



# Neurobiological Insights and the Ethics of Pleasure:

## Rethinking Hedonistic Dichotomies

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### Abstract

This paper proposes a reconceptualisation of the traditional dichotomy between higher and lower pleasures in hedonistic philosophies, informed by recent neuroscientific research on how pleasure is experienced. It introduces the distinction between “immediate pleasures” and “delayed pleasures” grounded in the understanding of how pleasurable experiences are formed in the brain. The concept of “delayed pleasures” emphasises the fulfilment derived from engaging in activities that require effort and engagement, whereas “immediate pleasures” pertains to readily accessible pleasures that require minimal effort. It is argued that this framework provides a more inclusive and scientifically informed understanding of pleasure. The paper concludes by reflecting on the ethical implications of this reconceptualisation on the meaning of hedonism, refining its application and that of utilitarianism in contemporary contexts.

### Keywords

- Hedonism
- Pleasure
- Neurobiology
- J.S. Mill
- Philosophy

### Introduction

*“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”*  
-John Stuart Mill (Utilitarianism)

Perhaps no philosophy has been so widely demonised, criticised and shunned as hedonism– the philosophical position that pleasure is the only end-in-itself, not least because of its religious implications. In everyday life, the constant pursuit of pleasure seems like a lethargic fantasy- though everyone wants it, none would admit to or ever recommend it. But its quick renunciation is indicative of how ubiquitous it is- the desire to live life according to one’s desires.

Various philosophers have developed varying versions of hedonism, from the *Cārvāka* school of Indian philosophy to the ancient Greek philosophers Aristippus and Epicurus, and later, the utilitarians. Epicurus believed that the good life was the pleasant life, and delight, pleasure and peace were goods worth seeking. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the value theory of hedonism found its revival in the works of Jeremy Bentham and his protégé John Stuart Mill. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will be limited to the qualified hedonism developed by John Stuart Mill and will only cursorily touch upon Epicurus' version. The focus will be on the hedonism underlying utilitarianism and not on the moral theory of utilitarianism itself.

Bentham devised the 'greatest happiness principle' to articulate the moral standards of utilitarianism: any action is good (therefore moral) insofar as it brings about a net total of happiness/pleasure for the greatest number of people. He also developed a hedonic calculus, a method that would allow us to calculate the potential for any resultant quantity of pleasure through the use of various criteria like propinquity, intensity, extent, etc. More importantly, for Bentham, all types of pleasure were morally equal, except when one produces more pleasure than another i.e. pleasures were quantitatively different. Mill, however, argued that pleasures are qualitatively different, i.e. some pleasures were superior to others and hence better to experience than others, even if the quantity generated is lesser. Elaborating upon this distinction, Mill classified pleasures into 'higher' and 'lower' categories, wherein the former constituted of intellectual, moral and aesthetic pleasures and the latter denoted sensual, bodily and immediate pleasures.

The aim of this paper is neither to critique hedonism nor challenge the basic assumptions of this theory, though there may be implications for them. It is to offer a new way of thinking about this old dichotomy of 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. The concern here lies in furthering the wisdom implicit in this dichotomy with reference to what I take to be its current scientific backing. Through this reconceptualisation, the paper will also suggest a new understanding of hedonism: consisting in the "pleasure of pursuit" rather than the "pursuit of pleasure" (Huberman). To substantiate this, neuroscientific understandings of pleasure will be discussed, with a focus on dopamine and reward-seeking behaviour. It will be attempted to show how this is entirely compatible with a classical understanding of hedonism as having pleasure as the ultimate end of all activity. Conclusively, the ethical implications of the proposed distinction will be discussed.

## Mill's Hedonism

John Stuart Mill followed in the footsteps of reformer-philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who was the first to systematise utilitarianism and revitalise hedonism. In "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation", Bentham spelled out the greatest happiness principle and laid out the devices of hedonic calculus.

One of Bentham's insights was that pleasure and pain alone are inherently good and bad, the basic units of value, and therefore moral agents ought to do that which promotes the overall happiness of everyone, considered impartially (J. Postema 28). Bentham recognised the difficulty in quantifying and measuring pleasures, and hence put forth an

attitudinal conception of pleasure instead– the commonality among all pleasurable experiences is not some particular felt quality but the fact that people like to have them (J. Postema 35-37). More importantly, since pleasures have no distinct and universal quality that is measurable, what must be measured is the quantity (the desire for it), which readily lends itself to calculation. Therefore, pleasures from different sources must be measured against the calculus on the basis of the prediction of the *amount* of pleasure they will produce instead of their quality. That is to say, there is no source-derived quality in pleasures– deriving pleasure from playing a video game mindlessly is not distinct from the pleasure derived from reading a piece of classic literature (Weijers).

