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ETHICAL HEDONISM (Indian and Western)

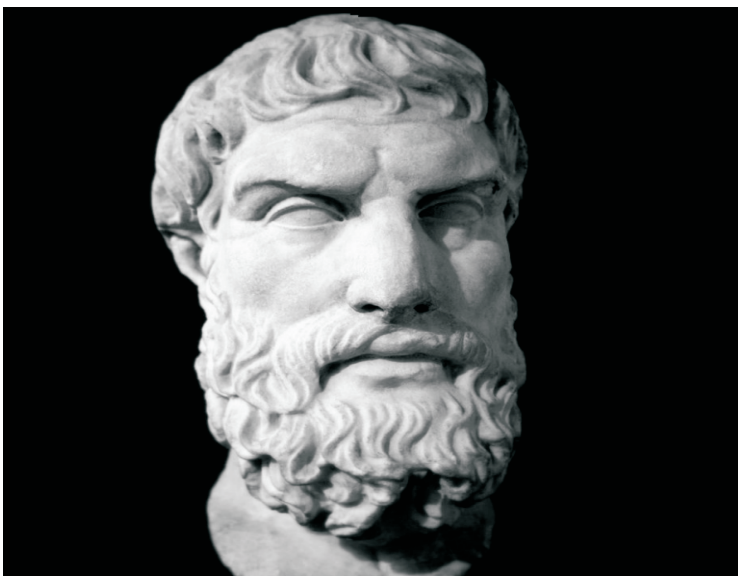
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ABSTRACT:

Ethical hedonism holds that pleasantness is the only quality because of which an experience is good or valuable. A good action is an action which leads to a pleasant experience as its consequence, and the right action at any moment is the one which will lead to more pleasant experiences or, as we commonly say, to greater pleasure than any other action which is possible for the agent at that particular moment. Ethical hedonism does not merely say that one of the factors which makes an action good is the pleasantness of the experiences which it brings about, for this is a view which many moralists, who are not ethical hedonists, would adopt; ethical hedonism holds strictly that no consequence of an action except pleasantness and unpleasantness, which we may call its hedonic consequences, have the slightest relevance whatever to the goodness of the action.

Key Words: Ethical hedonism , psychological hedonism, hedonic consequences.



INTRODUCTION

Ethical hedonism is a theory of ethics telling how men ought to act and what men ought to desire. In this way it differs from psychological hedonism, which is a theory of psychology holding that men always do those actions which have pleasant consequences and do have such natures that they can desire nothing but pleasantness. If a psychological hedonist were to go a step further than psychological hedonists usually do, and maintain that men always do those actions which bring the greatest possible amount of pleasantness to themselves, they there could be no theory of ethics at all for men would always act in a certain way and would be unable to act in any other. As a matter of fact, psychological hedonists do not generally take this step. They hold that man always desires pleasure but not necessarily the greatest possible pleasure: so that while the object of every action is the attainment of a pleasant experience, the pleasantness sought may not be either the most intense or the most lasting pleasantness possible for the agent. In this way they leave room for a theory of ethics that, while men do always seek pleasant experiences, they ought to seek for themselves those forms of pleasant experience which are most intense and most lasting. This theory is called egoistic ethical hedonism, and, if psychological hedonism were true, it would be the only possible theory of ethics. Many ethical hedonists have been at the same time psychological hedonists, and if they had succeeded in demonstrating the truth of their psychological theory, they would certainly have refuted all other ethical theories than egoistic hedonism.

Few hedonists, however, have accepted egoistic hedonism as their sole theory. There are two kinds of ethical hedonism: (a) egoistic hedonism, which

holds that each man ought to seek his own maximum pleasure ('his own maximum pleasure J being. A short way of describing those experiences which will bring to him a greater surplus of pleasantness over unpleasantness than any other experiences possible for him); and (b) universalistic hedonism, more commonly known as utilitarianism, which holds that each man ought to seek the maximum pleasure of all human beings, or even of all beings capable of experiencing pleasantness and unpleasantness.

