

control oneself in all situations of life. For people of this temperament, the Aristotelian ethic is not an appealing one; and the rise of Romanticism in philosophy can be regarded in this way as criticism of the Aristotelian way of life.

### Hedonism: The Philosophy of Epicurus

As we have indicated, Plato maintained that the good life is in no way connected with pleasure. Aristotle moderated this doctrine. Although denying that the good life was *identical* with a life of pleasure, he admitted that "pleasure must be in some way an ingredient of happiness." Epicurus was the exponent of a type of philosophy that has persisted down to the present time. He held a view that is sometimes called "hedonism," the doctrine that **pleasure is the sole good**. The influence of his philosophy can be judged from the fact that the English language still contains the word "epicure," which is based upon the view of Epicurus. As with so many words, however, the connotations of the word "epicure" as it is now employed do not represent accurately the sort of philosophy that was held by Epicurus himself. An "epicurean" is now depicted as a *gourmet*, as a person whose main delight consists in the enjoyment of exotic or fastidiously prepared food and rare wines. As a matter of fact, Epicurus himself suffered for years from stomach trouble and was never an "epicure" in the modern sense. He ate frugally, allegedly drank only water, and, in general, lived in a highly abstemious fashion.

(His letters contained such sentences as the following: "I am thrilled with pleasure in the body when I live on bread and

water, and I spit on luxurious pleasures, not for their own sake, but because of the inconveniences that follow them.")

The ethical philosophy of Epicurus consists mainly of advice for living moderately but pleasurably. He considered pleasure to be *the good*, but he also realized that if a person pursues pleasure too ardently, pain will follow. If a person drinks too much, he/she will suffer headaches and stomach pains the next day. The proper way to proceed in life is to **live pleasantly without suffering from any of the undesirable effects of such living**.

In fact, Epicurus' philosophy may be regarded as containing instructions that are designed not only to enable one to acquire pleasure but also to enable one to avoid pain. If one engages in a life of pleasure that leads to pain, then such a life would be regarded as a bad one by Epicurus. Since some pleasures are obviously accompanied by pain, Epicurus distinguished between those pleasures that are accompanied by pain and those that are not, and regarded only the latter as good. He called the former "dynamic" pleasures and the latter "passive" pleasures. Sexual love, for example, is bad because it is accompanied by fatigue, remorse, and depression. Other "dynamic" pleasures are gluttony; the fame that one achieves through a life of public service; drinking; and marriage. All of these are bad because they are accompanied by pain: gluttony will lead to indigestion, fame may be accompanied by all sorts of distress, drinking will lead to headaches, disease, and so forth. The result is that Epicurus advocated (and himself led) a life that we would now consider highly ascetic. This is because he seemed to believe that it is bet-

ter to avoid pain than to seek pleasure if it will produce pain. Friendship, on the other hand, is a passive pleasure. It is not accompanied by pain and hence is permitted and, indeed, encouraged by him.

Hedonism, as a philosophical doctrine, has two forms. We can call the first form "psychological hedonism" and the second type "ethical hedonism." Psychological hedonism is the doctrine that in fact people pursue pleasure, and only pleasure, in their lives. All activities, according to this theory, are directed toward the acquisition of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Eudoxus, who was a famous Greek mathematician and an earlier contemporary of Aristotle, is supposed to have held such a view. Aristotle says of him:

Now Eudoxus thought pleasure to be the chief good because he saw all, rational and irrational alike, aiming at it: and he argued that, since in all what was the object of choice must be good and what most so the best, the fact of all being drawn to the same thing proved this thing to be the best for all: "For each," he said, "finds what is good for itself just as it does its proper nourishment, and so that which is good for all, and the object of the aim of all, is their chief good."

Epicurus is generally interpreted as being a psychological hedonist in this sense. He apparently believed that all were motivated in their daily lives to attempt to acquire pleasure: did not people strive for riches, for fame, for sensual delights because the attainment of these produced pleasure?

