

Does normative  
hedonism provide a  
convincing account of  
value?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## Introduction

I focus on normative hedonism as a theory of rational action, where it is one of several competing explanations of value in goal-oriented rational action. Specifically, I focus on Nozick's experience machine as an objection to this view. The thesis of my essay is that normative hedonism *does not provide a convincing account of value*.

My essay unfolds in four sections. In Section 1, I introduce normative hedonism, making useful comparisons to descriptive hedonism and prudential hedonism, as well as explaining central ideas of final and instrumental value. In Section 2, I expound Nozick's experience-machine thought experiment against hedonism. I accommodate the critiques of scholars who argue that cognitive biases distort the intended effect of the thought experiment, by introducing a variation that is not as vulnerable to these biases. In Section 3, I explain Sharon Hewitt's objection to the experience machine: that hedonism justifies, and is bolstered by, anti-hedonistic intuitions arising from the thought experiment. In Section 4, I raise two objections against Hewitt. First, the desire for contact with reality and for authentic experiences is more plausibly explained by meaningfulness than pleasure. But secondly, even disregarding the first objection, her account has a troubling implication: it discredits all intuitions about value and delegitimises the entire normative debate about value. Finally, I conclude by recapping my arguments and re-emphasising my thesis.

### 1. What is normative hedonism?

Descriptive hedonism is the view that people are motivated by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, *as a matter of fact*. In contrast, normative hedonism is the following view: “the only thing that people are ever rationally motivated by is the prospect of gaining pleasure or avoiding pain” (Chappell, 2014, p. 94). Normative hedonism concerns what we *ought* to do. It is also distinguishable from prudential hedonism, which says that pain and pleasure are what ultimately contribute to, and detract from, our well-being (Weijers, 2012, p. 18). With normative hedonism, the focus is on goal-oriented rational action. Importantly, normative hedonism partly entails the truth of prudential hedonism (Weijers, 2012, p. 18), for if pleasure were *not* good for us, it is hard to see why it would have final value, and why we should be rationally motivated by it.

A goal is rational insofar as it has final value, or something instrumental to it (Barber, 2014, p. 45). Something has final value when it is valuable as an end in itself; whereas something has instrumental value when it is a means to an end, whether something else of instrumental value or something of final value (Barber, 2014, p. 22). We ask what we value a given experience or object for, and then we ask the same question of that answer, and so on. Eventually, we reach a point where something seems valuable in itself. This is what is meant by final value. For normative hedonists, pleasure is the only source of final value, and pain final disvalue. Everything else intuitively positive – friendship, knowledge, narrative art – is merely instrumentally valuable towards pleasure. A rational act, therefore, is one that promotes pleasure or something instrumental to it. As pleasure and pain are all that matter, regardless of source, two lives equal in net pleasure are equal in

value (The Open University (OU), 2018a). It follows that only the *internal felt experience* of pleasure/pain is of concern to hedonists. This, precisely, is what Nozick objects to.

## 2. Nozick's experience machine and its stronger variation

The experience machine is an objection against any theory that claims that internal experience is all that matters for final value, including hedonism.

Nozick (1974, p. 145) asks us to imagine that neuropsychologists have invented a machine that could manipulate our brains to give us any experiences we desired. We could not tell that these were fabricated experiences. Interpersonal relationships would seem real; summitting Everest would seem real. For the hedonist, this would entail whatever experiences were instrumental to achieving pleasure. For those who worry that desired experiences may change with time, suppose that part of the machine's function is to determine precisely this and adjust accordingly. Suppose also that the machines are self-sustaining, so that no one needs to service them. With advanced-enough technology, this could easily happen.

The questions Nozick (1974, p. 145) asks are "Should you plug in[?]" and "Would you plug in?" As the argument goes, the hedonist has to answer "Yes", because it is the ideal life and rational course of action. Yet Nozick assumes the vast majority would answer "No". This attacks a fundamental premise of hedonism: that we are rationally motivated by pleasure and avoiding pain; or that pleasure is the only source of final value. If one can establish that something other than pleasure has final value, normative hedonism is false. The implication of the experience machine is that contact

with reality has final value as well as pleasure. In the machine, one is not actually achieving anything and one's relationships are not real. The intuition suggests that we value achieving these things in the real world; having an effect on the real world. Another way of putting it is that, while hedonism argues that just the experience of pleasure matters, it seems that false pleasures are worth *less* than real pleasures - so contrary to hedonism, we have a desire for *authentic* experiences.

