Value, Reason and Hedonism

ALISON HILLS
St John's College, Oxford

It is widely believed that we always have reason to maximize the good. Utilitarianism and other consequentialist theories depend on this 'teleological' conception of value. Scanlon has argued that this view of value is not generally correct, but that it is most plausible with regard to the value of pleasure, and may even be true at least of that. But there are reasons to think that even the value of pleasure is not teleological.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that, if something is good, you have reason to bring about as much of it as possible. One of the greatest strengths of utilitarianism is often thought to be its commitment to this conception of value and practical reason: happiness is the good, and you have reason to maximize it. By contrast, one of the most puzzling aspects of deontological moral theories is their rejection of this link. A deontological theory might forbid committing murder, even for the sake of preventing other killings from taking place. But surely if murder is bad, you must have reason to minimize the number of murders?

In his book, *What We Owe To Each Other*, Scanlon calls this conception of the relationship between value and reason a 'teleological' view of value: 'what we have reason to do . . . is to act so as to realize those states of affairs that are best – that is, that have the greatest value'.[1] He claims that it is widely held as a thesis about a formal feature of value quite generally, noting that even philosophers like Thomas Nagel who are otherwise hostile to utilitarianism find the teleological view of value compelling. Indeed, the teleological view of value can seem to be not just natural, but 'inescapable'.[2]

Scanlon's own view is that the teleological view of value is not in fact correct, and he gives some examples of values for which he believes it does not hold. But he thinks that there are some values for which it is much more plausible, in particular, the value of pleasure and freedom from pain.[3] Indeed, he goes so far as to say (though he later qualifies the claim) that the teleological view is true for these goods: 'If a simple form of hedonism were correct as an account of value – if the only things

[1] T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 80.
[2] Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 87.
[3] Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 82.

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valuable in themselves were pleasure and the absence of pain – then value would have a teleological structure.'[4]

The teleological view of value has immensely significant implications for ethical theory, and it is obviously important to know whether or not it is correct. I agree with Scanlon that, though it can seem natural and even inescapable, it is in fact false. But I suggest that even he may concede too much to the teleological view of value.

I will describe a phenomenon that was first pointed out by Timmermann in the course of an argument against hedonism.[5] There is already one well-known paradox of hedonism: pursuing pleasure is self-defeating; it leaves you enjoying less pleasure than if you had aimed at something else. But Timmermann argued that there is a new, deeper paradox of hedonism, which implies that hedonism is incoherent and proves that 'the thesis that pleasure is the good cannot be saved'.[6]

I agree that the phenomenon Timmermann identified is real and that it is very significant. But I disagree about the way in which it is significant. The 'new paradox' he presents does not show that hedonism is incoherent. Instead, it has a very different lesson for us: pleasure is not a teleological value.

II. THE 'NEW PARADOX' OF HEDONISM

Hedonism is the theory that pleasure is the good. Theories of hedonism can be divided into two different types. *Psychological hedonists* claim that all agents act for the sake of their individual greater pleasure. *Normative hedonists* hold that all agents have reason to maximize pleasure, either their own or that of all sentient creatures.

Timmerman presents the 'new paradox' of hedonism as follows:

> There can be cases in which we reject pleasure because there is too much of it. Not only can we meaningfully ask whether pleasure is good. Sometimes we decide that pleasure is bad, or not worth having, not because of any extrinsic factor like moral, aesthetic etc, constraints, but rather because one is experiencing enough pleasure to the point that more would in itself be undesirable. Strong sensual stimulation can be like that: intense food, being tickled, sexual pleasure. In these cases, the pleasure on offer, beyond a certain point, simply exceeds the limit of what we can bear.[7]

Even though most of us think pleasure is good, we do not pursue it all the time. Sometimes we give up on an activity or type of experience because it no longer gives us pleasure. This is not a problem for hedonism. Sometimes we reject pleasure because we think it is morally

[4] Scanlon, *What We Owe To each Other*, p. 100.
[5] Jens Timmermann, 'Too Much of a Good Thing? Another Paradox of Hedonism', *Analysis* 65.2 (2005), pp. 144–6.
[6] Timmermann, 'Hedonism', p. 146.
[7] Timmermann, 'Hedonism', p. 144.

