

What is Hedonism?¹

1. Introduction

When philosophers use the term hedonism, they usually imply the pursuit of something lowly, as if the best a human being can aim for was like the life of grazing cattle.² And yet there are philosophers who endorse hedonism. To them, it seems that hedonists must not be destined for a lowly life at all. Instead, they argue for a life of reasoning and friendship.³ Given these discrepancies, what then is hedonism?⁴ This question bears, I propose, not only on the reconstruction of ancient views that self-identify as hedonist. More generally, it bears on how we understand ancient ethics. Compared to modern moral philosophy, the ancients are greatly—some may say, excessively—interested in pleasure and pain. As will emerge, I think that ancient ethics benefitted from the presence of hedonism as a contender. In response to hedonism, Plato and Aristotle seem to get

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² That hedonism is often understood as advocating a life like that of grazing cattle is Plato's concluding remark in the *Philebus*. "And did not pleasure turn out to receive fifth position, according to the verdict we reached in our discussion?—Apparently.—But not first place, even if all the cattle and horses and the rest of the animals gave testimony by following pleasure." (Plato, *Philebus* 67a11-b2) Cf. *NE* 1095b16-23.

³ Epicurus says one should care more who one is eating and drinking with than what one eats and drinks. To 'feed' without a friend is the life of a lion and a wolf. (Seneca, *Letters* 19.10)

⁴ On the pleasures of reasoning as well as the role of reasoning in the pursuit of pleasure cf. James Warren, *The Pleasures of Reason in Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic Hedonists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

something right: ethics needs to get clear about the role of pleasure and pain in human psychology, the nature of pleasure and pain, and its value.

The first premise of hedonism, I propose, is that pleasure is the only good that does not derive its value from another good (section 2). This premise is justified, in ways that explicitly reject the charge of a naturalistic fallacy, by an appeal to nature: because pleasure is by nature pursued, it should be pursued (section 3). Sophisticated hedonism, as I call the kind of theory formulated by Epicurus, develops ideas that Plato employs (section 4). Critics of hedonism differ in how they respond to hedonism's first premise. Anti-hedonists, as I use this notion, endorse its opposite, namely that pleasure is bad. Non-hedonists, as I call them, reject hedonism while admitting that there are good pleasures (section 5). The well-known objection against hedonism, that there are *good and bad* pleasures, thus cannot count as anti-hedonist; neither hedonism nor anti-hedonism can account for both, good and bad pleasures (section 6). But the hardest problem for hedonism, on my account, lies elsewhere: in the variety of pleasure. Pleasures may differ so deeply that there is no unified notion of pleasure. Without such a notion, hedonism does not get off the ground (section 7).⁵

My distinction between hedonism, non-hedonism, and anti-hedonism addresses an inauspicious tendency in the literature. Often, the views of Plato and Aristotle are labeled

⁵ An influential account of hedonism today is offered in Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures," *Ethics* 107, no. 3 (1997): 448-466; Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford New York: Clarendon Press, 2004).

as anti-hedonist, while on my account they are non-hedonists.⁶ Terminology aside, this matters because there is room for markedly more negative views of pleasure than Plato and Aristotle hold, views that diverge sufficiently from their proposals to merit a different designation. It is an ordinary intuition, today and in antiquity, that wanting one's life to be pleasurable is not the same as pursuing pleasure for its own sake.⁷ Ethics should accommodate this distinction, and refrain from classifying too many views as anti-hedonist. More than that, non-hedonism may well provide a model for ethical theorizing. Informed by psychology, it proposes norms that are distinctively norms for beings with our kind of mental life.

2. Only pleasure is non-derivatively good

Ancient discussions of hedonism tend to start with one of the following exchanges, or a mix thereof:⁸

⁶ Recent contributions that ascribe anti-hedonism to Plato are Gunter Figal, "Plato's Anti-Hedonism," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* (2008) 23 (1):187-204; Matt Evans, "Plato's Anti-Hedonism," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (2008) 23:121-145; Verity Harte, "Commentary on Evans: Plato's Anti-Hedonism," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 23 (2008): 147-153; J. Clerk Shaw, *Plato's Anti-hedonism and the Protagoras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Jessica Moss emphasizes the ways in which Aristotle characterizes pleasure as deceptive and misleading in *Aristotle on the Apparent Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Christof Rapp describes Aristotle's positive assessment of pleasure in *NE VII.13, 1153b8-15* as "shocking" ("Nicomachean Ethics VII.13-14 (1154a21): Pleasure and *Eudaimonia*," in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII: Symposium Aristotelicum*, edited by Carlo Natali (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209-236); on my reading, it is not.

⁷ Thucydides employs his distinction, seemingly picking up on fifth century discussions. In his terms, it is one thing to want to live in a way that is accompanied by pleasure, καθ' ἡδονήν (History of Peloponnesian War, II.37.2) and another thing to live for the sake of pleasure, διὰ ἡδονήν (I.120.4). Cf. J. de Romilly, *La condamnation du plaisir dans l'œuvre de Thucydide*, WS 1979, 1966, 142-148. I owe this reference to Giulia Bonasio.

⁸ *Philebus* 11a-12a as well as *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, Book I treat these questions as near-equivalent.

“What is the best life?” — “The life of pleasure.”

“What is the good?” — “Pleasure.”

