

‘It is only pleasure and pain that has any intrinsic value’. Critically assess this claim.

The belief that pleasure and pain are the only things that have intrinsic value comes from the philosophical theory of hedonism,¹ and while this belief is at the core of the theory, there are several distinct versions of hedonism that hedonists may believe in.² The vast kinds of hedonism delve into topics such as human behaviour, motivation and what is good for us,³ further expanding on why everything revolves around pleasure and pain. However, there are many philosophers that disagree with hedonism all together deeming that there are other important things beyond pleasure and pain in existence, and that the concept of pleasure and pain can be complicated and hard to define. Whether pleasure and pain are the only things that have intrinsic value is something dependant on where pleasure and pain exist in our hierarchy of values and is further influenced by our unique life experiences. This essay will explore the different theories within hedonism and the arguments against it, displaying the difficulties in providing a conclusion that everyone will agree with.

For this essay a hierarchy of values is proposed in order to find a framework to discuss the consequences and effects of the position of pleasure and pain as presented from different philosophical perspectives. At the first end of the hierarchy there is the hedonist belief that places pleasure and pain as the most important feelings in existence, while at the opposite end sits those who believe there are other intrinsic values beyond pleasure and pain, and in the middle there is the pluralist perspective that adapts beliefs from all ends of the hierarchy. This displays the true difficulty in finding one conclusive answer to what holds intrinsic value and what does not, as determining whether pleasure and pain are the only things to have intrinsic value is only possible from a subjective perspective.

Hedonism in philosophy is the idea that pleasure and pain are intrinsically of value and for hedonists, pleasure and pain are the guiding principles behind their actions.⁴ There are many theories within hedonism that offer their own perspectives on the value of pleasure and pain, including prudential hedonism which centres on finding a consistent balance of pleasure over pain in order to better our lives in the long run,⁵ hedonistic egoism which consists of people putting their best interests at the forefront of moral decision making,⁶ and oppositely, hedonistic utilitarianism which is a theory that places

¹ Ole Martin Moen, ‘An Argument for Hedonism’, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2016), p. 267.

² Dan Weijers, ‘Hedonism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’, *Hedonism*, (2011) <<https://iep.utm.edu/hedonism/>> [accessed 4 May 2026].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Moen, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, p. 267.

⁵ Weijers, *Hedonism*.

⁶ Ibid.

the happiness of the majority as the highest goal.⁷ Despite hedonists agreeing with the core idea that pleasure and pain are intrinsic values, there is still a divide in this subject of the hierarchy based on personal interpretation of those values.

In order to discuss the value of pleasure and pain it is important to understand what is meant by intrinsic value. For something to have intrinsic value it must be valuable in itself, thus hedonists would consider pleasure as an intrinsic value because it is good to feel pleasure even if you receive no other benefits from that.⁸ However, due to differing opinions on the definition of pleasure and pain, there is no firm agreement on whether pleasure and pain are intrinsic values, let alone the only intrinsic values.

To define pleasure and pain is not a simple task. If looked at from the perspective of phenomenology, pleasure and pain are sensory experiences caused by physical exposure to the human body of things that trigger those feelings.⁹ Such as eating a delicious meal or stubbing your toe. However, this does not include what is referred to as attitudinal pleasure and pain, which is pleasure or pain that is experienced through nonphysical means.¹⁰ It is difficult to agree on the validity of the feelings as they can be very subjective. Humans often feel emotions even when they are not physically interacting with something, such as thinking a painting looks good.¹¹ A hedonist would consider visual goodness¹² as a form of pleasure, while a non-hedonist could decide to differentiate it completely.

One problematic aspect of pleasure and pain is that sometimes pain can be a good thing and pleasure can be a bad thing. This creates a complex dilemma where the value of pleasure and pain is put into question. If there is such a thing as evil pleasures,¹³ when referring to acts of rape or torture, then there is a question of whether this pleasure holds the same weight as more morally acceptable pleasures would.¹⁴ Alongside that, the pleasure experienced in those moments of evil are fleeting, yet the consequences on the victims will be long lived, further muddying the position of pleasures intrinsic value. When thinking about the positive attributes of pain, it is reasonable for people to feel sympathy for others and suffer alongside them, such as the case of grieving at a funeral.¹⁵ As well as pain having evolutionary benefits in warning

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Panos Theodorou, 'Pain, Pleasure, and the Intentionality of Emotions as Experiences of Values: A New Phenomenological Perspective', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, (2014), p. 627.

¹⁰ Timothy E. Taylor, 'Does Pleasure Have Intrinsic Value?', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2010), p. 316.