In estimating the amount of pleasantness caused by an action, two factors need to be taken into account, the intensive or degree of pleasantness caused, and the duration or length of time that the pleasant experience lasts. It is difficult to estimate the comparative importance to be given to these two factors. Is an intense pleasantness of a short duration like that enjoyed in eating a sweetmeat to be reckoned greater than a less intense pleasantness of longer duration like that of lying in bed? Is a shilling spent on a novel that will give us several hours of mildly pleasant reading more productive of pleasure than the shilling spent on a cinema seat where our pleasantness will be more intense while it lasts but over in a couple of hours? Bentham suggested other factors which should be taken into account in comparing two pleasant experiences which regard to their pleasantness, namely (a) certainty or the degree of probability of the pleasantness resulting from the action, (b) propinquity or the nearness in time of the pleasant result, (c) fecundity or the power of the pleasant experience to produce further pleasant experiences in its train, (d) purity or freedom from intermixture with unpleasant experiences, and (e) extent or the number of persons affected by it. In our practical consideration of the results of an action, the probability of a particular result occurring, is a very important factor; Hamlet, for example, argued that it was unwise to take vengeance on his uncle while engaged in prayer because of the 'certainty' of his thus escaping the punishment he deserved. Propinquity is important only in so far as it affects probability; we prefer an immediate pleasure to a more distant pleasure because of the greater probability of our actually attaining it; there is less time for the proverbial 'slip 'twixt, the cup and the lip'. Fecundity and purity are really secondary factors determining the intensity and the duration of the pleasant consequences. A pleasure that produces other pleasures has either its intensity or its duration or more probably both increased. Purity means increased intensity for there is less unpleasant experience to reduce that surplus of pleasantness over unpleasantness.

A moralist may adopt Ethical hedonism for anyone of three reasons. (a) He may hold that the terms 'good' and 'pleasant' have exactly the same connotation or meaning, so that the one may be used for the other indifferently, or more probably he will hold that 'good' has the same meanings as 'productive of pleasant consequences'. (He will be referring of course only to the strictly ethical use of the term 'good'). If this view were correct, it is difficult to understand how people come to argue as to whether hedonism is a true theory or not, and their discussions are not merely discussions as to the meaning of terms. We may, with Professor Broad, call the holder of this theory an analytic hedonist. (b) A moralist may hold that, while the terms 'good' and 'productive of pleasant consequences' are not identical in meaning the experience of the human race has shown that good actions do, as a matter of fact, produce pleasant consequences. Such a hedonist has still to face the fundamental question of what it is that makes a good, or he may take, as such hedonists often do, a skeptical attitude to the possibility of this question being answered. In Professor Broad's terminology, this moralist is an empirical synthetic hedonist. (c) A moralist may hold that while "good" and 'productive of pleasant consequences' are not identical in meaning, yet they stand in a necessary relation to one another. A good action does not merely as a matter of fact produce pleasant consequences; from its very nature it must produce pleasant consequences. If we reject analytic hedonism as obviously misrepresenting the state of ethical argument this becomes the ground of hedonism most worthy of a critical examination. Professor Broad calls it a priori synthetic hedonism.

THE STANDARD AS END

The standard as End of Sukha or pleasure

The hedonistic standard of pleasure also occupies an important place in the ethics of the Hindus. It is the Carvakas that are created with this sensualistic standard of pleasure as the guiding principle in morality. The Carvaka motto of life is; live for pleasure as you can, and even if life is a blend of pleasure and pain the wise man should so regulate his life as to enjoy the maximum of pleasure with the minimum of unavoidable pain. It is sheer folly to forego pleasure because it is mixed up with pain just as it is folly to give up eating fish to escape the trouble

of removing the scales and fish bones, or to give up cooking the meal to escape the annoyance of beggars infesting the disturbing us. On the contrary, we should be reconciled to life as it is and should endeavour to curtail our suffering as much as possible. This is true morality which consists in so regulating life as to make it yield the maximum of pleasure. Similarly immorality consists in unnecessarily increasing the amount of avoidable suffering or pain. Hence rightness and wrongness are to be determined by reference to upakara, well being and apakara, ill-being, i.e., by egoistic pleasure or happiness and egoistic pain or suffering, and as the body as consisting of the elementary particles of matter is all that we mean by the self, soul or spirit, it is the bodily or 'sensual pleasures that count, and it is only the fools that sacrifice physical pleasures in anticipation of super sensuous pleasures to come in a future life. In fact there is no future life, the soul perishing which the disintegration of the body so that the wisely-regulated life is that which has made the most of his life so as to make it yield the maximum of pleasure. It is necessary therefore to live prudentially so as to increase our happiness and reduce our suffering in this life, and it is even proper to purchase the pleasures of life by incurring debts, and other similar means. (Rnam Krtva ghrtam pibet).