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wrong, or because it interferes with our having something else that is of value. This is a problem for hedonism, insofar as it suggests that there are goods other than pleasure. But it does not show that hedonism has an internal flaw.

Timmermann believes that there is another important phenomenon: sometimes we give up on an activity or type of experience, even though continuing would give us pleasure, precisely because we think that more pleasure is not worth having. For example, we may already be experiencing a great deal of sensual stimulation, and feel that more of the same is undesirable, even though it would be pleasurable (and would not reduce the quality of pleasure we experience).

> This is a problem for hedonism because: You cannot have too much of a good thing, let alone *the* good; but you can have too much pleasure. Ergo, pleasure and the human good are not identical.[8]

Hedonism is committed to the paradoxical claim that more of the good is not worth having. To avoid the paradox, the hedonist will have to deny that pleasure is the good and give up on hedonism. The new paradox implies that hedonism is internally flawed.

III. AVOIDING THE PARADOX

I believe that the phenomenon that Timmerman identified is real. Sometimes we really do reject pleasure on the basis that it is not worth having. Given that we do not always maximize pleasure, and it is implausible that we always have reason to maximize pleasure, there is a genuine problem for both Psychological and Normative Hedonism. But this problem does not require a hedonist of either type to give up on her hedonism. To see why, we need to look more closely at the structure of the two theories.

Psychological and Normative Hedonism both count as types of hedonism because they share the claim that pleasure is the good. We can make this explicit by restating each of them as a combination of two claims:

Psychological hedonism

P. All agents maximize their own individual good.
H. Pleasure is the good.

Normative hedonism

N. All agents have reason to maximize the good (their own individual good, or the good of all sentient creatures).
H. Pleasure is the good.

[8] Timmermann, 'Hedonism', p. 144.

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Psychological hedonism is a combination of two claims (P & H). Normative hedonism is a combination of two claims (N & H).

Timmermann has presented an example in which we do not pursue more pleasure, on the basis that it is not worth pursuing. In these examples, it is impossible for the claims H and P to be true together; and it is impossible for the two claims H and N to be true together. Timmermann concludes that we must give up H, the hedonist claim that pleasure is the good. But this does not follow from his argument, which simply shows that one of H or N (or both) must be false; and one of H or P (or both) must be false. To avoid the paradox, the hedonist must either reject H, the claim that pleasure is the good or reject P/N, the claim that the good is or should be maximized.

N is the claim that all agents have reason to maximize the good. This expresses the view that value is, in Scanlon's sense, teleological. Scanlon argues that not all values are of this kind. His example of a clearly non-teleological value is friendship. Since friendship is a good, we have reasons to be loyal to our friends and reasons not to betray them. We also have reason to cultivate our own friendships. Of course, there is a limit to how many people with whom we can genuinely be friends. But that is not the real issue. The point is that if I am already friends with Anna, Beth and Clare, I may decide it is not worth making friends with Deirdre even though I could become friends with her if I tried.

Does this show that, since 'you cannot have too much of a good thing', friendships cannot be good? Does it constitute a 'paradox of friendship'? Of course not. Friendship may be a good, but not a good to be maximized.

The hedonist of course will deny that friendship is an underivative good. But she can agree with Scanlon that value need not have a teleological structure. And she can use this insight to dissolve the 'new paradox of hedonism'. She can insist that whilst pleasure is the good, it is not to be maximized: we have reason to pursue the appropriate quantity of pleasure, not as much as we possibly can. She can revise the thesis of Normative hedonism as follows:

*Normative hedonism**

N*. All agents have reason to pursue the good (their own individual good, or the good of all sentient creatures) appropriately.
H. Pleasure is the good.

Psychological hedonism can be revised as follows:

*Psychological hedonism**

P*. All agents pursue their own individual good appropriately.
H. Pleasure is the good.

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It is compatible with Psychological hedonism* and Normative hedonism* that we may reject extra pleasure on the basis that we already have too much of it: to pursue pleasure in those circumstances would be to pursue it inappropriately. There is no more of a paradox here than there is a 'paradox of friendship'.