¹¹ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Is the Esse of Intrinsic Value Percipi?: Pleasure, Pain and Value', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 47, (2000), p. 120.

¹² Ibid., p. 120.

¹³ Moen, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, p. 272.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 272.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 273.

us when something is wrong to avoid further pain.¹⁶ It is evident that the concept of pleasure and pain is complex, and this can be used to argue for or against their intrinsic value.

Arguments against hedonism include the idea that pleasure and pain are not intrinsic values and that many of our actions show that we place other values above pleasure and pain. The philosopher Matthew Pianalto argued that the most intrinsic values humans have are related to evolutionary fitness.¹⁷ He explained that what humans desire most is physiological, psychological and social wellbeing,¹⁸ and that pleasure tracks and is associated with every action that helps us achieve that goal, including eating and having sex.¹⁹ This would make pleasure an extrinsic value, and links to theories that humans are motivated by desire.

Desire satisfactionism is the idea that pleasure and pain have extrinsic value rather than intrinsic value as they are the effect of following a desire rather than the motivating force of the action.²⁰ In this theory desire would be the intrinsic value, where pleasure is the result of achieving the desire and pain is the result of failing to achieve the desire.²¹ A hedonist may try to debunk this by claiming that desires only have value when they are achieved, and sometimes there is no way of knowing if they are, but it is the pleasure one gets from their achievement that holds the most merit.²² A desire-satisfactionist would place desire at higher importance than pleasure and pain as it is the motivating factor in experiencing those sensations.

Motivational hedonism presents another perspective of pleasure and pain in the hierarchy. Similarly to desire satisfactionism, motivational hedonism is centred around what drives our actions, but in this theory, finding a consistent balance of maximal pleasure over pain is the main goal.²³ Motivational hedonists propose this theory as a way of further understanding human motivation and links it to the core values of hedonism,²⁴ however, it seems to ignore more complex reasonings for why someone would be motivated to act in certain situations.²⁵ For example, if a soldier was to sacrifice themselves in order to save those around them, then they have actively chosen pain over pleasure, and motivational hedonism wouldn't make sense in this

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 273.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, p. 314.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁹ Moen, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, p. 269.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 271.

²¹ Ibid., p. 271.

²² Ibid., p. 271.

²³ Andrew Moore, 'Hedonism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2013) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/hedonism/>> [accessed 4 May 2026].

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

context.²⁶ A motivational hedonist may respond by claiming that the soldier would feel pleasure in saving people, so pleasure was still the ultimate motivation,²⁷ but this simply shines a light on how the shift in perspective can only find an answer subjectively. Further proving how a person's hierarchy of values sets a precedent for how they view human behaviour.

Robert Nozick's thought experiment, the experience machine, presents that when offered a hypothetical scenario of a lifetime of pleasure, many people would be wary to choose that. In this thought experiment, participants would be hooked up to a machine where they would experience ultimate pleasure and live in whatever ways they would want.²⁸ This seems to align with the hedonist belief that achieving pleasure and avoiding pain is the most intrinsically valuable life goal for humans to have. However, many counter arguments to hooking up to the experience machine revolve around retaining a sense of humanity no matter if it brought more pain to their lives.²⁹ This displays that for many people pleasure is not the only, nor most intrinsic value they'd consider for their lives, and at the top of their hierarchy really sits the ability to have some sense of control over their existence even if it leads to worse outcomes.

Pluralist arguments in philosophy state that pleasure and pain are based on subjective experience and are contextual. A pluralist could agree with a plethora of different arguments towards the statement that only pleasure and pain have intrinsic value. They could agree with the hedonist perspective, while also uplifting other things that could hold equal value in the world, choosing to take a more flexible approach.³⁰ Other potentially equal intrinsic values include knowledge, beauty, health, wisdom and security.³¹ Although a hedonist would argue that all of those values lead to pleasure one way or another,³² but that would suggest these things have no value of their own, and that is simply a matter of subjective opinion.

To agree with the statement that 'it is only pleasure and pain that has any intrinsic value', depends solely on where pleasure and pain are positioned in our hierarchy of values. Pleasure and pain are not defined or experienced the same by every person, and this can have ample effect on how people express what values most to them. Some arguments will favour other values over pleasure and pain, or centre desire and motivation in their discussions. Ultimately it is impossible to prove one way or another if

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dan Weijers, 'Nozick's Experience Machine Is Dead, Long Live the Experience Machine!', *Philosophical Psychology*, 27 (2014), p. 5.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰ Moen, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, p. 276.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 276-277.

³² Ibid., p. 277.

pleasure and pain are the only things in existence that have intrinsic value as it is a totally subjective opinion based on our unique outlooks on life.

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