There are several ways to respond to this. An objection from authors such as De Brigard (2010) and Weijers (2014) is that our intuitions about the experience machine are distorted by irrelevant influences and cognitive biases. For example, the idea of the neuropsychologists manipulating your brain carries a sinister connotation. You may be worried about renegeing on your responsibilities to friends and family by entering the machine. Because of imaginative resistance, you simply may not be able to truly imagine the scenario, due to revulsion or abnormal moral standards involved (Barber, 2014, p. 33). Primarily, it is argued that status-quo bias - preferring the existing state of affairs as a form of risk- and uncertainty-aversion (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988, p. 7) - is the driving force behind intuitions to not plug in (Barber, 2014, p. 44). I spend most of this essay focusing on the response from Hewitt (2010), who argues that hedonistic reasons are in fact consistent with our intuitions to not plug in. But in an effort to accommodate claims of status-quo bias, I present an experience-machine variation which does not seem vulnerable to this and seems to show that anti-hedonistic intuitions sustain.

Taking cue from Weijers (2014, pp. 522-523) removing oneself or loved ones from the judgement decreases the influence of the aforementioned biases, especially status-quo bias. Making judgements about merely potential lives, with whom you have no personal connection, allows relevant considerations to play a more significant role. Unfortunately, Weijers does not stipulate that the choice to be made is between two lives *equal in experience*, which would be the relevant way to assess hedonism (OU, 2018). It is easy to imagine that someone with a horrible life would plug into the experience machine. All this shows is that in some cases, reality is valued less than experience. It may still be that reality has final value in addition to pleasure. Instead, one should hold all variables equal, apart from the one being tested: whether reality has value.

Consider the following experientially-equal experience machine comparison from Lin (2016, p. 321). Imagine persons A and B, who have equivalent lives in experience of pleasure/pain. To reduce imaginative resistance, suppose that they enjoy an average quality of life for a Westerner. But A is living in the real world and all B knows is his life in the experience machine; a robot attached him shortly after birth. For the hedonist, these lives must be equal in well-being.

Through removing oneself as being the agent confronted with the decision, this case avoids some of the biases highlighted by De Brigard and Weijers. Our intuitions are not distorted by irrelevant influences such as worries over renegeing on our responsibilities to loved ones. Nor does this scenario exhibit status-quo bias; as Weijers (2014, p. 522) points out, removing the personal aspect removes fear of uncertainty and risk. Additionally, the status quo for <https://assignbuster.com/does-normative-hedonism-provide-a-convincing-account-of-value/>

both persons A and B are their respective environments, as they have known nothing else (Lin, 2016, p. 322). It should also be noted that, while this is an argument directly against prudential hedonism concerning well-being, if successful, it weakens normative hedonism because it somewhat relies on the truth of prudential hedonism (Weijers, 2012, p. 18).

I contend that most would respond that A's life is better than that of B, despite identical experience. Decreasing the influence of irrelevant biases makes it more plausible that people do have anti-hedonistic intuitions of valuing reality or authentic experiences.

A remaining objection, from Hewitt (2010), is to argue that hedonism actually justifies our anti-hedonistic intuitions. It is this argument I turn to now.

### 3. Hewitt's debunking argument of anti-hedonistic intuitions

According to Hewitt (2010, p. 332), "the falsity of psychological hedonism by no means entails the falsity of normative hedonism." Nozick's experience machine may show that things other than pleasure seem to matter to us, but this is grounds to reject descriptive (psychological) hedonism, *not* normative hedonism. The fact that things seem to matter intrinsically does not mean that they objectively have final value (I use "final value" where Hewitt uses "intrinsic value") (Hewitt, 2010, p. 332). The response draws upon the idea that one cannot derive an ought from an is. It establishes a clear distinction between something mattering subjectively to someone (or many), and something having final value independent of intuitions, judgement, feelings and desires (Hewitt, 2010, p. 344).

