

# **Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics**

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**Week - 03**

**Lecture -16**

**Hedonism**

Hello everyone. In the last class, we talked about Consequentialism, and Non-Consequentialism. And today, we discuss a theory called, Hedonism. Now, you might have all heard of, Hedonism or Hedon, as a rather suspicious word. When we look at, anything talking with Hedonism, it seems to be something, which is lowly, which is sensual, which is pleasure seeking. But, let us look at, Hedonism as a moral theory.

And, what does it really stand for. Now, Hedonism describes well, pleasure, including the absence of pain, as the sole intrinsic good in life, right, as the singular intrinsic good in life. When we look at pleasure, and we look at it as the sole intrinsic good in life. So, that is something, which is good in itself.

That is also a goal, that all our acts should be directed to something, which gives us pleasure. At the very surface of it, it seems pleasure is a loaded word, and it seems more sensual, and something which is demeaning, or which is a shallow thing in life. But, let us be charitable to Hedonism. And, as Philosophers, as students of Philosophy, or as curious thinkers, knowledge seekers, you need to step across the usual sense of colloquial knowledge, or the first impressions that we have, to go ahead and find out, what does it mean in general. What does it mean in specific details.

What does it mean as a theory. So, let us cut the chase, and hit to the crucial word right, at the start, that what do we mean by pleasure. Well, pleasure can mean various things. And, because we need to define our terms well, that is how we make sense of our theory, more accurately. And, entire value theories about Hedonism, differ depending on, how they define theories.

So, for some people, pleasure is defined as sensual pleasure. For some people, pleasure has been defined as intellectual pleasure. For some theorists, it has been defined as aesthetic pleasures. So, depending on how pleasure is defined, we come out to

understand, what a particular value theory of Hedonism means. So, is the pleasure the same thing as happiness.

Now, that is a crucial concern, that we shall have it sorted out, for the moment, to make sense of it. Aristotle talks about happiness. Aristotle talks about happiness, as well-being. Now, when Aristotle talks about happiness as well-being, we look at the sense, in which Aristotle talks about it, is in the term of a cumulative, long-term thinking. A cumulative sense of contentment, or peace, that comes with a good life.

And there, that is distinct from, what the Hedonist would mean by pleasure, as something which is discrete, which is not necessarily, or not a cumulative feature of life. So, it is not a cumulation, or not a cumulative effect of acts. A Hedonistic Value Theory. A Hedonistic Value Theory admits of a variety of claims, about the characteristic and types of pleasures, quantity or quality, intellectual aesthetic pleasures, vis-a-vis sensual pleasures. Now, it is easy to think of Hedonistic calculus, as something which is looking at, sensual pleasures, and then demeaning it, and then defeating it, as an theoretical claim.

But, what does Hedonism mean, as a theory in principle. Well, it means that, pleasure is important. Now, what is pleasure. Let us look at, intellectual aesthetic and pleasures of the mind, or excellence. So, when we look at intellectual pleasures, the pleasure of reading a good book, of encountering a good idea, of going to a museum, or watching a natural landscape, a moment of intellectual or aesthetic delight, that one has looking at a beautiful painting, a sculpture, or view of nature, or anything that one values, that itself as a goal, seems to be what is desirable.

So, sensual pleasures, yes, that is also a kind of Hedonism. But, that is not the only kind of Hedonistic Value Theory. A Hedonistic Value Theory can mean, to hold intellectual values, or aesthetic values also, as something which is pleasant, which gives us pleasure, intellectual pleasure, refined pleasure, as we call, and comes about to be a Hedonistic Theory also. Now, Plato's dialogue, Philebus. And typically, if we look at Plato's works, Plato as you all might know, was a philosopher in the ancient times.

And, Plato advances his philosophies, in the forms of a dialogue, of a dialogue taking place between two or more people, and each arguing for different theories. And, then they are concluding with one claim. So, that is a way peculiar to Plato, in how he has advanced his theories about many things in the world. In this particular place, called Plato's Philebus, there is a dialogue, where Hedonism is discussed, that well, it is a dialogue between one view, that pleasure is the good, the true goal of every living being, one character holding that view, and what everyone ought to aim at. And the view that,

intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom, are better and more excellent than pleasure, for all who are capable of them.

So, he makes a contrast between two characters. One arguing for pleasure as the good, and that every living being ought to aim at. And the other view is where, intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom, right. This is versus pleasure. These are the two paradigms argued for.

Now, this is a quote from William Frank's books by Ethics. And, in case you are interested to read further, or to understand this further, you are welcome to visit at least these particular pages, on the reading on Hedonism. Now, look at this. Intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom, versus pleasures, either refined or basal. That is a crucial claim, that makes a difference.