Ancient hedonists claim that “the life of pleasure is good” and/or “pleasure is the good.” For present purposes, the differences between these claims can be set aside. The upshot, in both cases, is that pleasure is the only non-derivative good. Whatever else may be good is made good via its relation to pleasure, deriving its goodness from the goodness of pleasure. For example, hedonism may admit that friendship is good, or that knowledge is good.⁹ But it accounts for this goodness via the more fundamental goodness of pleasure: friendship/knowledge/etc. are good insofar as they are conducive to pleasure or insofar as they are pleasurable. Let’s put the first premise of hedonism as follows:

NON-DERIVATIVE GOOD: Pleasure is the only non-derivative good.¹⁰

This claim identifies pleasure and goodness: pleasure and the non-derivatively good are one and the same.¹¹ This identification bears on one of the deepest questions in ancient ethics, namely whether there are several kinds of positive valence. Here is what the Socrates of Plato’s *Philebus* grants in conversation with Protarchus, his interlocutor who

⁹ Cf. Matthew Evans, “Can Epicureans be Friends?” *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004): 407-424.

¹⁰ According to Fred Feldman, hedonism is the claim that pleasure is intrinsically good (“On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures,” *Ethics* 107 (1997): 448-466). I refrain from this formulation because (i) it is controversial whether there is a shared sense of intrinsicity between contemporary and ancient discussions and (ii) Feldman’s formulation is compatible with there being several intrinsic goods.

¹¹ Cf. Plato’s *Protagoras*, where Protagoras formulates the hedonist claim that pleasure and the good are the same (τὸ αὐτὸ ἡδὺ τε καὶ ἀγαθόν, 351e5-6). Cf. Jessica Moss, “Hedonism and the Divided Soul in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (forthcoming).

defends hedonism: “what takes pleasure, whether it is rightly pleased or not, can obviously never be deprived of really taking pleasure.” (37b2-3)¹² Socrates seems to ascribe positive valence to pleasure; he seems to admit that whoever is pleased is experiencing this positively. On this view, what is positive about all pleasures is that they are pleasant. But being pleasant, and thereby of positive value, does *not* make them good. This argument presupposes that there are genuinely different kinds of value.¹³ The three candidates that ancient thinkers consider are goodness, beauty, and pleasure.¹⁴ These may be distinct values, each with its own account, such that beauty and pleasure are not kinds of goodness, but values other than goodness. Hedonism does not admit any such distinction. Pleasure and the good are identified, rather than two kinds of value.

2. Psychological Hedonism and Normative Hedonism

What lines of justification does hedonism offer for NON-DERIVATIVE GOOD?

Consider the premises NATURE and NORM:

¹² My translations from the *Philebus* are adaptations, with changes, of Dorothea Frede’s (1993) translation, included in *Plato’s Complete Works* by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. Cf. also *Plato’s examination of pleasure; a translation of the Philebus*, with introduction and commentary by R. Hackforth, (Cambridge, The University Press, 1945), and Frede, *Platons Werke, Übersetzung und Kommentar Band III.2 Philebos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

¹³ Plato’s *Gorgias* contains two arguments to the effect that pleasure and pain cannot be good and bad because good and bad are opposites; qua opposites they cannot be compresent in the same thing; but in thirst and the relief of thirst there is both pleasure and pain; hence pleasure and pain on the one hand and the good and the bad on the other hand differ (495e-497d).

¹⁴ Cf. the opening lines of the *Eudemian Ethics*, where Aristotle says that the very same thing, namely *eudaimonia*, has all three properties in the superlative: it is best, most beautiful, and most pleasant (1214a1-8).

NATURE: Pleasure is pursued as the good in an uncorrupted, natural condition.

NORM: Pleasure should be pursued.

It is a fact about human psychology, or so it is argued, that we pursue pleasure. This can be observed when we look at human beings who are as of yet uncorrupted by acculturation, and it can also be observed in the behavior of animals.¹⁵ Here is how Epicurus, in Cicero's report, puts this:

We are investigating what is the final and ultimate good [...] Epicurus situates this in pleasure, which he wants to be the greatest good with pain as the greatest bad. His doctrine begins in this way: as soon as every animal is born, it seeks pleasure and rejoices in it as the greatest good, while it rejects pain as the greatest bad and, as far as possible, avoids it; and it does this when it is not yet corrupted, on the innocent and sound judgment of nature itself. (Cicero, *De finibus* 1.29-30)¹⁶

NORM is inferred from NATURE. Because pleasure is pursued as good in uncorrupted natural states, pleasure actually is good. In other words, 'should' is inferred from 'is': one *should* pursue that which is pursued, and no justification is needed other than that it *is* pursued. This inference seems suspicious, to the extent that it is often considered a naturalistic fallacy. Hedonism is a kind of naturalism: it aims to infer from natural features of human motivation and behavior how we should act, and what really is good.

Here is Epicurus's defense of the inference:

¹⁵ Cf. *Philebus* 67a11-b2, where Socrates presupposes that hedonists refer to cattle, horses, and so on, as providing *testimony* on what is good.

¹⁶ A.A. Long and David Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* Vol.1 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987) [= LS], fragment LS 21A, translation LS with minor changes.

Hence he says there is no need to prove or discuss why pleasure should be pursued (*expetenda*) and pain avoided (*fugiendus*). He thinks these matters are sensed (*sentiri*) just like the heat of fire, the whiteness of snow and the sweetness of honey, none of which needs confirmation by elaborate arguments; it is enough to remind us of them. For there is a difference between an argument and conclusion reached by reasoning and a simple observation and reminder. The former discloses certain hidden and as it were obscure matters, the latter judges what is directly accessible and evident. Since man has nothing left if sensations are removed from him, it must be the case that nature itself judges what is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does it perceive or what does it judge except pleasure and pain as a basis for its pursuit or avoidance of everything? (Cicero, *De finibus* 1.30)¹⁷

For Epicurus, the goodness of pleasure is perceived and thereby evident. Sense-perceptions as well as pleasure/pain are, according to his larger philosophical framework, criteria of truth.¹⁸ Whatever theory one is putting forward about the good (or about anything), it must agree with these criteria. If pleasure is perceived to be the good, then a theory which disputes this fails to meet basic methodological standards.