<https://assignbuster.com/does-normative-hedonism-provide-a-convincing-account-of-value/>

Hewitt is correct that one cannot logically deduce objective final value from the fact that it seems to matter to many people. But a defender of the experience machine can still argue that reality having final value is the *inference to the best explanation* from the fact that many competent judges of value believe so (Weijers, 2013, p. 14). As Hewitt rightly points out, deductive reasoning is problematic in this instance. However, *abductive* reasoning - inference to the best explanation from the available evidence, without a logical link (Douven, 2017) - arguably points to the answer: reality has final value. Unless a more plausible explanation for these anti-hedonistic intuitions is provided, it seems reasonable to believe that reality has final value.

Hewitt attempts to debunk anti-hedonistic intuitions about the experience machine and explain why they are mostly consistent with hedonism. Hewitt (2010, pp. 334-337) lays the foundation for this argument, by emphasising that pleasure and pain are not just ends, but means. They are instrumental in acting as indicators to guide future action towards more pleasure and less pain. They are essentially phenomenological feedback from present actions and train us how to act. If acting on a present motivation leads to pleasure, that action is reinforced; if it leads to pain, it is discouraged. As such, motivations we act on now are ones that have tended to produce pleasure in the past. Call it *hedonic conditioning*.

Hewitt (2010, p. 346) uses this foundation to appeal to the *paradox of hedonism*, which says that intrinsically desiring things other than pleasure is a superior method to achieving pleasure than intrinsically desiring pleasure (when I say "intrinsically desire", I mean thinking of it as having final value <https://assignbuster.com/does-normative-hedonism-provide-a-convincing-account-of-value/>



subjectively). Recall that the hedonic conditioning will have positively reinforced certain motivations. Due to limitations of time and energy - pragmatic concerns - the optimal way of acting is to intrinsically desire these things, promoting their instrumental capability as much as possible (Hewitt, 2010, p. 346). It is relatively inefficient to think of them as merely instrumentally valuable. This does not, however, mean they *objectively* have final value. In the context of Nozick's experience machine, the motivation to interact with the real world - to form real relationships, have real accomplishments and evade deception - has been positively reinforced by past hedonic conditioning. Given pragmatic concerns, it is optimal to think of contact with reality as having final value, even though it is merely instrumentally valuable. Moreover, her reasoning purports to explain why we do not pursue pleasure at any cost (plug into the machine), because such a desire would have been discouraged through hedonic conditioning. Therefore, hedonism in fact explains anti-hedonistic intuitions about the experience machine.

#### 4. Two objections to Hewitt

My first objection is to Hewitt's claim that pleasure - hedonic conditioning - explains a desire to track reality and have authentic experiences. She does not say whether she thinks that pleasure and pain *alone* are instrumental in forming intrinsic desires, but her argument is reliant on it being the case at least for the examples she gives. My purpose is not to point out all the problematic cases that do not seem explainable by hedonism. Instead, I focus on the reality claim specifically.

There are cases where tracking reality is associated with *less* pleasure.

Psychologists have found in numerous experiments that people think they are good drivers; most professors think they are well above average; and terminally ill patients tend to believe they will recover (Lauria et al., 2016, p. 120). Self-deception is an everyday affective coping mechanism that allows us to operate in the world. One achieves more pleasure than one would have otherwise. I do not claim that tracking reality is not generally associated with more pleasure. But there may be another reason that people have a desire for real and authentic experiences than hedonic conditioning. I certainly have no trouble accepting that life would be more pleasurable for me in the experience machine, and I accept that persons A and B from the above thought experiment are equivalent in net pleasure. Yet I still elect not to plug in, because I believe life is less *meaningful*. As a competing explanation of why people desire reality and authenticity, it is more plausible than hedonic conditioning. Given the pervasiveness of the view that meaningfulness is an important and distinct kind of value from the narrow hedonist conception of happiness (Metz, 2013), hedonists have not done enough to convince philosophers that the intrinsic desire to track reality can be explained away with reference to pleasure. But suppose that we agree with her account; it leads to the next objection.