Now, intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom, they are also part of pleasure. They are intellectual pleasures. So, if one looks at, say, I thought of an example, that if a nation state uses scarce resources, to build museums, to build art galleries, or to build monuments, that give a sense of say, pride, or beauty, or aesthetic delight, to its citizens, using scarce resources, it is committing to a value theory of refined pleasure seeking, and will still be under the character of Hedonism. Right. When, we are looking at something, that may be even gives a sense of honour.

So, when we are looking intellectual knowledge, wisdom, we can also include the word, honour. So, what do we. Something that gives one pleasure. And, let us contrast intellectual pleasures, with non-hedonistic theories, to make sense that, to give it a fair and equal competition.

Right. So, if we think of making aesthetic delights, at one way, if you are a functionalist, or if you believe in function, or if you want to claim function is more important than, aesthetic or intellectual delight, then you might see, expenditure or resources spent on aesthetic delights, resources spent on aesthetics, intellectual stimulation. In fact, the humanities has not giving you bang for the buck, or as a parliament, perhaps not giving it bang for the buck. But if you look at, a pleasure seeker, an intellectual pleasure seeker, that you encourage drama, you encourage fine arts, you subsidise performing arts, so that, you want the society to revel in intellectual pleasures. So, this is nevertheless, a Hedonistic value theory. Only, the pleasure defined here as, is intelligence, is knowledge, is wisdom, is aesthetic delights.

Right. Now, let us think of other examples. Because, the point of this course is that, you constantly move from the world of theory, to the world of practice, to the world of

practice, to the world of theory. So, you should be able to connect examples with theories, and theories with examples. So, when you look around, and you find well, okay, this is a kind of an expenditure. Suppose, you are a student, and your college thinks of building an art gallery, or your college thinks of enhancing the library, with non-trait books, which are not essential to your particular trait.

So, that in that sense, the institute or your college is thinking of your intellectual growth as something, that is a source of pleasure, and therefore it should be subsidised. Here is a catch again. Whether, aesthetic delight or intellectual growth is a source of pleasure, or it is seen as something, which is a must, even if you do not enjoy it, will again differ the chain of thinking. So, let us say, and as we frequently discuss that, when we look at a single act or a policy, we can understand that, there may be two or more differing, compelling motivations for each of it. So, say enhancing the library.

Enhancing the library can happen on two grounds of motivation. Right. So, the first one is, when it is looking at, let us take the first one, that will knowledge, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, is necessary. Right. And there, you can see the policy out there.

And, there is where, you will be able to discover the strains of the policy. So, knowledge, whether the acquisition process is pleasant or unpleasant, it is deemed necessary, and therefore it is paternalised or forced onto you. Now, the same, when knowledge is seen as something, which gives you pleasure. And therefore, non-trade books are added to the library. And, without any schematic compulsion for you to read those books, perhaps no exams on them, perhaps no tests on them.

But, a library are, that allows you to explore the library. So, in that case, the motivation of course has been, that knowledge is giving you intellectual pleasures. And therefore, this option is to be exercised. Right. So, I hope I have made it somewhat clear, that how one could look at different theories.

If this example looks a little complicated, you might even think of simpler examples. That well, anything that encourages Hedonistic pleasures. Right. And, Hedonistic here, can be intellectual knowledge and wisdom pleasures also. There have been various kinds of Hedonists also.

Now, as you can guess, pleasure itself is a very porous and ambiguous term. And, you can see that, it can be variously interpreted. And thereby, it almost changes the theory, the Hedonistic theory. So, there have been quantitative and qualitative Hedonists, who define a pleasure in different way. And, there is more number of people to be happy, and qualitative, that well, if a better form of pleasure qualitatively comes about.

Let us think of an example. Let us say, the sense of, and remember, in the last slide, as we talked about, pleasure including the absence of pain. Now, keeping this in mind. Now, if you go ahead and think of this example, that a government is spending on feeding its people. Right. Now, in feeding its people, say it has a large citizenry of people, who are underfed.

So, whether they buy cheaper food, say typically carbohydrates, and make sure that, it is distributed to as many as possible, vis-a-vis they try to invest their scarce resource, into carbohydrates and proteins, which is typically more expensive than carbohydrates, protein, and try to give it to as many citizenry as possible. Now, ideally any government would like to provide food to its hungry citizens, in their nutritional requirements. But, I am asking you to imagine a hypothetical case, where the resources are limited, or the demand has been so high, that the government cannot fulfil its demand, in full scope. So, there it has to make this ugly choice, between quantitative hunger satiation via carbohydrates, or a qualitative hunger satiation, for the few, via having a balanced nutritional diet. The quantitative would be for much many more people.

