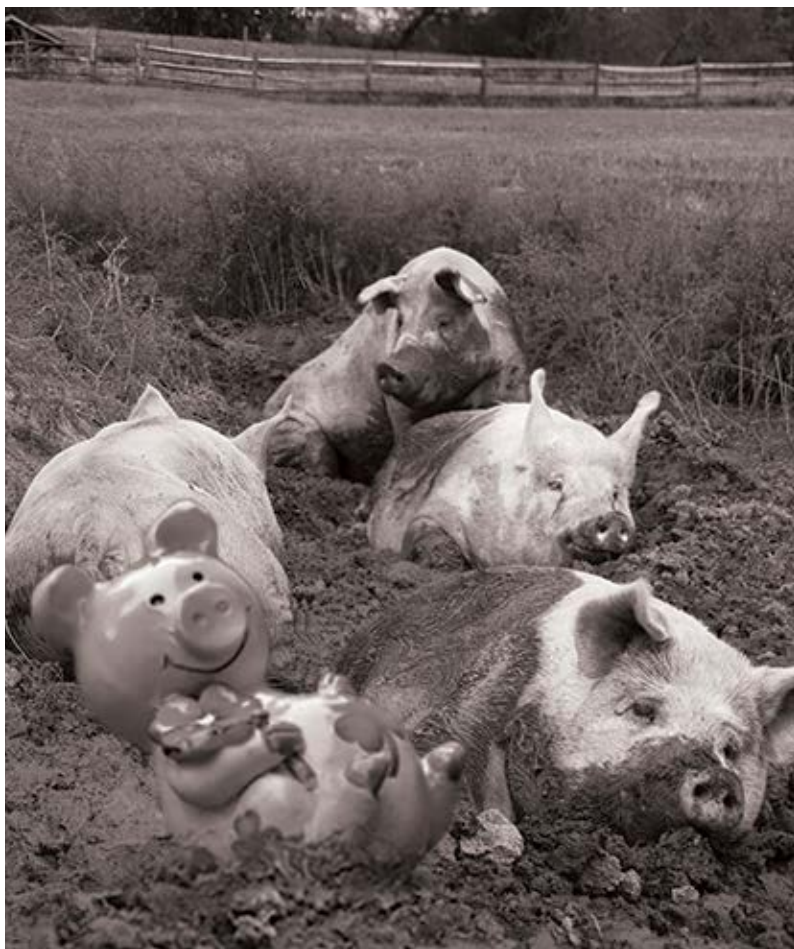


AVOIDING THE SWINE: A Hedonist's Dilemma



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ABSTRACT

What constitutes a good life? A hedonist's answer to this question is rather simple—more pleasure, less pain. While hedonism was previously a widely accepted belief, it now suffers from several crucial objections. A challenge particularly vexing to hedonists is the Philosophy of Swine: could it be possible that our lives may be less than that of a theoretical swine? In this essay, I argue that lifetime hedonism, the view of hedonism concerned with one's total lifelong well-being, does not survive this objection. In particular, I will refute the counterarguments that modern-day hedonist, Ben Bramble, presents against the Philosophy of Swine objection.



I. INTRODUCTION

What constitutes a good life? What does it mean to live well? A hedonist's answer to these questions is rather simple: more pleasure, less pain. While hedonism was widely accepted by philosophers in the past, arguably dating back to Plato, it has now few advocates as it suffers from several objections.¹ A challenge that is particularly vexing to hedonists is the Philosophy of Swine: could it be possible that the life one lives is less than that of a theoretical swine?

Rather than biting the bullet and saying that may well be, modern-day hedonist Ben Bramble argues that this is impossible.² I briefly summarize Bramble's view of hedonism, the Philosophy of Swine objection, and Bramble's response. Then, I refute each of his claims to disprove lifetime hedonism, ultimately showing how a lifetime hedonism cannot escape from the Philosophy of Swine problem.