The second, more serious, objection concerns Hewitt's argument that we should not trust anti-hedonistic intuitions. Her argument leads to scepticism of *all* intuitions, not just anti-hedonistic ones. Hewitt needs to show that anti-hedonistic intuitions are a special case in terms of unreliability, and that other intuitions are still reliable. This is because, presumably, the normative

debate cannot begin without some intuitions about value being taken as reliable. Hedonism, for example, requires the intuition that one life higher in pleasure is better than another life lower in pleasure.

Hewitt's (2010, p. 345) argument is that our intuitions come from our intrinsic desires, but that merely having those intrinsic desires is not evidence "for its actually *being* valuable". Hewitt (2010, p. 347) gives examples of knowledge, art and relationships as things we assign final value to, but do not objectively have it. This is not an exhaustive list: it is to illustrate her general point that intrinsic desires are no good reason for concluding that the objects have final value. And since our intrinsic desires are responsible for our intuitions, we therefore have no good reason to suppose our intuitions say anything about final value. Unfortunately, she has not provided sufficient reason to treat anti-hedonistic intuitions *alone* to this criticism. The implication of her argument is that we cannot trust *any*, including hedonistic, intuitions about value.

Hewitt may respond to this objection by arguing: since it is pleasure that explains the formation of our intrinsic desires, hedonistic intuitions about value are more reliable than others. Recall that this story is why Hewitt believes hedonism is strengthened by our anti-hedonistic intuitions to track reality. Granting Hewitt the truth of her hedonic-conditioning story does not resolve the issue. To illustrate the problem with this, imagine if we posited a different explanation for the formation of intrinsic desires: an evolutionary argument of the imperative to proliferate our genes. The purpose of this argument, similar to Hewitt's, would be to call into question the reliability of our intuitions about value, as such intuitions come from intrinsic desires

<https://assignbuster.com/does-normative-hedonism-provide-a-convincing-account-of-value/>

which we have no reason to accept as objectively having final value. We could not, however, make a special case for intuitions about value that align with the spread of genes. We would not conclude from this that, *normatively*, the spread of genes has final value and is the rational way to act. We would conclude that all intuitions are to be distrusted.

At most, assuming her story is correct, Hewitt has established the truth of descriptive hedonism, as she has told a psychological tale of how intrinsic desires arise. But telling this story to debunk anti-hedonistic intuitions has the implication of discrediting *all* intuitions about value. As explained through the analogy of spreading genes, the fact that it is pleasure that is responsible for intrinsic-desire formation does not establish that hedonistic intuitions about pleasure having final value should be taken more seriously, as a special case. As Lin (2016, p. 330) points out, without invoking supernatural agency, it would be a “mysterious coincidence that all of our desires are reinforced in accordance with how well they lead to the” only source of final value. That goes for the spread of genes, sex, food, pleasure, or any proposed explanation.

Thus, if Hewitt maintains her claim that anti-hedonistic intuitions should not be trusted, her account implies that all intuitions should not be trusted. This counts as much against her own hedonistic view as anyone else’s, and brings the whole normative debate into question. Alternatively, if she dropped this claim, and conceded that intuitions about value should be trusted to a certain extent, we are left with the anti-hedonistic intuitions that arise from the experience-machine variation. Because it seems too extreme to accept a claim which brings into question the entire debate about normative value, I <https://assignbuster.com/does-normative-hedonism-provide-a-convincing-account-of-value/>

of course accept the latter claim. I believe that Hewitt's argument that we should not trust anti-hedonistic intuitions fails. The anti-hedonistic intuitions sustain, and the inference to the best explanation is that something *other* than pleasure has final value, whether it be reality, authenticity or meaningfulness.