So, a quantitative Hedonist would say that well, we need to reach out, as many people as we can, even though our standard or quality of food deteriorates. So, we just have carbohydrates, we do not have a balanced diet. A qualitative Hedonist would say that, we would rather, and this sounds cruel, but history has had examples of such, qualitative Hedonists, where they have invested in providing a qualitative support to the few, rather than a general support to the many, even if the demand has been equally on both ends. So, how one defines pleasure, and what kind of a Hedonist one is, a qualitative or a quantitative. You can easily think of various examples, where a qualitative Hedonist, versus a quantitative Hedonist, comes into being.

You can think of say, a software that a college or an institute would like to buy, software that is required for a very few people, but niche people, who can actually go ahead and develop it further, and do some really path-breaking work, vis-a-vis the same amount to be spent on a software, that will be equally utilised by many many more people. So, mostly we are familiar with in today's epoch, as quantitative Hedonists, where we look at the result of the many. I can give you examples, that well. Let us think of India, half a century back. India formed the IIT's, half a century or so back.

And that was a time, when India was much scarce in resources. But, it had to give a lot of resources, to the IIT's, compared to say, primary education, or other institutes, or other colleges. And, with the hope that, that was a qualitative Hedonistic calculus. And here, actually I am emphasising the difference between, qualitative and quantitative. So, for

the IIT's to do something path-breaking, for the development of the state.

Right. A purely quantitative approach to this, would have been to distribute resources equally, depending on the number of students, any institute is supporting. So, that is an example of, qualitative and quantitative Hedonists. However, the key word here is, Hedonists. And, Hedonists are the one, who are looking that well. Intellectual pleasures, or what essential pleasures, are all that is worth gaining for.

So, that should be the ultimate goal. And, that is the only thing, that is intrinsically valuable. Right. And, here you can see a close connection between, Consequentialism and Non-Consequentialism. Because, what is intrinsically valuable, also becomes a goal, for the Consequentialist.

So, think over it. And, here is also the difficulties and porousness between, definitions, which are not water tightly separated. Now, before we come to the next slide, I want to tell you of a thought experiment. And, I invite you to think of, your own thought experiments, regarding this. Now, let us look at, what is a thought experiment. In case, I have not talked about this earlier, and even if I have, just a quick recollection.

A thought experiment is an imaginary situation, that we put ourselves into, or that we define. So as to test both, our theoretical position, and the boundaries of our thought. Right. So, let me give you an example.

And, that will clear this idea. Let us imagine, or let us call it a, Hedonistic Chair. Okay. Let us imagine a chair, that is all plugged with systems, that can plug into your nervous system. And, you sit in the chair, and once all the input is plugged into the nervous system, you can equate it with matrix, the movie, or any other science fiction, that you can see. So, in the chair, you find that, you are taken to a simulated reality, where you are given pleasure.

Right. Whatever kinds of pleasure, that you require. Right. A clear and easy analogy to this, comes is, video games. Right. And, if in the future, we have immersive gaming, where you have a total sense of altered sense of reality.

Right. So, Hedonistic Chair, why can also think of it as, video games, where one is completely involved in it. Getting the pleasure of an adventure, getting the pleasure of a conquest, getting the pleasure of a fight, or of a race, without facing the side effects, or without being vulnerable to the risks of that particular pursuit. Right. The risks are minimalised, or they are cancelled. Now, if the risks are cancelled out, and one sits on that chair, and is continuously given a pleasure dose.

Let us stick to the Hedonistic Chair example. Would you like to sit on such a chair. Right. What is happening here. You have an altered sense of reality. You are plugged in, and you have all the pleasurable experiences, that you can imagine, you keep on.

It is programmed into hitting you. Now, if this happens, would one like to sit on this chair. Right. Say, your nutrition is taken care of, and you are in an altered state of reality. And, your physical nutrition and body is taken care of.

A classic equivalent of say, a matrix kind of a movie. Now, here, the purpose of this thought experiment is to show, or to explore, whether if pleasure is all that we want, and we seek that, then if we have a direct shortcut to get that sense of pleasure, or that sense of whatever pleasure that may be. It may be sensual pleasure. It may be the intellectual pleasure. But if one is stimulating that particular part of the brain, and getting those pleasures, would one like to sit on this Hedonistic Chair.

Now, think of your answer, whether you would, or you would not. Let me guess out a few positions. Right. One would like to sit on the chair. To sit on the chair, and then you get to have a life of absolute pleasure, especially the ones you want.

Two, no. You refuse to sit on the chair, because it is just not real. It seems that, these pleasures are pre-programmed. What does it mean, that it is not real. Well. Secondly, it is not real, because you are not facing the risks of the pursuit. Had you faced the risks of the pursuit, the realness quotient of the pleasure would go up.

Three, one could argue that well, this is really not pleasure. And this is perhaps, what we really do not want. Because, we want the joy of pursuit. We want happiness. We do not want pleasure. We do not want that particular sensation, or that slice of experience, independent of the drama and the journey, that precedes the arrival of that slice of experience.

