over such events, and not only over actions meets with no obvious conceptual problems. Suppose we next conceive of events as concrete entities. A journey may illustrate the point. Suppose that one morning Olof takes a train instead of a bus to Lund. The trip could be seen

as a series of determinate events that occurred at a certain places and at a certain times such as, getting aboard the train at 8:00 a.m., sitting on window seat at 8:10 a.m., and talking to Gustav five minutes later. The pleasure that Olof experienced when he scratched himself, could in a similar way be regarded as consisting of a successions of events such as having a pleasant experience at one time, having a pleasant experience the quality of which peaked a little later, and having a pleasant experience that declined in intensity later still.

Whatever the initial plausibility of the claim that choices range over concrete events, it is crucial to realise what price is attached to it. Consider again Olaf's choice to take a train to Lund instead of a bus. If it were really a choice between two concrete events, the bus journey that Olof did not take that morning would consist of a determinate successions of concrete events, such that it could be asked about the journey: "If Olof had taken the bus instead of the train, at what time would he have stepped on the bus? Did he talk to anyone in that counter-factual situation?" If the alternative bus journey were in fact a concrete event, the questions would have an answer. But if that were the case, we would have to endorse contra-factual determinism, which is not plausible.

On a more explicit judgmental position a person has a preference for one thing over another, if and only if the person judges that the one thing to be better than the other. The advantage of this view is that the two things need not be states of affairs. At face value there is nothing strange about judging a concrete object to be better than another concrete object. Given this we finally seem to have landed with a preferentialist position that avoids the hedonistic argument. However, a closer look at the judgemental position reveals that it is hardly a convincing competitor. According to it preferences are nothing but judgments of value. This just raises the question of how a preferentialist understands the value judgments. A preferentialist is bound to find himself in a vicious circle when asked to analyse "better" in the claim: "Someone has a preference for one thing rather than another, if and only if the person thinks the one thing is better than the other." He will have to say, it seems, that one thing is better than another if and only if the one thing is preferred to the other.

Changing the second hedonistic claim does nothing but strengthen the hedonistic argument. Another possibility for a preferentialist is to change the first claim that final value accrues only to the objects of final preferences. This formulation of preferentialism, which has been called object-preferentialism, should be distinguished from, what has been called satisfaction version of preferentialism, which includes the claim that intrinsic value is assigned to the circumstance that

our intrinsic preferences are satisfied.⁹ But this is even less likely to convince a hedonist about the falsity of the idea that final value accrues to experiences and not to states of affairs. The most reasonable way of satisfying a preference is see to it that some state of affair is realized.

4. Reducing the Value of Pleasure to Existential Facts or Instantiations of Properties

Recent works in philosophy of value have brought questions about the bearers of final value to the fore, and a number of different positions have been formulated. Two general positions are discernible. While value monists with respect to the issue of value bearers claim that final value accrues only to one kind of object, value pluralists deny this and hold that there are many kinds of value bearers. Both preferentialism and hedonism are *bona fide* examples of such monistic positions. Some examples of value bearers that recently have been discussed are abstract entities such as states of affairs, facts, properties understood as *universalia*, instantiations of properties understood as abstract particulars, and concrete individual objects such as things, persons, and sensations.

It may be argued that the claim “An experience has final value in virtue of being pleasant” should actually be reduced to a claim about some existential fact such as what has final value is that the experience which is pleasant exists. Given an eliminativistic reduction, the alleged value of the experience is localized in the existential fact. This kind of reductionistic argument is open to the objection that it puts the cart before the horse.¹⁰ The reason why we think that it is valuable that the experience which is pleasant exists is that the experience itself is valuable. The value of the experience is the ground for the value of the existential fact. To argue that it is the value of the fact that is the ground for the value of the experience is to misplace what is of non-derivative final value here. A way of expressing the relation at issue is to say that the value of the fact derives from the value of the experience, and not the other way round. A hedonist could agree that value might also accrue to facts, but the facts would then be of derivative value.