## Conclusion

To recap, in Section 1, I provided an account of normative hedonism in relation to prudential and descriptive hedonism, and defined final value and instrumental value. In Section 2, I introduced Nozick's experience machine and why it might be thought to count against hedonism. I then proposed a stronger experientially-equal variation that did not seem vulnerable to the cognitive-biases objection from De Brigard and Weijers. In Section 3, I offered Hewitt's debunking argument of anti-hedonistic intuitions and how it is she claims that hedonism justifies these intuitions. In Section 4, I raised two objections against Hewitt, with the main problem being that her account discredits all intuitions about value, without providing an explanation for why we should trust hedonistic intuitions. This has the troubling implication of eliminating any possibility of normative judgements about value.

My strategy against hedonism was to show that something other than pleasure plausibly has final value. I presented a variation of Nozick's experience machine that I argue survives the cognitive-biases objection. The onus was then on Hewitt to debunk sustaining anti-hedonistic intuitions and argue that hedonism justified them. Hewitt's argument had a troubling implication that brought her account into doubt. As she did not provide a

more plausible explanation for anti-hedonistic intuitions, the inference to the best explanation is that authenticity/reality, perhaps through making one's life meaningful, has final value. As hedonism requires pleasure being the *only* source of final value, my discussion is sufficient to conclude that normative hedonism does *not* provide a convincing account of value.

## Bibliography

- Barber, A. (2014) *Reason in Action*, Milton Keynes, The Open University.
- Chappell, T. (2014) *Truth in Fiction*, Milton Keynes, The Open University.
- De Brigard, F. (2010) 'Reading 2 De Brigard's empirical case against Nozick's argument', in Barber, A. (ed) *Reason in Action*, Milton Keynes, The Open University, pp. 147-153.
- Douven, I. (2017) 'Abduction', in Zalta, E. N. (ed) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online]. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abduction/#AbdGenIde> (Accessed 14 May 2019).
- Hewitt, S. (2010) 'What do our intuitions about the experience machine really tell us about hedonism?', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 151, no. 3, pp. 331-349 [Online]. Available at [https://www-jstor-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/stable/40926829?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/stable/40926829?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) (Accessed 13 May 2019).
- Lauria, F. Preissmann, D. Clement, F. (2016) 'Self-deception as affecting coping. An empirical perspective on philosophical issues', *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 41, pp. 119-134 [Online]. Available

at<https://www-sciencedirect-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/science/article/pii/S1053810016300137>(Accessed 17 May 2019).

- Lin, E. (2016) 'How to Use the Experience Machine', *Utilitas*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 314-332 [Online]. Available at [https://www-cambridge-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ED99B6ED85AACFCDE4F6C0AD49A56360/S0953820815000424a.pdf/how\\_to\\_use\\_the\\_experience\\_machine.pdf](https://www-cambridge-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ED99B6ED85AACFCDE4F6C0AD49A56360/S0953820815000424a.pdf/how_to_use_the_experience_machine.pdf)(Accessed 17 May 2019).
- Metz, T. (2013) 'The Meaning of Life', in Zalta, E. N. (ed) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online]. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/> (Accessed 18 May 2019).
- Nozick, R. (1974) 'Reading 1 Nozick and the experience machine', in Barber, A. (ed) *Reason in Action*, Milton Keynes, The Open University, pp. 145-146.
- Samuelson, W. Zeckhauser, R. (1988) 'Status Quo Bias in Decision Making', *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 7-59 [Online]. Available at <https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/fs/rzeckhau/status%20quo%20bias.pdf>(Accessed 14 May 2019).
- The Open University (2018a) 'Kauppinen on Nozick's experience machine' [Audio], *A333 Key questions in philosophy*. Available at <https://learn2.open.ac.uk/course/format/oustudyplan/resource.php?id=1308840&repeat=1>(Accessed 12 May 2019).
- Weijers, D. (2012) *Hedonism and Happiness in Theory and Practice* [Online], published PhD thesis, Wellington, New Zealand, Victoria University of Wellington. Available at <http://www.danweijers.com>.

com/pdf/Hedonism%20and%20Happiness%20in%20Theory%20and%20Practice%20-%20Dan%20Weijers. pdf(Accessed 13 May 2019).

- Weijers, D. (2014) ' Nozick's experience machine is dead, long live the experience machine!', *Philosophical Psychology* , vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 513-535 [Online]. <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/abs/10.1080/09515089.2012.757889>(Accessed 17 May 2019).