So, we do not require that particular shortcut. So, a reason. Now, look at it, what are the practical implications of it. If you look at the domain of video games. Now, online gaming. Is there something wrong with it. Or, should that be encouraged, should that be discouraged, if people spend a huge amount of time gaming.

So, there are many assumptions and questions, hidden into it. But, we will stick to the hedonistic questions, right now. That, video games, or virtual reality, or even pornography, all of these are examples of a virtual world, which is targeting pleasure, without the effort, or without the process to be, the usual process to be followed, right.

Now, in this, one way of looking at it is, well, the joy, and where you will step away from the hedonistic calculus, or the hedonistic theory, is that, you look at the joy of say, climbing a mountain, true and fulfilling, only if you go through the risks, and the training required to actually do that experience, rather than sit on a video game, and have those experiences, made available to you, however engrossing or embedded it is, right. So, the joy is not in that particular feeling, that you get in summit. So, you have a brain state, when you reach the summit, and that brain state is miraculously being created for you, and you believe that.

So, it is a brain state, that you are not targeting. Rather, this is, I am talking about the non-hedonist. This is a brain state, that the hedonist may target, but the non-hedonist, or the non-hedonistic theories would say, that well, this is really not what we should be targeting. There is something else, that should be targeted, right. So, I am sure, you can think of many examples, in this regard. But, and go ahead and look at the various examples, that you find in real world, and see where you find a, Hedonistic motivation, or a Hedonistic value theory, powering that particular policy.

One should know the difference between, Psychological Hedonism, and Ethical Hedonism. So, if we start from the foundation of Naturalism, that we see, that well, if we look that morality aside, people naturally seek pleasure. If this becomes a fact, that well, it is natural for us to seek pleasure, may be biological fact. This is of course, termed as Psychological Hedonism. And, on the basis of that, when we make a judgement, that therefore morally, we should seek pleasure.

Because, something is natural, that is the reason for us to make it moral. Look at this reasoning, and see, if you can follow this up. Something that is natural.

Naturally, we seek pleasure. And therefore, we ought to seek pleasure. Right. This is a classic case of, how we move from an is, to an ought. Right. Is is a state of affairs, is the current state of affairs.

Right. Ought is a prescription. This is a description. And this is a prescription. So, because, things are the way, we are naturally biologically pleasure seeking creatures, pain avoiding creatures. Therefore, we should be also, that should, or that ought, we ought to be looking for pleasure. And, that is what is morally, how we should go ahead and do it. So far, I have tried to argue for Hedonism, as a value theory, to give it a sound understanding.

Because, it is easy to dismiss, Hedonism as a moral theory. Because, when we particularly build it as a straw man argument, we look at Hedonism as looking for sense



gratification. And therefore, it is an undesirable value theory. But, if we change the denotation of pleasure, from sensual gratification, to intellectual pleasures, to aesthetic pleasures, to wisdom, to knowledge, then Hedonism becomes a much more seriously taken theory. There is however, one particular paradox of Hedonism, that one must be aware of, is what is perhaps the most difficult objection for Hedonism to overcome, is that, many of the deepest, and I quote from the Cambridge dictionary of philosophy. Many of the deepest and best pleasures of life, say of love, child rearing, or work, seem to come most often, to those who are engaging in an activity for reason, other than pleasure seeking.

Right. Now, listen to this carefully, that most of the acts, that we find giving us meaning, give us meaning, when we are actually not looking for pleasure, in that particular act. Right. Say, the act of love, or work, or child rearing, that you are not looking for pleasure, in every moment of that act. So, let us say analogically, you are there to watch a movie. Now, at every scene of the movie, you are not telling yourself, that oh, I am enjoying this movie.

Yes, this is giving me pleasure. Yes, I am enjoying. For a moment, you need to be into the flow of the movie, for really to have a sense of enjoyment, at the end of it. So, the paradox of Hedonism is that, if you chase pleasure, you are unlikely to get it. And, you get pleasure, only when you do not chase pleasure.

Right. So, this is a standard critique of Hedonism, that talks about the paradox of Hedonism. That when you chase pleasure, you are unlikely to get it. But, when you do not chase it, and immerse yourself in the pursuit, pleasure comes as a side effect. So, the Hedonists are making a mistake, by putting what is a side effect, or what ought to be a cumulative effect, as the immediate target of an act.

Right. So, with this, we come to the end of Hedonism. And, Hedonism is of course, a moral theory, that is often underrepresented and refuted. But, as I hope to have shown that, this is not the case. It is a serious moral theory, that can argue, depending on the kinds of pleasure, that one values. And, it can make a very significant moral theory, for conditions to work. Thank you. .