The biggest drawback of Bentham's quantitative hedonism was that it was completely indifferent to quality, making it a philosophy 'worthy of swine' (Mill). Even intuitively, it seems incorrect to place all kinds of pleasures on an equal footing. The pleasure of binge-watching and consuming junk food is surely not the same as that of playing the piano or engaging in a chess match? The exclusive focus on quantity equated bodily pleasures with intellectual, moral and aesthetic pleasures and this was unacceptable to many, including Mill himself. In the second chapter of his *Utilitarianism*, he sets out to develop a more refined version of the hedonism underlying utilitarian moral theory. Bentham's view on pleasure was simplistic, and he focused on "simple pleasurable experiences and components of mind" (Donner 120). Mill's view was much more complex and he related his understanding of pleasure to the operations of "psychological laws of association" (Donner 120). He argued that both quality and quantity contribute to the good-making characteristic of pleasurable experiences. In *Utilitarianism* he says:

"It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." (II, 11)

According to Mill, the most valuable *kinds* of pleasures are those that "exercise and develop the higher human capacities and faculties" (Donner 123). These he called 'higher pleasures' and they include reading, philosophical thinking, engaging in meaningful activities and relationships, etc. By contrast, 'lower pleasures' were those of immediate and sensual or bodily satisfaction, like quenching thirst or eating junk food. The possibility of higher pleasures is restricted to human agents alone, setting the pleasure-seeking dimension in hedonism apart from those of animals. His argument in favour of this claim was that this could be confirmed by 'competent judges'; people who have experienced both kinds of pleasure will unanimously attest to the former being more desirable than the latter.

This formulation has met many criticisms. Some argue that this distinction between higher and lower pleasures is elitist and subjective, rooted in imposition of value judgments on different types of pleasure based on personal biases which do not necessarily hold universally (Crisp 35–43).

Mill has also fallen short of clearly defining higher and lower pleasures which leaves room for ambiguity. There is also the charge of over-rationalisation of pleasure– that this distinction leaves no room for less cerebral pleasures which may nonetheless contribute to

overall happiness. Another objection is that even in the presence of higher-quality pleasures, people often seem to choose lower-quality ones; Mill answers this by saying that this can be attributed to infirmity of character; there is certainly some truth to this statement, evident even in everyday situations [1]. Scholars have developed counters to these criticisms over the years but even those mainly include qualifying Mill's claims or further substantiating them [2]. While I agree that Mill was right in claiming that certain *kinds* of pleasures are more valuable than others, his qualification seems to be severely limiting. The distinction that is proposed in the following pages has the potential to overcome its limitations while still being rooted in empirical grounds.

## Neuroscientific Insights on Pleasure

As mentioned before, Epicurus is known to have said that the good life is the pleasant life. This is closer to the truth on more accounts than one; well-being or happiness is believed to be constituted of two parts- *hedonia* (state/s of pleasure) and *eudaimonia* (happiness, meaningfulness in life). People who report high on scales of *hedonia* are also likely to report a high sense of meaningfulness. It is plausible to conclude that positive hedonic states are necessary for most people seeking happiness (Berridge and Kringelbach).

Contemporary science has proved that pleasure isn't merely a sensation. It involves various parts of the brain and requires an additional 'hedonic gloss' to be painted over a sensation to make it pleasurable. Berridge and Kringelbach write that "active recruitment of brain pleasure-generating systems is what makes a pleasant experience 'liked'" [3]. Several liking-enhancing hedonic hotspots across the brain work together "as a coordinated whole to amplify core pleasure reactions." Still, it is not difficult to achieve normal liking-reactions.

Pleasure is also conceived of not as a monolithic occurrence but rather a complex process involving liking (hedonic component), wanting (motivational or incentive component) and learning (prediction of future rewards component). Pleasure thus has certain objective aspects that can be determined. Studies have indicated that dopamine, which was for a long time thought to be a pleasure neurotransmitter, is actually associated more with motivation and prediction (the wanting property) rather than the liking property. Dopamine may make animals 'want' the stimulation more voraciously but it still doesn't mean that the animal will 'like' the stimulation more than usual. It promotes 'wanting' without 'liking'. The incentive salience may become permanently attached to the stimulation to make it 'wanted'. Attribution of incentive salience on easily accessible stimulation may lead to compulsive binge-watching, shopping, scrolling, texting, etc. without any accompanying hedonic liking (Berridge and Kringelbach).