Epicurus is also an ethical hedonist (with certain important qualifications). Ethical hedonism is the view not only that people in fact seek pleasure but, further, that they ought to do so, since pleasure

alone is good. It is obvious that psychological hedonism does not entail ethical hedonism. One might hold either doctrine without necessarily holding the other. For example, one might believe that people are motivated to seek pleasure, and one might also believe that they ought *not* to do so. In fact, this is roughly what Epicurus held, as we have seen. His view was that even if people are motivated to acquire pleasure, certain pleasures are bad and ought to be avoided. On the other hand, he held that some pleasures, such as friendship, conversation about philosophy, and so on, are such as ought to be cultivated; and the good life consists in acquiring pleasures of this sort. He can consequently be interpreted as holding a modified form of ethical hedonism, as well as adhering to the psychological version of the theory.

### Criticism of Hedonism

Hedonism is a complex moral philosophy consisting of at least two parts, one of them a psychological theory, the other an ethical theory. The psychological account is supposedly a true description of how people are motivated to action in conducting their daily lives. According to this account, every conscious action is motivated by the search for pleasure. Whether one is a hermit or whether one seeks fame, in either case—if we are to accept psychological hedonism—one is motivated to act as one does because one is striving for pleasure. Ethical hedonism, on the other hand, goes beyond the psychological account: it contends that people *ought* to seek pleasure, for ultimately this is the only thing worth having for itself.

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Both aspects of hedonism seem plausible not only to the unsophisticated reader but even to professional thinkers. Let us show in somewhat more detail why this is so, considering **psychological hedonism** first. What the theory attempts to do is to provide a single explanation for every possible type of conscious or voluntary action human beings engage in. It is a source of satisfaction to all thinkers to find the most general explanation for a group phenomenon, especially if this explanation turns out to be a very simple one. And psychological hedonism tries to provide an explanation of this sort. Consider any kind of conscious behavior—why do people do it? The answer is always the same—they are seeking pleasure. At this point, we can mention a famous philosophical distinction that can be used to support psychological hedonism. The distinction has various names, one of the most common of which is the “**means-ends**” distinction. The point of the distinction is this: **Some things may not be worth having in themselves, but are worth having because they enable us to achieve certain goals.** On the other hand, other things may be worth having in themselves. They are, as philosophers say, “**intrinsically valuable.**” We value them not because they enable us to achieve something else, but for their own sakes. Exercise, for instance, may not be worth doing in its own right, but it has value in that by doing it, we will become healthy, which is valuable in itself. In terms of the above distinction, exercise is valuable as a “means,” while health is valuable as an “end.” Now the position of the psychological hedonist is that the ultimate end toward which all activity is directed is

pleasure; such things as fame, riches, success are all means to this end. Thus, all conscious human behavior can be explained by saying that individuals are motivated *ultimately* or *basically* by pleasure—it is the end for which all strive. Put this way, psychological hedonism has been a theory that has attracted philosophers and ordinary people, and it has accordingly had a great influence throughout the history of Western thought.

However, insofar as this part of hedonism is interpreted as a purely scientific account of conscious behavior, it does not withstand present-day scientific scrutiny. Psychologists agree that people are *sometimes* motivated by the search for pleasure, but they go on to point out that such is not always the case. For although some individuals may begin by trying to acquire riches as a means to pleasure, after a time they may come to regard wealth as an end in itself. In psychological language, they become “fixated” upon the acquisition of wealth and disregard the use to which it may be put for acquiring pleasure. (Such people are commonly called “misers.”) Psychologists point out that these people may be so strongly motivated by the attempt to acquire money that they may disregard or even reject the pursuit of pleasure as being of any value to them if it interferes with the acquisition of money. We are all familiar with newspaper accounts of men and women who are found living in squalid conditions even though they may possess a fortune hidden in the mattress. The acquisition of money, not pleasure, becomes an end for them—and for this reason, psychologists tell us that psychological hedonism cannot be accepted as an accurate

picture of *all* conscious human motivation. And this is merely one instance of such exceptions.