Though ancient hedonists embrace both NATURE and NORM, these premises can be taken to express two kinds of hedonism, sometimes called psychological (NATURE) and normative (NORM).

Psychological hedonism [PH]: All human motivation is for pleasure.

Normative hedonism [NH]: Pleasure should be pursued.

¹⁷ The text continues in ways that attest to discussions about precisely this line of argument. Epicurus mentions that others in his school hold slightly different views, only to reiterate afterwards that it is unnecessary and misguided to do so.

¹⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 129.3-4 speaks of the pathos of pleasure as the yardstick by which we judge every good thing (ὡς κανόνι τῷ πάθει πᾶν ἀγαθὸν κρίνοντες) (LS21B); cf. DL 10.31 = LS17A.

To see how PH amounts to a kind of hedonism, compare it with a weaker claim, one that can be ascribed to Plato and Aristotle: all motivations involve pleasure/pain. Aristotle thinks that pleasure and pain accompany all distinctively human activity. Say, you get up in the morning tired, which you find unpleasant. You have a cup of coffee and like that it wakes you up. You start reading the news and find much of it dreadful. But there's a message from a friend, with a photo that makes you smile. And so on. In these ways, pleasure and pain accompany all activity and thereby affect motivation: one aims to hold on to pleasure, prolonging activities that provide it (say, having another cup of coffee, but not a third one, for then it would no longer come with the pleasurable sense of waking up), and avoiding activities that are painful (say, calling back your bank whose customer service is hit and miss).

On this (broadly speaking) Aristotelian view, things other than pleasure can motivate the actions that are accompanied by pleasure and pain. Say, an agent may be motivated to read the news because she aims to know what is going on. This desire for knowledge and its role in a good life are the primary motivations to refer to in an analysis of her action. That the action is accompanied by pleasure/pain and that this accompaniment has a motivational role does not exhaust the analysis and is not the most basic component of it. PH makes a more radical proposal. Whatever is pursued as good is pursued on account of its relation to pleasure. When it seems that people pursue knowledge or honor or beauty or some other value, what they really pursue is pleasure. This is not by itself a normative

position—it does not put forward any claims on what one should pursue or on what is good. It can nevertheless count as a kind of hedonism. If it is true that nothing other than pleasure motivates human beings, then no normative theory that recommends otherwise is plausible. There is no evidence that any ancient hedonist held PH without also holding NH. But it is worthwhile to consider PH by itself, because Plato and Aristotle take PH a lot more seriously than NH: it is conceivable that human psychology simply is such that we are motivated, pervasively, by pleasure. If this is conceivable, and if one aims to defend a non-hedonist normative ethics, a close look at the workings of pleasure in human motivation is needed.

NH on its own (that is, without PH), is also a conceivable position. One might think that people are confused and misguided when they care about honor or beauty or other values as non-derivatively good. Really, they should aim at pleasure as the only non-derivative good. Though this position is conceivable, and has been held later in the history of thought, it does not seem that ancient thinkers entertain it.¹⁹ To Plato and Aristotle, NH would likely seem ill-conceived, and not only because by their lights hedonism is false. They would argue that people do not need to be told to pursue pleasure. As Aristotle puts it, pleasure is “dyed into” our psychology.²⁰

¹⁹ Henry Sidgwick holds NH without holding PH. *The Methods of Ethics*, London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1874/1963.

²⁰ “[...] for pleasure both is something shared with the animals, and accompanies all the things falling under the heading of choice. For in fact what is fine and advantageous seems pleasant. Again, pleasure is something we have all grown up with since infancy; the result is that it is hard to rub us clean of this impulse, dyed as it is into our lives (ἐγχεχρωσμένον τῷ βίῳ). (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.3, 1104b34-a3; all passages from the *NE* are cited in the Rowe/Broadie translation, with changes).

3. Sophisticated Hedonism

Sophisticated hedonism is the type of position Plato envisages in the *Protagoras* (351b-358e). Hedonism, according to the *Protagoras*, is strictly a single-value theory. Unlike other approaches in ethics, which admit a plurality of values, it posits only one non-derivative good: pleasure. Hence reasoning about one's choices and pursuits is aggregative. In other words, a hedonistic deliberator aims for as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. This is why scholars speak of a pleasure-pain 'calculus'. Decision-making, on this picture, is quasi-mathematical. In Plato's terms, it is an art of measurement (356d). This art, however, is not concerned with momentary pleasure, but with the agent's life as a whole. It secures the most pleasure and the least pain in the long run. This makes correct calculation difficult: it must overcome perspectival mistakes that we are prone to (356a-357b). Typically, that which is temporally near looms disproportionately large in our minds, and that which is temporally distant appears disproportionately small. For example, when the visit to the dentist comes temporally closer, it may look more and more scary to the extent that the tooth does not seem to hurt all that much anymore.