Nevertheless, the 'new paradox of hedonism' has more of a paradoxical air than the 'paradox of friendship'. This is because we are much more willing to assume that the value of pleasure is teleological. The idea that we should have as much friendship as possible is plainly absurd; the idea that we should have as much pleasure as we can sounds much more reasonable.

But the hedonist can remind us that the occasions when we do not have reason to pursue more pleasure are rare. It is unusual for us to overdose on sensual pleasure, but not in such a way that more would be unpleasant. Typically, more pleasure is worth having. We naturally assume that this is always the case; but we see that we are mistaken, once we reflect on the kind of examples that Timmermann has highlighted.[9]

IV. PLEASURE AS A COMPONENT OF THE GOOD

Timmermann's examples do not prove that pleasure is not the good. Instead, they show that hedonists have to reject *either* their claim that pleasure is the good *or* their maximization claim (the claim that the good is maximized, or that it should be). But I believe that the examples are more significant. They show not merely that we cannot accept both maximization and hedonism, but also that we cannot accept both maximization and the much weaker claim that pleasure is *a* good. In order to show this, I will begin by considering an objection to the argument of the previous section, an objection to drawing an analogy between the value of friendship and the value of pleasure as conceived by the hedonist.

Scanlon's example of friendship illustrates that there can be *a* good that is not to be maximized. But obviously, friendship is not the only good. Perhaps when I am friends with Anna, Beth and Clare, I have no reason to be friends with Deirdre only because that would affect my

[9] Timmermann considers a response to the new paradox which denies that we have reason to maximize pleasure, on the basis that we are not capable of appreciating goodness under all circumstances. He rejects this response, questioning whether it is right to separate the theory of value from the theory of what we ought to do; and whether it makes sense to say that pleasure is good, independently of its being the kind of experience that we appreciate. By contrast, if we deny that we have reason to maximize pleasure because pleasure is not a teleological value, we do not separate the theory of value from the theory of what we ought to do; and we do not claim that the value of pleasure is independent of our appreciation of it.

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ability to achieve other goods, like a successful career or a rewarding family life.

Suppose that friendship, family life and career are all goods, each of which contributes to the overall good, G. In order to maximize G, I may have to balance each of the goods that contribute to G against one another. I may have to moderate my pursuit of my friendships for the sake of my career, and moderate the number of hours I spend at work for the sake of my family, for example. In order to maximize G, I have to pursue friendships, family life and career success appropriately, not maximally. I may have *no* reason to maximize individual goods, precisely *because* I have reason to maximize the good, G. Even if friendship need not be maximized, it may still be true that the overall good G must be maximized. Scanlon's discussion of the value of friendship may illustrate the possibility that we have no reason to maximize something that is a good; but it does not prove that we have no reason to maximize the overall good.

The hedonist does not claim that pleasure is *a* good; he claims that pleasure is *the* good. To avoid the paradox, he must claim that we do not always have reason to maximize *the* overall good. The analogy with friendship, it may be argued, does not support this claim.

Suppose that pleasure is a good. It is one component of the overall good G, together with friendship, career success and family life. Suppose also that we do have reason to maximize the overall good G.

We do not have reason to maximize individual components of G at all times, because these goods can conflict with one another: we may have to moderate the pursuit of one good for the sake of another. But since we have reason to maximize the overall G, when there is only one component of the good at issue, we do have reason to maximize that good. For example, we may have to moderate our pursuit of career success for the sake of family life, but when no other goods are relevant except career success, we have reason to maximize our success. Similarly, we may have to moderate our pursuit of pleasure for the sake of family life, but when no other goods are relevant except pleasure, we have reason to maximize our pleasure.

In Timmermann's examples, one has no reason to gain extra pleasure, because one already has enough of it: 'one is experiencing enough pleasure to the point that more would in itself be undesirable'.[10] These are *not* examples where gaining extra pleasure would interfere with attaining other kinds of goods.

Timmermann set up the examples in order to show that hedonism has an internal flaw. It would be impossible for him to prove this if it

[10] Timmermann, 'Hedonism', p. 144.

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were essential to the examples that they included some genuine good other than pleasure. The examples were specifically designed in such a way that pleasure was the only good relevant to them.