II. BRAMBLE'S ACCOUNT OF HEDONISM

Bramble defines hedonism as the idea that pleasure and pain just consist in determining one's lifetime well-being, which is the view that evaluates the pleasures and pains experienced by an individual throughout their life as a whole. He claims that lifetime well-being holds greater normative significance than momentary well-being.³ He then explains his model of hedonism, Hedonism about Benefiting and Harming (hereby HBH)—the idea that benefiting and harming consist in affecting pleasures and pains in various ways, where benefiting or harming someone is to make their lives better or worse off in respect to their life as a whole. The motivation and basis for HBH is the Experience Requirement, which Bramble takes for granted. This requirement states that for something to benefit or harm a person, it must affect that person's experience phenomenologically.⁴

He then introduces two main branches of hedonism: the felt-quality theory, which he believes in, and the attitude-based theory. The felt-quality theory, also known as phenomenalism, is the theory that pleasure or pain is a mental state or property that is or has a certain phenomenology—that is, a subject's experience. On the contrary, the attitude-based theory, or intentionalism, states that pleasure and pain are intended phenomenologies. Bramble rejects the attitude-

based theory, as he writes that the intentionalist would also have to accept that one's pleasures and pains could change if there is a change in one's intention to maintain their current phenomenology. Even if this intention could be considered a separate phenomenology on its own, it would have to be connected to the phenomenology it resulted in. To suggest such a connection between distinct phenomenologies, then, would indicate a certain shared phenomenology among all phenomenologies that allows them to be interpreted as pleasurable or painful.⁵

However, this does not seem to be necessarily true. For instance, one may abandon lifetime hedonism in favor of the momentary well-being view of hedonism. Instead, one can claim that all pleasures do not share a common qualitative characteristic that allows for the evaluation of lifetime pleasures and pains as wholes. A momentary-intentionalist's view, then, could be phrased as such: intent phenomenology A could have a common phenomenology with its resulting phenomenology A' but not necessarily with a different intent phenomenology B nor its resulting phenomenology B'.

III. THE PHILOSOPHY OF SWINE

In *Pleasure and the Good Life*, Fred Feldman describes Porky's case, a human being who lives in a pigsty and pleasures greatly from engaging in sexual activities with the pigs. He has no other sources of pleasure, such as human relationships or learning, and has never experienced pain in his life.⁶ The threat that the Philosophy of Swine objection poses to hedonism, reformulated by Bramble, is:

1. Hedonism entails that Porky's life could be as high in well-being as the life of a normal human being.
2. Porky's life could not be as high in well-being as the life of a normal human being.
3. Therefore, hedonism is false.⁷

IV. BRAMBLE'S RESPONSE

There are two ways a hedonist could defend hedonism against the Philosophy of Swine objection: by either denying the second premise—that is, to bite the bullet and admit that Porky is as well off as a normal human being—or the first premise, claiming that hedonism does not entail that Porky is as well off as a normal human being.

1 Roger Crisp, "Well-Being," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/well-being/>.

2 Ben Bramble, "A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (2016): 85-86, 10.3998/ergo.12405314.0003.004.

3 Bramble, "Hedonism," 85-86.

4 Bramble, "Hedonism," 88.

5 Bramble, "Hedonism," 90-94.

6 Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature Varieties and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40-41, 10.1093/019926516X.001.0001.

7 Bramble, "Hedonism," 95.



In response to the Philosophy of Swine objection, Bramble takes the second approach and presents what he considers a “better response” than biting the bullet:

1. Porky’s pleasures are not as especially pleasurable as the pleasures of a normal human.
2. Porky’s pleasures are not as diverse as the pleasures of a normal human.
3. Hedonism does not entail that Porky’s life could be as high in well-being as the life of a normal human being, as his pleasures are lacking in these two aspects.⁸

Against the first premise, Bramble argues that a pleasure is not especially pleasurable if it is easy to attend to. A pleasure is easy to attend to if it (1) pertains to a certain bodily location rather than permeating one’s experiential field, such as the pleasures of orgasms or massages, (2) comes suddenly rather than building up slowly over time, or (3) involves little to no mental absorption in a certain pleasurable activity or thing. Pleasures derived from, say, sex or drugs are not as pleasurable as they fulfill all three criteria. He explains why pleasures that are not easy to attend to, such as those of learning or aesthetic appreciation, are more pleasurable as he quotes Henry Sidgwick; that is, “the genuine artist at work seems to have a predominant and temporarily absorbing desire for the realization of his ideal of beauty.”⁹