Epicurus's instructions about choosing some pleasures over others echo the *Protagoras*. The sophisticated hedonist examines pleasures with a view to their long-term effects. But in Epicurean ethics, this line of study pushes beyond the aggregative model. Epicurus introduces distinctions between kinds of pleasures. Some pleasures are natural (φυσικαί)

and others are empty (κενά); and among those that are natural, some are merely natural and others necessary. Among the necessary, some are necessary for happiness, others for the body's freedom from stress, and others for life itself.²¹ The task is to observe these (and further) distinctions, and that is, to do more than aggregative reasoning:

Since pleasure is the good which is primary and congenital, for this reason we do not choose every pleasure either, but we sometimes pass over many pleasures in cases when their outcome for us is a greater quantity of discomfort; and we regard many pains as better than pleasures in cases when our endurance of pains is followed by a greater and long-lasting pleasure. Every pleasure, then, because of its natural affinity, is something good, yet not every pleasure is choiceworthy. Correspondingly, every pain is something bad, but not every pain is by nature to be avoided. However, we have to make our judgment on all these points by a calculation and survey of advantages and disadvantages. For at times we treat the good as bad and conversely the bad as good. (Epicurus, 129-130, *Letter to Menoeceus*, LS 21B, tr. LS).

Two formulations in this text are especially noteworthy, because they put pressure on the premise that all pleasure is good. Epicurus says that though all pleasures are good, they all not are choiceworthy. And he says that at times one should treat the good as bad and the bad as good. That is, though all pleasure is good, there are reasons not to choose certain pleasures and not to avoid certain pains. The guide in choosing and avoiding is reason. This, too, pushes against the limits of hedonism. Epicurus goes so far as to call prudence the greatest good, though its value is derivative: prudence and sober reasoning

²¹ Throughout this section, I'm referencing Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 127-132. Epicurus employs a further distinction, between so-called static and so-called kinetic pleasures, which arguably supports the claim that, as long as pain is absent, one is in pleasure (namely, static pleasure). On this contested distinction, cf. Phillip Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1988).

produce the pleasant life, and their value derives from the value of pleasure.²² In effect, Epicurus's proposals are surprisingly close to Plato's arguments in *Republic* VIII-IX, recommending simple pleasures and warning against luxurious habits.²³ He even endorses a version of Plato's proposal that reason can judge the relative merits of different pleasures (*Rp.* IX, 582a-583a).

Nevertheless, Epicurus' distinctions are ways of making hedonism more sophisticated, rather than ways of departing from or rejecting hedonism. Prudent reasoning is not by itself valuable; it is valuable because it helps one secure the most pleasure. No pleasures, on his account, are mere illusions. All pleasure is real and all pleasure is good. Plato's discussion of the pleasures of reason in the *Republic* introduces three models of how pleasure and pain relate (583b-585a), and his *Philebus* mentions a fourth model, ascribed to grumpy people with an inordinate hatred against pleasure (44c6-7). These models are worth laying out here because they help characterize Epicurus's position further:

Two Stage Model

(1) Pleasure

—no neutral, in-between state: the cessation of pain is pleasure, the cessation of pleasure is pain—

(2) Pain

Three Stage Model

²² Cf. *Protagoras* 356e, on the art of measurement as our 'savior'.

²³ *Letter to Menoeceus* 130-132. Cf. Warren (2014). In Plato's third argument for ranking the pleasures of reason highest, Socrates proposes that what is—in the ambitious metaphysical sense of his notion of Being—satiates in a deeper and more lasting way than anything in the realm of becoming (585a-587b). Epicurus does not engage with the relevant metaphysics. But his distinction between empty pleasures and natural/necessary pleasures arrives at similar conclusions about the pleasures of reasoning.

- (1) Pleasure
- (2) Neutral, in-between state: neither pleasure nor pain
- (3) Pain²⁴

Qualified Three Stage Model

- (1) Pure Pleasure (not the cessation of pain; example: the scent of a flower; the agent was not in pain before she walked by the flower.)
- (2) Neutral, in-between state that misleadingly seems to be pleasurable (cessation of pain) and painful (cessation of pleasure)
- (3) Pain

Anti-Hedonistic Two Stage Model

- (1) Pain
- (2) Pleasure is the absence of pain in a way that makes pain primary. In a sense, there *is no* pleasure; what people call pleasure just is absence of pain.

Epicurus endorses the Two Stage Model. In his words, “The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures.”²⁵ Pleasure and pain, on his account, are equally real. They are each others removal, without one of them being primary. The Plato of the *Republic* endorses the Qualified Three Stage Model, which singles out a class of pure pleasures—those taken in reasoning—that do not involve prior pain and do not mistake the cessation of pain for pleasure.²⁶ Plato here captures an idea that both he and Aristotle explore in various fashions: some pleasures seem to be pleasures without really being

²⁴ On the question of whether there is a neutral state in between pleasure and pain, cf. *Philebus* 44a-b.

²⁵ Epicurus, *Key doctrines* 3 = LS 21C. Cf. Cicero, *De finibus* 37-9.

²⁶ The question of whether ignorance is painful, and the seeking of knowledge a way of aiming to get rid of the pain of not-knowing, is difficult. Arguably, Plato goes back and forth on it, admitting this kind of pain in the *Symposium* and not admitting it in the *Republic*.

pleasures.²⁷ In the *Republic*, the illusion comes about via a transition: we take ourselves to be in pleasure when really we are merely relieved from pain. This idea is pushed to its extreme in the Anti-Hedonist Two Stage Model, which takes pain to be primary and pleasure to be nothing but the absence of pain.²⁸

4. Non-Hedonism and Anti-Hedonism

Critics of hedonism reject hedonism's first premise, that pleasure is the only non-derivative good. On my proposal, this rejection comes in two guises. Anti-hedonists endorse the opposite of hedonism, arguing that all pleasure is bad. Non-hedonists hold that there are good and bad pleasures. The following non-hedonist views correspond roughly to the hedonist's premises.

