

Princeton Philosophical Society: Normative Hedonism

The claim: *only* pleasurable mental states should have value and *only* displeasurable mental states should have disvalue non-instrumentally (all other 'ends' should be solely instrumental toward attaining pleasure and avoiding pain)

Working definitions:

- ▶ Pleasurable mental state: a subjective mental state which you would prefer to be in than not to be in
- ▶ Displeasurable mental state: a subjective mental states which you would prefer not to be in than to be in

Reasons why normative hedonism is plausible:

- ▶ Evolutionary evidence indicates that the development of moral rules and norms was necessary to help facilitate beneficial social cooperation; the rules are not valuable in-and-of-themselves but simply as instrumental tools to improve welfare and quality of life.
- ▶ Many deontologists would accept that in extreme circumstances the ends justify the means. Why is this so? Is it consistent with the belief that rules have independent moral authority? For that matter, why should we privilege rules non-instrumentally at all?

Classical objections:

- ▶ 'None such' objection: no unified state or property present in all instances of pleasure, therefore normative hedonism does not state a determinate thesis
 - Counter: a preference definition of pleasure, avoids this objection
- ▶ 'Not all' objection: pleasure has value only under certain conditions (when, for instance, it does not arise out of a 'bad' deed)
 - Counter: this presumes the existence of another value system, so it reduces to the 'not only' objection
- ▶ 'Not only' objection: other values are as important or more important than pleasure and pain
 - Counter: if one accepts that others values are important, this objection is true; but the normative hedonist would seek to show that they aren't *really* committed to other values

Robert Nozick's experience machine: suppose there was a machine that operated similarly to 'the matrix'. You could specify any experience, any sort of pleasure or feeling, any subjective state you wanted to be in. You would then be plugged in to the machine and it would deliver that subjective state to you for as long as you wanted. While inside, you would not be aware that you were inside of a machine: all of your experiences and feelings would seem completely real to you. Would you use this machine? If not, why not?

One potential answer is to say that you value authentic experience. But if you were in the machine, you would feel as if your experiences were authentic. And in our world, how do you know that what you do is actually 'authentic'? All you know are the mental states and sense-perceptions you have: for all you know, you could indeed be in a computer simulation. You could again say that you value other 'real' people in-and-of-themselves. But once more, inside the machine you would subjectively 'know' that the people you interact with are real. And in our world, you can't know that anyone else actually exists as an independently thinking being.

More fundamentally: all you have access to are your subjective mental states. Why should you care about an 'objective' reality when you have no direct access to it and cannot even be sure that it exists?