Unfortunately, psychological hedonism is not simply a scientific theory, and it cannot be refuted merely by an appeal to the latest scientific findings. This can be seen when we consider the sort of reply the psychological hedonists will make to the objection we have just considered. They will claim that the miser *actually* gains pleasure by hoarding money. The miser is merely giving up the usual means for acquiring pleasure, such as living in a decent home, eating well, and so on. All he/she has done, the hedonists argue, is to limit the means for acquiring pleasure to the collecting of money. Money has not become an end in itself—rather, it has become the sole means for achieving pleasure; but pleasure is still the end for which he/she strives.

At this stage, the theory has been removed from the area where any scientific finding can possibly confirm or refute it. It has now become a philosophical rather than a scientific problem, for no collection of facts can be gathered that would resolve the problem. But when psychological hedonism is interpreted in this way, it can still be attacked on philosophical grounds. **For when any theory cannot be refuted by facts, then it loses its explanatory force. It becomes true "by definition" but no longer refers to the world in the way in which genuine scientific theories do, since its truth or falsity no longer depends upon the facts.** When this happens, the theory may be rejected on the ground that it has lost its power to provide us with a satisfactory explanation of the facts it started out to explain. It has now

defined "pleasure" as what people "desire," so that in asserting that all people are motivated by a desire for pleasure, it is asserting no more than the tautology that all people are motivated by a desire for what they desire. It has become irrefutable by becoming trivial, i.e., it is not worth refuting.

**Ethical hedonism**, as contrasted with psychological hedonism, can be divided into two parts, which may be regarded as answers to the questions "What is the good life for people?" and "How *ought* one to behave?" The answers, according to the ethical hedonist, are that the good life consists of a life of pleasure and that one *ought* to act so as to acquire pleasure. Let us now examine objections to these replies.

We have already pointed out that even Epicurus, the founder of hedonism, recognized that some pleasures may be accompanied by pain or that they may produce pain. For example, smoking cocaine may give us pleasure, but it will produce physical and mental deterioration if persisted in. It thus appears that some pleasures are bad; and if so, we cannot contend simply that the good life is *identical* with a life of pleasure. Epicurus attempted to avoid this difficulty by finding pleasures that do not produce painful consequences, and argued that such pleasures constitute the good life. But this approach will not do, since even friendship, which he regards as a passive pleasure, may sometimes be accompanied by tribulation. For example, if a friend dies, one may suffer intensely from sadness at the death.

A second way of defending the view that pleasure is good is to hold that pleasure

itself is never bad—even the pleasure one gets from smoking cocaine. It is only the painful consequences themselves that are bad. For example, if a drug could be devised that would eliminate the painful consequences of smoking cocaine—who would deny that the pleasure one got from it was good?

This defense is logically unassailable, but it has practical difficulties that make it dubious that ethical hedonism can offer acceptable guidance for one's conduct in daily life. For we cannot, as a matter of fact, always separate the painful consequences of a course of action from the pleasurable ones. If we use cocaine, we may be given pleasure, to be sure, but we will also suffer pain as a result of doing so. To advise one, as ethical hedonists do, to seek pleasure is in effect frequently equivalent to advising one to seek pain as well, since the two sometimes cannot be dissociated. Ethical hedonism, consequently, must sometimes advise one not to pursue pleasures when those pleasures are followed by pain, and thus its practical effect seems incompatible with the theory.