POSITIVE VALENCE VS. GOODNESS: Pleasure is pleasant, and 'pleasant' is an experience with positive valence. But that does not make pleasure good. There are good and bad pleasures.

MOTIVATION: Pleasure and pain figure pervasively in our mental lives and in motivation.

²⁷ Pleasures other than the pleasures of reasoning are, for both Plato and Aristotle, prone to mislead. They are "mindless advisors," as a passage in the *Laws* has it (644c4-d3); in Aristotle's words, they are appearances of the good (NE, 1113a33-b2). Cf. Moss (2012) and Susan Sauvé-Meyer, "Pleasure, Pain, and "Anticipation" in Plato's *Laws*, Book I," in *Presocratics and Plato*, edited by R. Patterson, V. Karasmanis, and A. Hermann (Nevada: Parmenides Publishing, 2012), 349-366 on these ideas.

²⁸ Jessica Moss argues that Plato engages with pleasure as much as he does because he is interested in its deceptiveness: "I will argue that Plato's suspicion of pleasure is systematic and philosophical, and tied to his most central views. Pleasure is dangerous because it is a deceiver. It leads us astray with false appearances, bewitching and beguiling us, cheating and tricking us." ("Pleasure and Illusion in Plato," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 503-535).

GOOD LIFE: Pleasure is an ingredient of a good life that no one would choose to do without (Plato). Pleasure is also part of the very best, divine life (Aristotle).

On this reconstruction, Plato and Aristotle count not as anti-hedonists but as non-hedonists. They never seem to call into question that pleasure is a positive experience. Habituation as the *NE* has it and education in Plato's *Republic* 'work with' the way our psychologies are. Both texts discuss how pleasure/pain attitudes can be shaped and directed. The virtuous agent, who enjoys being moderate or just, is supported in her virtue by enjoying it (*NE* II.1-6).

Plato's *Philebus* ends with an analysis of the ingredients of a good life.²⁹ This life, according to the *Philebus*, contains pleasure. No human being would choose a life without it. A better life is conceivable, a divine life, and it would not contain pleasure. But ethics is about the good for human beings. A good human life does not contain all pleasures, because some pleasures are inherently bad. It contains certain pleasures, such as the pleasures of thinking, and these are among the causes of the goodness of a good human life (*Philebus* 66c). Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* starts with the claim that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is at once the best, the most beautiful, and the most pleasant (1214a1-8). Along the same lines, according to the *NE*, the virtuous person enjoys her virtuous actions and the agent who engages in contemplation enjoys thinking (VII.11.1152b1-6). The life of contemplation is, in its purest form, a divine life. This life, and

²⁹ Cf. Vogt, "Why Pleasure Gains Fifth Rank: Against the Anti-Hedonist Reading of the *Philebus*," in John Dillon and Luc Brisson (eds.), *Plato's Philebus*, (St. Augustin: Akademia Verlag, 2010), 250-255.

here Aristotle disagrees with Plato, is pleasant. A god continually enjoys a “single and simple pleasure” (1154b26), namely the pleasure of contemplation.

Scholars often discuss Aristotle’s two ‘treatises’ on pleasure, *NE* VII.11-14 and *NE* X.1-5, with a view to differences between his positive proposals. What is perhaps more striking, however, is that *NE* VII.11-14 and to a lesser degree *NE* X.1-5 critically engage with arguments *against* hedonism. Aristotle reconstructs a set of arguments, presumably by Plato or others in the Academy, that are meant to defeat hedonism; and he pulls them apart, aiming to demonstrate their weaknesses.³⁰ Are these arguments flawed, such that Aristotle replaces them with more forceful and compelling ways to refute hedonism? It does not seem so. Rather, Aristotle seems more invested in refuting arguments against hedonism than in refuting hedonism.³¹ He adduces considerations that distance him from the more negative assessment of pleasure he ascribes to Plato.³² For example, he argues that the badness of pain suggests that pleasure must in some way be good (*NE* VII.13),

³⁰ On Aristotle’s rejection of Academic anti-hedonist arguments, cf. Rapp (2009). Scholars traditionally pay much attention to Aristotle’s rejection of an account he ascribes to Plato, according to which pleasure is a restoration and thus a change. The *Philebus* starts out with the restoration-account Aristotle objects to; but it ends with ideas about pleasure in a good life that Aristotle does not mention. On the difference between the restoration account and Plato’s considered position, cf. with Joachim Aufderheide <<https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/10023/2105/6/JoachimAufderheidePhDThesis.pdf>> (2011). Cf. Dorothea Frede, “Disintegration and Restoration: Pleasure and Pain in Plato’s *Philebus*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, edited by Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 425-63; and James Warren, “Aristotle on Speusippus on Eudoxus on Pleasure,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 36 (2009): 249-281.

³¹ This is how Dorothea Frede puts it: “the purpose of the discussion is to refute a set of arguments against hedonism” (“Nicomachean Ethics VII.11-12: Pleasure,” in *Symposium Aristotelicum: Nicomachean Ethics VII*, ed. Natali (2009), 183-208).

³² Cf. Frede (2009) and Rapp (2009).

and (along the lines of my introductory reference to Plato and the life of cattle) that disproportionate attention to bodily pleasures has given pleasure an inadequately bad name (*NE* VII.14). Aristotle recognizes pleasure as an ingredient of virtue and an ineradicable feature of human motivation. He carves out space for a non-hedonist position that ascribes value to pleasure and takes seriously that pretty much everyone “weaves” pleasure into happiness (1153b15; cf. 1152b6-7).