Meanwhile, Bramble’s argument concerning the second premise is twofold. He argues that Porky’s pleasures are not as diverse as a normal human being’s because they are purely (1) repetitive and (2) physical. Purely repeated pleasures add nothing to one’s lifetime well-being as they cannot introduce anything qualitatively new to the pleasurableness of a person, and purely bodily pleasures offer little qualitative diversity. Conversely, he explains why his examples of multi-dimensional, non-physical pleasures, such as those of love, learning, and aesthetic appreciation, are qualitatively diverse. For instance, pleasures that come from learning are diverse in character, because people can acquire different information and interact with this information in various ways.¹⁰

He then proceeds to argue against Chris Heathwood’s objection that Porky could have various experiences as well. For instance, what if Porky could engage in various sexual activities with different animals, never to be bored? To this concern, Bramble argues that there will still be a lack of qualitative distinction between his experiences. To Porky,

having sex with pig A would not be too different from having sex with pig B, or even cow C, for he cannot experience love, which is a more diverse pleasure.¹¹

Bramble also refutes the claim that at least some purely repeated pleasures can contribute to one’s well-being. In response to this concern, he first claims that most of the pleasures that seem to be purely repeated still introduce new elements. For example, the pleasure of drinking coffee may seem one-dimensional but can be diversified by introducing other factors such as where or with whom one drinks the coffee. In addition, he also states that even pleasures that are purely repeated can have instrumental values and act as a sort of “oil for our joints” that fill in the gaps between impactful pleasures.¹²

V. IMMEDIACY OF PORKY’S PLEASURES

As in his first argument, I do not intend to argue with the criteria Bramble sets for easily accessible pleasures. Rather, I will show why his claim, that such pleasures are not as pleasurable, contradicts his version of phenomenalism, which he calls the felt-quality theory of hedonism. Phenomenalists claim that we desire pleasures because they feel good; they are pleasurable. If slowly-building pleasures truly provide higher levels of pleasure, it would be more likely for one to have higher desire for such pleasures. But this does not seem to be the case. In fact, it is more common for immediate pleasures, such as sex or drugs, to have this effect. How is it that people often display higher desires for immediate pleasures if they are less pleasurable than slowly-building pleasures?

There are two possible counterarguments that Bramble could provide to this claim. The first is to say that more people desire slowly-building pleasures than those who desire immediate ones; since more people desire it, the appeals of such pleasures are greater. However, I believe that it is faulty to directly attribute the widespread preference of slowly-building pleasures to their appeal, as other factors also come into play. For instance, those who do not desire immediate pleasures are often not fully aware of the phenomenology that they provide or are affected by sociocultural factors such as stigmas against sources of instant pleasures. Yet, many of those who have experienced immediate pleasures desire them greatly despite these negative sociocultural factors, which shows the strong appeal of such pleasures. Moreover, those who have already experienced immediate pleasures still desire to experience them again. An apparent type of expression of such desires are withdrawal symptoms. The desires are not gone, but are merely

⁸ Bramble, “Hedonism,” 96.

⁹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 49.

¹⁰ Bramble, “Hedonism,” 98.

¹¹ Bramble, “Hedonism,” 99.

¹² Bramble, “Hedonism,” 100.



repressed within the individual due to factors such as social stigma or health issues.

Another potential counterargument Bramble could give is that the addictiveness of quick pleasures comes from their immediateness, not their level of pleasure. Their appeal could be that they are low-quality but cheap and accessible. However, this argument begs the question as it is already based on the assumption that immediate pleasures are not as pleasurable, for which he does not provide sufficient reasoning. For Bramble, in order to accuse quick pleasures of being “low in quality,” he would first have to define the factors that account for such low levels of pleasure that they provide.

VI. DIVERSITY OF PORKY’S PLEASURES: REPETITIVENESS

To refute Bramble’s second argument, I could either state that Porky’s pleasures are not purely repetitive and physical, or that purely repetitive pleasures can add to one’s lifetime well-being and that bodily pleasures can be qualitatively diverse. I take the latter approach.