Finally, let us consider the doctrine that people ought to behave so as to acquire pleasure. This view likewise seems plausible at first glance, but further reflection shows that it violates our commonsense beliefs about how we ought to behave. Consider the following case: A soldier is put on guard duty at an important post. He is forced to walk back and forth, and this is monotonous for him. It is a hot night. It would be more pleasant not to remain at his post but to leave for a bar where he can have a cool drink. Most people would say that if he deserted his post for this reason, then he would be acting

wrongly. If he says that he acted as he ought to have done because he was seeking pleasure, this defense would be laughed out of court. The ordinary person feels that sometimes one ought to act so as to acquire pleasure, but not always. Sometimes one has certain obligations that one must fulfill, and in these cases one ought to behave so as to fulfill them even if in doing so one does not acquire pleasure. If ethical hedonism is interpreted as a systematic theory about how people ought to behave in society, the objection we have just cited shows that it cannot be regarded as an adequate account of such behavior.

Hedonism, even though theoretically attractive, can thus be seen to violate our ordinary feelings about what constitutes moral behavior. Do we object on moral grounds to the "playboy"? The objection is not merely that he seeks superficial pleasures, such as those of the table, the grape, and so on; but more fundamentally, that pleasure is not the sole object that people should strive for. The ordinary person is, with regard to pleasure, more an Aristotelian than an Epicurean. He/she feels that sometimes pleasure is a worthwhile object, and in fact that no life can be happy without some pleasure in it; but finds the doctrine that pleasure is the *only* worthwhile goal, objectionable—and rejects it as containing advice that cannot in fact be followed.

### Cynicism

We have spoken of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Epicureanism as if they were ethical philosophies that were devised by their authors in isolation from the social

conditions of the time. For many purposes, this sort of abstraction is useful; but at the same time, it should be stressed that moral philosophies to a great extent *are* products of their times. If one does not recognize this fact, it may be impossible for one to account for the widespread appeal that such theories have had for so many people. Great philosophies, especially moral philosophies, may be regarded as saying more clearly and usually more strikingly what many common people only vaguely realize. This is especially true of Cynicism and Stoicism, whose attraction for so many cannot be fully appreciated apart from some knowledge of the social conditions from which they developed. To some extent, this is even true of hedonism. When people suffer great catastrophes, they may grasp at pleasure as providing some comfort and security in a collapsing world. Hedonism is a philosophy that justifies their behavior, and under such conditions they will be attracted to it. In this regard, hedonism may be considered a philosophy that arises out of despair.

Cynicism and Stoicism resemble hedonism in being, generally speaking, philosophies of consolation. But instead of suggesting that the acquisition of pleasure is the proper goal of life, they offer different advice. Let us turn to these doctrines now in order to see why they arose when they did and what sorts of answers they give to such persistent questions as "What is the good life for people?" and "How should people act?"

There are various ways that people can deal with adversity. They can succumb to it, fight it, escape from it, accept it, and so on. For each of these types of behavior

there is a corresponding ethical theory that justifies it. Quietism, for example, is an Oriental ethical philosophy that advises one to accept and succumb to adversity; hedonism can be looked at as a way of escaping from it; and utilitarianism, as a way of combating it. All ethical theories arise because people are dissatisfied either with their personal lives or with the world in which they live. If a person is content with his/her lot and with the situation in which the world finds itself, he/she will not in general seek to change it. What would be the point of trying to do so? But when one is dissatisfied, one will attempt to alter the circumstances in which one finds him/herself—as we have said, one may fight these circumstances or try to escape from them. Likewise, philosophers do not develop theories about how one *ought* to behave unless they are discontent with the way people do in fact behave: they offer these theories as advice for altering the situation as they see it.

This is particularly true of Cynicism. It can be regarded as having prescribed behavior for those whose lives became intolerable due to the collapse of the world about them or for reasons of personal despair. This collapse in part began with the decline of the Greek city-state (note the frequent wars between Sparta and Athens, or Sparta and Corinth, with the incredible loss of life and destruction that they entailed) and was considerably accelerated by the turmoil that was attendant upon the collapse of the Alexandrian Empire. When social institutions of this magnitude break down, people are naturally led to consider how they may achieve *personal* salvation, and Cynicism offers one answer to this question. It holds