What, then, about passages where Plato and Aristotle talk about hedonism dismissively? One thing to say is that this is compatible with the picture I defend: non-hedonism, of course, disagrees with hedonism. Another thing to say is that, at different moments in their discussions, Plato and Aristotle target different opponents. At times, say, when Plato talks about the life of cattle at the end of the *Philebus*, he has in mind a brutish and unreflective kind of hedonism. But in the same dialogue, Socrates talks in civil ways and seemingly with genuine philosophical interest with Protarchus, whose task it is to defend hedonism.³³ At the beginning of Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle engages with Eudoxus, a philosopher in the Academy who holds a version of hedonism. Commentators discuss why Aristotle is so respectful, engaging with Eudoxus’ views in earnest. One speculation, widely accepted, is that Eudoxus seems to have lived in ways

³³ Along similar lines, both Plato and Aristotle ascribe the view that pleasure is the good to ‘the many’, which may suggest that they hold this view in disdain. And yet, according to the *Philebus* and according to the *NE*, both views—that pleasure is the good and that wisdom is the good—are flawed in the same fundamental way: they identify one value as ‘the’ good, rather than understanding that a good human life (*eudaimonia*) is the good. Cf. Vogt (2011).

Aristotle finds noble.³⁴ Like Epicurus, he seems to have been a sophisticated hedonist, someone who takes pleasure in activities that Plato and Aristotle approve of—virtuous action and thinking. His presence in Aristotle’s arguments is, on the picture I defend, just one example of the way in which hedonists push ancient non-hedonists to refine their views.

Consider then the premises of anti-hedonism, corresponding (roughly) to the three premises of hedonism, NON-DERIVATE GOOD, NATURE, and NORM:³⁵

BAD: Pleasure is bad.

IRRATIONAL: Pleasure is pursued in a state of illusion or in a corrupted condition.

N/A (here the anti-hedonist can go several routes).³⁶

Who counts, on this way of looking at things, as anti-hedonist? In the *Philebus*, Socrates refers to a group of harsh people. As they see it, there is pain and the removal of pain, which on their account is misclassified as pleasure. This is the Anti-Hedonistic Two Stage Model: pleasure is the absence of pain in a way that makes pain primary; pleasure is by

³⁴ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 347.

³⁵ Aufderheide defines anti-hedonism as the claim that no pleasure is good by itself, and argues that this is Plato’s “official view” in the *Philebus* (2011).

³⁶ The Stoics, who on my classification count as anti-hedonists, ascribe motivations other than pleasure to newborns. First impulse, they argue, is for self-preservation and for the preservation of those closest to us. Thus the Stoics start with a different set of presumed observations. But like hedonists, they infer norms from what they take to be natural. Cf. LS (1987) fragments in chapters 57 and 59.

itself nothing, and it is pervasively mistaken for something good. Hence with respect to these ‘harsh people’ it is not exactly right to say, as my premise BAD has it, that pleasure is bad. More precisely, pleasure is mistakenly viewed as good, while really it is not good, and it is not good on account of not even genuinely being in existence (44b10-11). Still, Plato describes the proponents of this view as anti-hedonists, or in his words, as haters of the power of pleasure who on account of this hatred refuse to acknowledge anything healthy in it (44c-d). Scholars have not been able to identify these thinkers; apart from their grumpiness and hatred, Plato ascribes to them a tremendous reputation in natural science (44b9). Either way, he introduces them in order to signal who the true enemies of hedonism are (44b6-7). It is in this spirit that I classify them as anti-hedonists.

A more straightforward candidate for counting as anti-hedonist is Stoic philosophy. The Stoics ascribe positive affective states to the wise person. But they see no place for pleasure in a good life as they conceive of it. For the Stoics, pleasure is one of the four generic emotions (*pathê*). These emotions are defined as excessive movements of the mind, as impulses for ill-conceived actions, as irrational and ‘mad’.³⁷ This assessment is part of a larger framework, often called psychological monism. According to the Stoics, the soul is one, not in any way divided into reason and desire. Any tumultuous state, on this picture, disrupts our abilities to think. And pleasure is paradigmatically an irrational state of mind. On the Stoic picture, the person who is in an emotional state of mind is not

³⁷ Stobaeus 2.88,8-90,6 (= LS 65A); cf. all fragments in chapter 65, LS (1987).

enjoying it, even though she may claim she does. The turmoil in her mind is experienced negatively, or so the Stoics argue.

As I see it, those who characterize Plato and Aristotle as anti-hedonists lack a principled way of distinguishing the positions Plato and Aristotle formulate on the one hand and the Stoic (as well as ‘haters of pleasure’) position on the other. A mere dichotomy between hedonism and anti-hedonism makes everyone who is not a hedonist an anti-hedonist. To signal how misleading this is, consider a lively debate among later Stoics, Galen, and others. They discuss psychological monism and pluralism precisely with respect to the question of whether pleasure can be ‘tamed’. According to Plato and Aristotle, a molding of pleasure/pain attitudes that makes them fit into a good life can be attained. According to the Stoics, pleasure/pain attitudes are inherently irrational, no matter what. On my proposal, anti-hedonists hold that pleasure/pain cannot be made into something good, whatever efforts one undertakes via education, habituation, and so on. To them pleasure is not only such that it can mislead or typically misleads. It is thoroughly bad, in every instance and in an unsalvageable fashion. Anti-hedonism construed this way genuinely holds the opposite of hedonism.