Even if value does not accrue to the fact that the experience that is pleasant exists, this alternative may still be regarded as being on the right track. Perhaps what is valuable for its own sake is some property of the experience, such as being pleasant.¹¹ But it does not seem very convincing to say

⁹ Wlodek Rabinowicz and Jan Österberg, “Value Based on Preferences,” *Philosophy and Economics* 12 (1996).

¹⁰ See Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for Its Own Sake,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100(1), (1999).

¹¹ See Panayot Butchvarov, *Skepticism in Ethics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989).

that properties are value bearers.¹² However, a different but still related proposal that has some appeal is that particular instantiations of properties are valuable. When someone experiences pleasure, what is valuable is the instantiation of pleasure in the experience. Value accrues to the sensation's having of a hedonic tone. That the instantiation of pleasure occurs in one person rather than another is of no evaluative importance. On this proposal, then, what is of final value is the instantiation of pleasure that occurs in some person. Value accrues in the same way to each instantiation of pleasure, in whatever object it occurs.

There is a plausible ring to this argument.¹³ If it is property instantiations that are valuable, then the concern about placing the cart before the horse is not serving. It would evidently be implausible to suggest that the value that the instantiation of pleasure in a person or sensation has, derives from the value of the person or the sensation. Even so, it is not obvious how a hedonist should respond to this idea. Even if a hedonist enriched his ontology with these particular entities, he would be well advised to be suspicious with regard to their role as bearers of final non-derivative value. Suppose the instantiations are aspects of experiences rather than being kinds of experiences.¹⁴ In that case the hedonist ought to reject the idea: aspects do not have phenomenological qualities. It takes experiences such as sensations to have such hedonic tones. However, the particular instantiations need not be regarded as aspects of sensations. Someone who believes in the existence of instantiations of properties might well question the very ontological status of sensations. But just how such ontology would in fact look like is not clear.¹⁵ Since on the hedonistic position that we have considered there are sensations with hedonic tones, the natural thing to say is that the hedonic tones are good-making properties that render the complex sensation valuable. To this it might be objected that, if an object is valuable because it has certain properties, then the properties or at least the instantiations of the properties must themselves be valuable. The idea underlying this objection would be that what is a condition for something of value must also be of value. However, it is at least not logically necessary for the condition of what is valuable to be valuable itself, either

¹² See Noah M. Lemos, *Intrinsic Value, Concept and Warrant* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Michael J. Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

¹³ Cf. Jonas Olson, "The Bearers of Value," typescript, Lund University, (2000).

¹⁴ Cf. Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 253.

¹⁵ See Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "Tropic of Value", forthcoming *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2001). Also see Erik Carlsson and Rysiek Sliwinski, eds., *Omnium-gathrum; Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Jan Österberg on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Uppsala Philosophical Studies 50, 2001).

intrinsically or extrinsically. The good-making property need not be of value to qualify as good-making.

5. Two Conclusions

An attempt to analyse pleasure without reference to hedonic tones ought not to convince a hedonist to withdraw his claim that preferentialists are debarred from valuing what hedonists value. Certain attempts to avoid this conclusion by altering three theses that are customarily regarded as being endorsed by preferentialists, that final value accrues only to the objects of final preferences, that preferences have only the obtaining of states of affairs as their objects, and that final value accrues only to the obtaining of states of affairs have not been successful. Hedonists have a point against theories that would have us localize the value of concrete pleasant experiences in something other than the experiences themselves. This strengthens a pluralistic approach to the issue of value bearers. Experiences are not the only value bearers, but they are one kind of value bearer.¹⁶

¹⁶ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Lund University, University of Toronto, and Depauw University. I benefited much from the discussions on those occasions. I wish in particular to thank Wlodek Rabinowicz but also Johan Brännmark, Dan Egonsson, Noah Lemos, Ingmar Persson, Wayne Sumner, Sergio Tenenbaum, and Michael J. Zimmerman. I also wish to thank editor-in-chief Thomas Magnell for valuable suggestions.