Bramble does not provide convincing evidence as to why purely repeated pleasures cannot affect one’s lifetime well-being. Earlier in his paper, Bramble establishes his model of hedonism, HBH, which accounts for minimal hedonism—the full determination of one’s well-being by pleasures and pains. However, there is nothing inherent in pleasures and pains that explain why only new pleasures and pain can affect one’s well-being. In his rebuttal against Bramble, “Is pleasure all that is good about experience?,” Willem van der Deijl words this concern perfectly: “if only pleasure and pain matter intrinsically, why would then only some pleasure and pain matter?”¹³

Bramble could argue that purely repetitive pleasures gradually decrease over time as the level of attention paid to an object, event, or person decreases due to familiarity. Consider the life of a human who lives for about an average of eighty years. If Porky’s life were extended to the point where the average cumulative pleasure felt in his life trumps that experienced in a human’s life, Bramble may then argue that Porky’s repeated pleasures would eventually arrive at zero, not gaining any pleasure from the same activity, provided the decreasing trend in pleasure levels were to continue. However, he would then have to explain the nature of habit; even though humans do get bored of a repeated activity, there are activities that humans rely on as a consistent source of pleasure. Even if we may not recognize as much pleasure from drinking water compared to drinking a new juice, there is still some

consistent pleasure that one derives from their thirst being quenched. The challenge that Porky presents, then, still remains: after a certain amount of time Porky outlives a human, would he eventually be happier than all of us?¹⁴

Let us now return to Bramble’s rebuttal against the counterargument that some purely repeated pleasures can add to one’s well-being. His first claim that most purely repeated pleasures seem to subtly introduce new elements is irrelevant to the discussion of Deijl’s problem; it only rules out seemingly repetitive pleasures. Rather, what matters is his second argument that purely repetitive pleasures are not significant to one’s well-being, but can have instrumental values. In explaining his definition of instrumental values, he writes that, “[repetitive] pleasures can relax or stimulate us. They can rejuvenate or sustain us.”¹⁵ How are these pleasures, then, any different from non-repetitive pleasures? Are relaxation and stimulation not ways to affect one’s phenomenology? Bramble’s distinction between non-repetitive pleasures and instrumental “filler” pleasures appears to be an unsuccessful attempt to avoid accepting that repeated pleasures do affect one’s phenomenology. If he were to accept this, he would have to admit that repetitive pleasures also benefit people and therefore, add to their lifetime well-being, according to HBH. Thus, Bramble fails to show why purely repeated pleasures cannot affect one’s well-being.

VII. DIVERSITY OF PORKY’S PLEASURES: BODILY PLEASURES

Bramble also fails to prove that purely bodily pleasures lack in qualitative diversity due to the sorites paradox, where the boundaries of a certain condition are unclear. The paradox evokes this question: how many types of pleasures should a source of pleasure provide to be considered as “qualitatively diverse?” If Porky did not have any diversity in his pleasures, then it would surely be impossible to deem them as being qualitatively diverse. However, Bramble accepts that “we might succeed in adding some new kinds of pleasures to [Porky’s life].”¹⁶ If Porky can have some variety in his pleasures, Bramble should be able to provide a criterion that determines a pleasure’s qualitative diversity to state that Porky’s purely bodily pleasures are not diverse enough.

A possible counterargument that Bramble could make is that a source of pleasure, regardless of the number of pleasures it may provide, requires specific qualities to be qualitatively diverse. Such qualities

13 Willem van der Deijl, “Is Pleasure All that is Good about Experience?,” *Philosophical Studies* 176, no. 7 (2019): 1781, 10.1007/s11098-018-1090-y.

14 Crisp, “Well-Being.”

15 Bramble, “Hedonism,” 100.

16 Bramble, “Hedonism,” 99.



may be derived from interactions with unique personal characteristics, aesthetic value, or a deepened understanding of the world. In this case, the burden again seems to be on Bramble to answer Deijl's question: if only pleasure and pain matter intrinsically, why would then only some pleasure and pain matter in the discussion of qualitative diversity?

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated the failure of lifetime hedonism against the Philosophy of Swine objection by disproving Bramble's claims that Porky's pleasures are not as pleasurable nor diverse compared to those of a normal human being. If he cannot prove that Porky's pleasures are inferior compared to a normal human being, an immortal Porky would eventually be happier than all of humanity. It seems that the only options left for a lifetime hedonist, then, are to either bite the bullet and conclude that Porky is as well off as we are or to abandon the sinking ship that is lifetime hedonism.



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