Obviously, gaining more sensual pleasure when one already has plenty may sometimes interfere with the pursuit of other goods. But it need not always do so. In these examples, were you to gain the extra pleasure, you would *not* miss out on anything that anyone might think to be good, nor would experiencing extra pleasure diminish the quality of the pleasure you already enjoy. The only relevant good in these examples is pleasure.

Since there are no other goods at issue, if pleasure is a component of G, and if G should be maximized, then it follows that we must have reason to maximize pleasure. But in the circumstances described, we have no reason to gain extra pleasure. So we are forced to conclude that in these circumstances *either* pleasure cannot contribute to the overall good G after all, *or* the overall good should not be maximized.

We can continue to insist that we always have reason to maximize the good. But if we do so, we are forced to conclude not just that pleasure cannot be *the* good, but that it cannot be *a* good. This is very implausible indeed; much more implausible than the hedonist's claim that pleasure is the only good. Many people who are not hedonists think that pleasure is valuable (though they believe that there are other kinds of good too). It is highly implausible that they should give up their view just because, in some circumstances, more pleasure is not worth having.

This strongly suggests that instead of giving up the claim that pleasure is valuable, we should give up the claim that we always have reason to maximize the good.

The hedonist can therefore claim that he too is entitled to give up the claim that we always have reason to maximize the good, rather than the claim that pleasure is the good. He can accept normative hedonism* instead. But the real importance of the argument is not that hedonism is coherent after all, but that the following conditional must be true: if pleasure is valuable, then it is not a value that we always have reason to maximize. The teleological view of value is not the correct account of the value of pleasure.

V. IS THE PHENOMENON REAL?

I have argued that Timmermann's examples strongly suggest that we do not always have to maximize the good, and they show that if pleasure is valuable, it is not a value that we always have reason to maximize. But these conclusions follow only if the phenomenon Timmermann identified is real.

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I believe that, sometimes, we may decide that more sensual pleasure is not worth having, that we do not have reason to have as much pleasure as possible, and not because it would interfere with our having other goods. It is very difficult to argue against those who disagree: it essentially depends on one's judgement of the examples Timmermann presents.

It is possible, however, to clarify what is essential to the examples. It is not necessarily often the case that more pleasure is not worth having. It is not essential that anyone has in fact turned down pleasure on that basis. Nor is it necessary that anyone actually had reason to do so. The claim that pleasure is a teleological value, and the claim that we have reason to maximize the good, are not claims about all the instances of pleasures or of goods that have actually existed: they are claims about the value of any possible pleasures. All that is essential to the examples is that it is *possible* that someone might have reason to refuse more pleasure. If this comparatively weak claim is accepted, the rest of the argument follows.

VI. CONCLUSION

There are many objections to hedonism: that it fails to reflect our experience of the variety of kinds of value; that it is impractical; that it may even be morally repulsive. The 'new paradox' of hedonism was supposed to show that, in addition, it has a fatal internal flaw. I have not defended hedonism against these objections. But I have shown that hedonists can avoid the new paradox without giving up on their claim that pleasure is the good, provided that they give up their other claim, that all agents have reason to maximize the good. The new paradox does not prove that hedonism is incoherent: its significance lies elsewhere.

It is widely believed that the teleological view of value is correct: if something is a value, we have reason to bring about as much of it as possible. But this is not the only way to think of value; instead, we can view it as relating to practical reasons of many different kinds. Some of these are reasons to promote the value. But they may instead include reasons to respect it (in the Kantian sense in which we are required to respect rational wills but not bring into existence as many as possible). Because friendship is valuable, we have reasons to be loyal and to treat our friends well, but not reasons to have as many friendships as possible. From this perspective, anyone who accepts a teleological conception of value has taken one of the kinds of reason to which value can be related – reasons to promote the value – and 'fetishized' it, mistakenly assuming that it is definitive of value itself.

Timmermann's examples are significant because they imply that sometimes more pleasure is not worth having. Timmermann concluded

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that pleasure could not be the good. But in reality, the examples show that either pleasure is not a component of the good, that it is not good at all, or that we do not always have reason to maximize the good. I have suggested that it is preferable to reject the latter rather than the former. But in any case, the teleological view of value is clearly false of pleasure: if pleasure is a value, it is not a teleological value.

alison.hills@sjc.ox.ac.uk

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