5. The Bad Pleasure Problem

The best known line of attack against hedonism's first premise, that pleasure is the only non-derivative good, asks "what then about bad pleasures?"³⁸ Here is an outline of the argument:

Hedonism: Pleasure is good.

Objection: There are good and bad pleasures.

Objection Granted: Hedonism does not dispute the distinction between good and bad pleasures.

Opposites (suppressed premise): Nothing has, in the same respect, at the same time, etc., opposite properties.

Defeat: Hedonism must, *per impossibile*, assume that some pleasures are good *and* bad.

In reply, hedonists insist that all pleasures are inherently good, even if they are taken in bad activities.³⁹ This is, then, how hedonism rejects Defeat:

Distinction: All pleasures are good qua being pleasures, and some pleasures are bad qua their object/cause.

This distinction preserves the unity of pleasure: all pleasure is alike insofar as it is good; it differs merely in its object. Protarchus, Socrates's interlocutor in the *Philebus* famously puts this as follows: "pleasures come from opposite things. But they are not at all opposed to one another. For how could pleasure not be, of all things, most like pleasure?" (12d7-e2). To see how the debate continues, consider what counts as bad pleasure. Here are candidate replies: lowly, perverted, and false pleasures.

³⁸ This objection is mentioned in the *Republic* as so well-worn that it is hardly worth repeating. "What about those who define the good as pleasure? Are they any less full of confusion than the others? Or aren't even they compelled to admit that there are bad pleasures?" Plato, *Republic* VI, 505c6-8 (tr. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004)

³⁹ Cf. *Philebus* 36c-38a.

Lowly: In the *Philebus*, Plato seems to think of lowly pleasures as those that human beings share with animals (67b). Socrates asks what pleasure amounts to if very little cognitive activity is going on, as is presumably the case in some animals. His example is a sea-urchin. Its pleasures are lowly in the sense that they are barely registered and as such not pleasant in the way in which pleasure figures in a human life. Even if the sea-urchin were in constant pleasure, the word ‘constant’ would lack meaning: without memory, experience, anticipation of the future, one cannot find oneself in ongoing pleasure. Lowly pleasures, conceived along these lines, are not simply bodily. More fundamentally, they are pleasures that involve only a low level of complexity in cognitive activity. That may coincide with bodily pleasures, assuming, say, that cows enjoy activities like grazing. But the badness of lowly pleasures, insofar as hedonists concede it, hangs on something else, namely that we would not want them.⁴⁰ Even with respect to

⁴⁰ “Moreover, due to lack of memory, it would be impossible for you to remember that you ever enjoyed yourself, and for any pleasure to survive from one moment to the next, since it would leave no memory. But, not possessing right doxa, you would not realize that you are enjoying yourself even while you do, and, being unable to calculate, you could not figure out any future pleasures for yourself. You would thus not live a human life but the life of a mollusk or of one of those creatures in shells that live in the sea.” (*Philebus* 21c1-8)

bodily pleasures, human beings prefer versions that are reflective of their cognitive abilities, involving memory, anticipation, and so on.⁴¹

Perverted: Republic VIII-IX offers an analysis of psychological decline that involves detailed engagement with perverted pleasures. Pleasures of addiction, pleasures taken in self-destructive and excessive activities, pleasures in activities that to others are unthinkably shameful, and so on, fall into this category. Arguably, hedonists share the view that such pleasures are not to be pursued. In choosing between pleasures, the hedonist is guided by prudence and prefers pleasures that leave intact sober reasoning.⁴²

False: Plato's Philebus classifies bad pleasures as false. Though hedonists accept that there are pleasures which, via their object (that which the agent enjoys), are bad, they do not accept the identification of the bad and the false (36c-42c). Scholars have long puzzled over the precise interpretation of the notion of false pleasure.⁴³ What matters for my proposal is that the debate between hedonism and non-hedonism reaches an impasse.

⁴¹ For a similar line of thought, cf. *Eudemian Ethics* I, 1215b301216a5 (tr. Brad Inwood and Raphael Woolf, *Aristotle: Eudemian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): “Nor indeed would anyone who was not completely slavish prefer life merely for the pleasure of nourishment or of sex, if deprived of the other pleasures that knowledge of sight or any of the other senses provide people with. It is evident that whoever makes this choice might just as well have been born a beast as a human being. At any rate the ox in Egypt, which is worshipped as the god Apis, is lavished with a good deal more of those sorts of things than many monarchs. Similarly, one would not choose life just for the pleasure of sleeping. What is the difference between an uninterrupted sleep from first day till last, for ten thousand years of any period you like, and living as a plant?”

⁴² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus* 127-132.

⁴³ Cf. Vogt, “Imagining Good Future States: Hope and Truth in Plato’s *Philebus*,” in John Wilkins (ed.), *On the Psyche: Studies in Literature, Health, and Psychology* (Festschrift for Christopher Gill) (forthcoming) contains discussion of recent trends in scholarship on this issue.

Non-hedonists can admit that there are lowly and perverted pleasures. They may reject the notion of false pleasures, but non-hedonists other than the Plato of the *Philebus* do not employ this notion either. The Bad Pleasure Problem does not settle the dispute.

6. The Nature of Pleasure Problem

The *Philebus*'s discussion of pleasure starts with the observation that pleasure is manifold, ποικίλον (12c). According to Socrates, pleasure goes by one name, but comes in forms that are quite unlike each other.⁴⁴ In effect, it is not clear whether everything we ordinarily call pleasure falls under one genus; or whether on the contrary there is no unified notion of pleasure that captures all of them.⁴⁵ These considerations pose what I consider the hardest challenge for hedonism. It is an implicit premise of hedonism—and arguably of anti-hedonism—that pleasure is a sufficiently unified phenomenon for general claims about pleasure to make sense:

UNITY: Pleasure is a sufficiently unified phenomenon for there to be such a thing as the nature of pleasure.