Scientists have also discovered that the processing of pleasure and pain happens in overlapping brain regions via "opponent process mechanism" (Lembke, 42). The imagery of a scale is often employed to illustrate this: pleasure and pain are like two sides on a balanced beam. Any time the balance is tipped in favour of pleasure, through internal self-regulatory homeostasis mechanisms, it is brought back to equilibrium, i.e. a spike in pleasure is followed by an equal amount of spike in pain, a mini dopamine deficit (Lembke, 44).

Naturally, after experiencing a pleasurable sensation, we want it to occur again. But repeated exposure to the stimulant causes less and less pleasure each time. This causes the spike in pain to grow stronger and longer and more and more of the initial stimulant is needed to experience the same pleasurable spike again. This disruption may cause the beam to get stuck on the side of pain, especially when high dopamine inducing stimulants are being used, i.e. the original baseline for pain becomes worse. And over-generation of dopamine eventually leads to a dopamine deficit state, which leaves the agent without motivation, able to experience pleasure but unable to pursue it (Huberman).

The dopamine economy that we now live in has increased not just access to various pleasures but also their potency. In addition to physical stimulants, we are also constantly bombarded with digital stimulants like pornography, video games, etc. Things have come to the point that we indulge excessively in wanting and desiring, with the act of consumption itself becoming the stimulant instead of the object of consumption. Much of our constant anxiety and state of misery can be attributed to our need to avoid being miserable (Lembke, 38). What follows is the conclusions and formulations believed to be derivative from this exposition.

## The Proposed Distinction

An appropriate way of thinking about Mill's dichotomy, in view of the neuroscientific findings detailed above, is to replace higher pleasures with 'delayed pleasures' and lower pleasures with 'immediate pleasures'. This terminology better captures the essence of Mill's demarcation while avoiding its ambiguities. The following passage explains how.

For Mill, higher pleasures are pleasures obtained by the exercise of our higher, intellectual capacities. These may include reading a difficult book like *Ulysses* or learning a new skill. These pleasures are therefore accompanied by the "prior requirement of pursuit" (Huberman). Lower pleasures include activities that do not require any such prior requirement, i.e., they are aimed *exclusively* at achieving pleasure. The former, pleasure without prior requirement of pursuit, consists in those actions which are undertaken for the end goal of achieving a pleasurable state, but without any specific stimulant in mind. These are actions wherein the gap between wanting and gratification is extremely small if not non-existent. 'Liking' is achieved without the effort that is a result of 'wanting', i.e. wanting is immediately followed by liking and pursuit is absent. These are pleasures which are easily accessible and provide instant gratification. For example, I think about how amazing it would be to be good at playing chess i.e. I desire to be good at chess, which requires effort.

As I continue to think about it, the dopamine starts shooting up, followed by a dip. This dip is what makes me get up and do something about my desire. But instead of pursuing that goal, I opt for instant gratification by watching TV. I take pleasure in watching the show and experience 'liking'. Yet, I have done nothing to achieve what I actually desired. Though this may seem relatively harmless, this habit of indulging in low-effort pleasures conditions my brain to expect instant rewards, which could harm my long-term goals and moral behaviour. It may keep me from performing moral actions that require effort, like doing community service, and may well incline me towards undertaking immoral actions



that don't require effort but still appease me, like tripping someone over because it makes me laugh. When moral actions require effort, habituation to instant gratification might lead to avoiding these actions.

Delayed pleasures, associated with a pursuit, refer to actions that are undertaken in line with the desire for them and that take effort to arrive at. The desire, the pursuit and the reward (liking) are all present. One might argue that pleasures that require a lot of time and effort are hardly pleasures at all. And this is true, to a certain extent. The pleasure arrived at through this method might not feel grand or big, because it wasn't 'arrived at'. The pleasure becomes attached to the activity itself rather than to its 'consequence', i.e. the activity itself is pleasurable. This takes conscious effort on part of the agent to achieve, but it is not implausible to conceive of. If I convince myself that cleaning up my elderly neighbour's garden is an activity I can derive pleasure out of, so it will be.