It is to be seen that the Carvake hedonism is gross and sensualistic as well as egoistic. It is the happiness of the self that counts in the last resort and a prudential and tactful regard for others with a view to self gratification is the only form of altruism that is recommended as rational and proper. Similarly any discrimination between sensual and refined pleasures in view of qualitative superiority is condemned as foolish.

N.B.- It is doubtful however whether the Carvakas really preached this gross hedonism which has been ascribed to them. The slokas ascribed to Brhaspati or some other carvaka teacher may be nothing but a caricature of their doctrine by their opponents, or they may be only exaggerated tirades of some Carvaka controversialist against the conventional teaching then current. As a matter of fact we hear of different classes of carvakas such the Susiksita or refined carvakas and the Dhurta or astute Carvakas besides the usual run of the Lokayatikas. They must have represented different grades of refinement in hedonism in their ethical teaching just as they are actually reported to have taught materialism, naturalism and skepticism in their metaphysical and psychological doctrines.

This brief survey of Carvaka hedonism with the general background of the western notion of hedonistic ethics shows that the ethical theory of the Carvakas is undoubtedly based on the choice of pleasure as the ideal of life. Since the carvakas believe that hedonistic behavior is congenital and instinctive, it is evident that their ethical hedonism is based on psychological hedonism. It was almost bound to follow this course because the Carvakas did not probe human nature very deeply and believed only in the common man's perception as the only valid source of knowledge.

But at the same time the Carvakas try to defend ethical hedonism by forwarding some crude arguments. Examples no one rejects (concerning the rice and chaff, fish and bones) are offered only to convince the layman. Their exhortation for the pursuit of pleasures is further intensified by saying that those who reject pleasure because of the presence of pains are fools, thereby indicating that ethical hedonism is logical. Even if one were to disregard the fact that we are always inclined towards pleasure, he would be a fool to do so. Wisdom lies in adopting pleasure and eschewing pains. Thus Carvaka hedonism is not merely based on psychological evidence, but also tries to be an independent ethical theory.

If we were to apply the criterion of western hedonism to Carvaka ethics we shall have to say that it is not utilitarian or universalistic. Western hedonism advocates the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But Carvaka hedonism harps only on the satisfaction of sensual desires by the individual, even if he has to incur debt. Carvaka hedonism is grossly egoistic- nay even selfish. This very narrow-minded attitude is visible with regard to the conflict between present pleasure and remote pleasure. The pleasure of the moment is regarded as the sole purpose of man's behavior. If the Carvakas had admitted the utilitarian view of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, they might have abandoned their whole theory, because it would lead to the recognition of Dharma, or social duty. The Carvakas are consistent in their shortsightedness, and therefore they do not advocate social well-being. That is the reason it is sometimes remarked that carvaka ethics is a lower type of hedonism. Before we discuss how far this remark is justified we ought to examine the Carvaka ethics

dispassionately. We should not forget that the modification with regard to the means of seeking pleasure in the Carvaka School indicates that it was not a stark sensualism and a grossly selfish philosophy of life.

It is quite correct to say that for the Carvaka system pleasure is the highest good and that to sacrifice the present to future is unjustified. The past and the future being dead and doubtful respectively, the present alone is regarded as the possession of the individuals. These facts lead us to the conclusion that carvaka hedonism was an extreme form and that sensual pleasure was the only end of life. But at the same time it is noteworthy that later on the Carvakas leaned towards social wellbeing and even towards spiritualism. The later Carvakas believed that consciousness was a quality of the mind and that the mind could control volition as well as other organs. The Carvakas began to admire the highest level of spiritual pleasures and preferred the pleasures of intellect to those of the body. The learned Carvakas, the Susiksita Carvakas, practiced sixty-four fine arts. This proves, however, that after all Carvaka was not a lower type of hedonism. The cultivation of the fine arts itself indicated the cultural tastes of the ancient Indian materialists.