If there is no such thing as the nature of pleasure, hedonism does not get off the ground. Today this objection is known as the heterogeneity objection. Theorists argue that, say, the pleasures of smelling the scent of a rose, solving a math problem, and hitting

⁴⁴ Socrates also admits that there are many forms of knowing (ἐπιστήμαι). But he describes this in non-derogative terms as a plurality (πολλά), while pleasure is characterized as manifold (ποικίλον), which for Plato is a negative term.

⁴⁵ Emily Fletcher, "Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life," *Phronesis* 59 (2014): 113-142.

someone in anger, are too different to share one nature.⁴⁶ Accounts of the unity of pleasure are hard to come by, whether they are formulated by hedonists or other theorists interested in pleasure.⁴⁷ Does this mean that hedonism and anti-hedonism are untenable, for reasons that are more basic than debates about the value of pleasure and pain suggest?

In *NE* X.1-5, Aristotle offers a sideward step that may help both non-hedonism and hedonism. According to *NE* X.4, pleasure does not occur without activity and every activity is completed by pleasure.⁴⁸ Though this proposal is often called an account of pleasure, it is not. It is not an account of the nature of pleasure; it merely characterizes the relationship between pleasure and activities. Pleasure is said to be an accompaniment of activities, one that goes along with them, depends on them, and is generated by them.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. Feldman (1997).

⁴⁷ One option is to just say that pleasure feels good; but one may wonder whether this goes beyond the claim that pleasure is pleasant. Another option is to ascribe a certain role in motivation/desire to pleasure; but that, like the *NE* X.4 proposal, is a proposal about a relation in which pleasure stands with something else, not an account of the nature of pleasure. Cf. Henry Sidgwick for a combination of both: “for my own part, when I reflect on the notion of pleasure,—using the term in the comprehensive sense which I have adopted, to include the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments,—the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seem to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term “desirable”, in the sense previously explained. I propose therefore to define Pleasure—when we are considering its “strict value” for purposes of quantitative comparison—as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or—in cases of comparison—preferable (*The Methods of Ethics*, book II, ch. II, s. II, pr. III, p.127).

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4, 1175a20-21: “without activity, pleasure does not occur, and every activity is completed by pleasure” (ἀνευ τε γὰρ ἐνεργείας οὐ γίνεται ἡδονή, πᾶσάν τε ἐνέργειαν τελειοῖ ἢ ἡδονή).

⁴⁹ Scholars often call this relation supervenience. I refrain from using this term here, because pleasure does not ‘supervene’ on activities in the sense in which philosophers today speak of supervenience; and Aristotle himself does not employ such a notion.

On this picture, there are as many pleasures as there are activities. This multitude is not surprising or perplexing—we consider it evident that there is a wide range of activities that people can engage in.⁵⁰ Nevertheless there is unity, namely, there is one kind of relation that obtains between activities and pleasure. The *NE X* proposal thus recognizes both the variety and unity of pleasure.⁵¹

By the standards that this debate sets up, this is a success. But for whom? In effect, Aristotle adapts an hedonist move. He shifts attention from pleasure to the activities that are being enjoyed. Pleasures differ, on his account, according to the ways in which activities differ. And this is a version of Protarchus's argument in the *Philebus*. Pleasures are bad, insofar as they are bad, by virtue of the object or cause of pleasure—and that is, the activity that is enjoyed—being bad. This leaves intact the positive valence of pleasure no matter how bad the activity that someone takes pleasure in. Does the *NE X* proposal concede too much to hedonism, in effect enabling the hedonist to account for bad pleasure? Or does its refusal to offer—or to even aim at—an account of the nature of pleasure undercut hedonism, because hedonism needs a more robust unity of pleasure?

⁵⁰ Robert Heinaman discusses what he calls a coarse versus a strict division of pleasures into kinds in Aristotle ("Pleasure as an Activity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, edited by Michael Pakaluk and Giles Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7-46. According to the former, the pleasure of doing geometry, for example, is one kind of pleasure. According to the latter, proving one theorem goes along with one kind of pleasure, and proving another theorem with another kind of pleasure. Cf. Vogt, "Pakaluk and Pearson (eds.), *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*," *Mind* 123 (2014): 1221-1227.

⁵¹ Shields, "Perfecting Pleasures: The Metaphysics of Pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics X*," in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A Critical Guide*, ed. J. Miller (Cambridge University Press: 2011), 191-210; and Heinaman (2011).

Either way, and this is what I hope to have established in this paper, hedonism's presence in ancient ethics inspires some of the most subtle analyses of pleasure philosophers have formulated, with surprisingly much common ground between hedonists and non-hedonists.

So, by way of conclusion, what is hedonism? It is, or so I have argued, the claim that pleasure is the only non-derivative good. *Qua* pleasures, all pleasures are good. The positions that Plato and Aristotle develop in a whole range of texts are not the opposite of hedonism, and they are not the strongest rejection of hedonism that is conceivable. Plato and Aristotle admit good pleasures and both find a place for pleasure in good lives. The position that should be called anti-hedonism is genuinely different. It holds the opposite of hedonism, namely that all pleasure is bad. It has ancient proponents, among them the Stoics and a group of people Plato refers to as haters of pleasure.