On the face of it, this might seem to locate moral value in some pleasure-independent standard, which would deny hedonism. However, this is not so. For hedonists, any action that brings pleasure is a moral action (others considered, for the utilitarian version). That is to say, an agent is free to perform any action as long as it results in, or constitutes of, pleasurable states. This leaves the choice of pleasure-inducing action up to the moral agent. Additionally, our experience of pleasure is also influenced by the meaning we attach to it (Lembke 55-56). Just as over-consumption of short-form content on social media sites can make one's brain accustomed to attaching pleasure to them, it can similarly be trained to attach pleasure to the activity of solving difficult physics problems or critically analysing a philosophical theory. This conceptualization also better aligns with Mill's differentiation between satisfaction and happiness— while immediate pleasures may bring satisfaction, delayed pleasures bring happiness (Brink).

## Ethical Implications

The reconceptualization proposed in the above section has certain implications for hedonism. For one, through it, we can fruitfully modify hedonism to mean the "pleasure of pursuit" instead of the "pursuit of pleasure" (Huberman). By attaching the pleasurable feeling to the activity that one is engaged in, and less to the result of that activity, hedonism can accommodate, endorse as well as *prefer* engagement with difficult tasks that require effort. Taken in this sense, the pursuit will ultimately become more pleasure-inducing than the final goal and so a good life would be one that is filled with multiple meaningful pursuits because the pursuit is itself the reward.

As having healthy baseline dopamine levels are important to pursuit, practising active restraint from minor impulses to achieve larger, more satisfying hedonic states is perhaps the true insight of hedonism.

The terminology used avoids elitist implications and grounds the distinction and preference in empirical findings rather than appealing to competent judges. It also explains why people prefer 'lower' immediate pleasures over 'higher' or delayed pleasures. The charge of over-rationalization of pleasures may also be averted as delayed pleasures may well

include going out for a walk or simply cooking something, as long as some effort was required to achieve it.

Over-reliance on effortless pleasures decreases our capacity to experience meaningful pleasure and negatively affects our psychological well-being. Hedonism, applied in the sense expounded here, encourages the development of virtues/habits such as patience and perseverance, leading to a more fulfilling and ethically robust life. Learning skills, building relationships and engaging in community service are all activities that require effort yet yield long-lasting and profound satisfaction. Substituting them with binge-watching and mindless scrolling may help the agent get by, but will ultimately result in dissatisfaction. While immediate pleasures are not inherently unethical, their overindulgence can lead to a diminished capacity for pursuing substantial and ethically enriching activities. A balanced approach offers a more sustainable path to *eudaimonia*.

## Evaluating Possible Objections

A possible counterargument to this formulation is that it ignores the subjectivity of pleasures. The focus on 'pursuit' and 'effort' may prove problematic because what counts as effort for one person may not be the same for another. While it is true that effort may not mean the same thing for everyone, the terminology still holds as a general framework for evaluating pleasures. It might also be argued that emphasising pursuit risks moralising effort itself, possibly dismissing meaningful pleasures that arise without much effort, like appreciating a sunset or laughing with one's friends. Here it must be pointed out that this distinction does not devalue these simple pleasures but highlights the downsides of exclusively relying on instant gratification. This proposal does not seek to eliminate the value of immediate pleasures altogether. Rather, it illustrates the need to balance them with delayed pleasures in order to achieve long-term wellbeing and happiness.

The understanding of hedonism as pleasure of pursuit also avoids the hedonistic paradox—the contention that the pursuit of pleasure leads one to dissatisfaction. Theorised in this manner, hedonism allows agents to focus on worthwhile pursuits and achieve pleasure while in the process itself, instead of arriving at it only to find dissatisfaction.

## Conclusion

Through this paper, some limitations to John Stuart Mill's classification of pleasures which underlie his utilitarian theory have been discussed. As a solution to these difficulties, a new framework for thinking about pleasures has been suggested in the form of immediate and delayed, by bringing in neuroscience to substantiate it. Though this is not an unprecedented proposal, applying it and formulating it may pave the way for further considerations and research in hedonistic theories. This can influence policy making for education, something that Mill himself was highly concerned with, and result in novel pedagogical approaches which focus on personal development and growth through self-restrained and disciplined behaviour while also allowing for freedom of thought and creativity.

As the avenues of instant pleasures increase, it becomes the task of philosophy to critically evaluate their impact on human well-being, to question their ethical implications, and to guide individuals toward more meaningful and sustainable sources of happiness. Philosophy must help us discern between fleeting satisfaction and deeper fulfilment, offering frameworks that encourage long-term growth, virtuous action, and the cultivation of pleasures that align with our higher moral and intellectual capacities.

## Endnotes

1. See Hales for further elaboration.
2. For further criticisms and developments of Mill's hedonism, see Brink.
3. Activities which reliably and consistently elicit pleasure have the capacity to activate the pleasure-generating systems. For detailed exposition, see Kringelbach and Berridge.



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