If we were to measure Carvaka hedonism from the point of view of the collective pleasure of the society, again we shall have to admit that it lacks the utilitarian touch which we find in the Western hedonism of Mill, Bentham and Sidgwick. There is no doubt that the conflict between the pleasure of the individual and that of society, between individual rights and social obligations, and between egoism and altruism has been a constant puzzle for western hedonists and philosophers, and that they have not been able to offer any satisfactory solution to this knotty problem. But the utilitarian school of Mill, democratic philosophy, and lately Marxist communism in the West emphasize the general good.

The first view, or the doctrine of the identification of self with the sense organs, is based on the facts that consciousness and bodily movements follow from the initiation of the sense, and that the judgments expressed in "I am blind," showing the identity of the self with the sense organs, are universally accepted as valid. Still opposed by the spiritualists it [Carvaka] maintains that vital principle itself is really the source of intelligence, as the senses depend for existence and operation on it. When this view was attacked its sponsors came to maintain that consciousness is a quality of the mind.

This fact shows how gradually the Carvaka philosophy tried to give up its rigidity and attempted to rise from love of the material, and the biological concepts of the self, to the mental concept (Manomayakosa) of it, as propounded in the Upanisads. My contention is that all the schools of Indian philosophy, where heterodox or orthodox, derive their main concepts from the Upanisadic and the Vedic philosophy, which is the rock and foundation of Indian thought and culture. The different schools have undoubtedly based their tenets, particularly their metaphysical notions, on the Upanisadic philosophy, and have in fact given different interpretations of the nature of ultimate reality. The differences have mainly arisen because of the emphasis of the schools on one or other Kosas, or 'layers' of human personality, the fact being that man is not one or two, but all the five Kosas, the physical, or Annamaya; the biological, or Pranamaya; the psychological, or Manomaya; the intellectual, or Vijnamaya; and the spiritual, or Amandamaya Kosas, all in one.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a disciple of Bentham's. Mill explains the theory:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals. Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.

The principle of utility or the Greatest happiness Principle as formulated by Mill maintains that rightness and wrongness are matters of degree. An act is right "in proportion as" it tends to promote happiness. Therefore, the more happiness it will produce, the more right it is; the more unhappiness it will produce, the more wrong it is.

Mill is quite explicit that "that standard is not the agent's own happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. . . , " because

the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires

him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.

Most people since Mill have interpreted his Greatest Happiness version of Act Utilitarianism as requiring people to do whatever will produce the most total happiness in any given situation. For example, Henry Sidgwick (1830-1900) wrote:

By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct.

The hedonistic standard of pleasure also occupies an important place in the ethics of the Hindus. It is the Carvakas that are credited with this sensualistic standard of pleasure as the guiding principle in morality. The Carvakas motto of life is: live for pleasure as you can, and even if life is a blend of pleasure and pain the wise man should so regulate his life as to enjoy the maximum of pleasure with the minimum of unavoidable pain. It is sheer folly to forego pleasure because it is mixed up with pain just as it is folly to give up eating fish to escape the trouble of removing the scales and fishbones, or to give up cooking the meal to escape the annoyance of beggars infesting and disturbing us. On the contrary, we should be reconciled to life as it is and should endeavour to curtail our suffering as much as possible. This is true morality which consists in so regulating life as to make it yield the maximum of pleasure. Similarly immorality consists in unnecessarily increasing the amount of avoidable suffering or pain. Hence rightness and wrongness are to be determined by reference to *upakara*, Well-being and *apakara*, ill-being, i.e., by egoistic pleasure or happiness and egoistic pain or suffering, and as the body as consisting of the elementary particles of matter is all that we mean by the self, soul or spirit, it is the bodily or sensual pleasures that count, and it is only the fools that sacrifice physical pleasures in anticipation of supersensuous pleasures to come in a future life. In fact there is no future life, the soul perishing with the disintegration of the body so that the wisely-regulated life is that which has made the most of this life so as to make it yield maximum of pleasure. It is necessary therefore to live prudentially so as to increase our happiness and reduce our suffering in this life, and it is even proper to purchase the pleasure of life by incurring debts, and other similar means. (*Enam Krtva ghrtam pibet*)

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