

# Hedonism as Standard of Morals.

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In Europe the conception of moral thought practically first began with the Greeks. They were the pioneers in giving a definite shape to moral science. After a considerable progress had been made in the Philosophy of matter etc.,—they directed their attention towards the ethical problems.

The most prominent among them were Democritus and Heraclitus, the two physical philosophers who tried to raise some ethical problems of very crude forms which afterwards developed into stoicism and Epicuriannism and “keep your soul dry” and “the dry soul is the best,” these were the fundamental principles in ethics according to Heraclitus, while pleasure is the ultimate standard of morality with Democritus. But nothing can be found of further development of these theories in their writings.

The post-Democritians, Permenidians the Pythagorians seem to have been touched with the ethical speculation. Indeed, “to philosophise” was the way of the Grecian mode of life. But it was the Sophists who were the first to bring a revolution in the moral world by their practical teaching for repairing the young men of Athens for efficient citizenship but the old and the conservative grew alarmed by these kinds of moral teachings. This alarmist spirit finds expression in the writings of Aristophanes. Plato shared the same fate—the greatest of the intellectual life of the city had to suffer to a large degree. But questions on practical Ethics became of vital importance to Socrates. Aristippus had learnt from Socrates that true standard of morality lies in the insight into the result of an action—whether pleasurable or painful—in the distant or in the immediate future. Then, the ultimate aim of life is pleasure of some quality but differing in degree only. According to Socrates the pleasure of the soul and not the pleasure of the body is the standard of morality. But Aristippus misinterpreted the meaning and preferred the latter to the former.

After observing the phenomena in nature Protagoras came to the conclusion that the true end of life consists in pleasurable sensations and avoidance of pains. The result of an action is to be judged according as it promotes or not the highest good of men and that goodness can only be found in the pleasurable of an action. Then if pleasure is the only reality, it should be the ultimate end or good of life. So, the standard of morality by which we are to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action is Hedone or pleasure. If the sensation of the moment is the only reality, the aim and end of life should be to exert all our attention to increase of such momentary happiness. In a short span of life we should make the best use of each moment by means of momentary happiness ere it passes away. The greatest economy of life consists in miser-like jealousy. "To guard the interests of the moments than the thought of the morrow." The greatest foolishness of our life is to give up the pleasure of the present in favour of the unwarranted future. "Because the present is ours, the future may never be." Therefore it is not the Socratic calculation of pleasure but "the careless surrender of life to present joy, that is the true rule of life."

Our short life consists of moments—we pass from moments to moments. So, it is a great prudence indeed on our part to lead a life, pure and simple, heedless and unthinking, and undisturbed by reason, and to fill to the brim our cup of life with intense mirth and jollity. Such was the highest ideal of the ethical world according to Cyrenaics. To them the highest ideal would be that sunny pagan spirit which is not yet borne down with "the heavy weary weight of all this unintelligible world." This sceptical theory, though not altogether faultless, can be accepted by them other than brooding over the higher philosophical theories of Socratic eternal life and ideal welfare. So, Aristippus was glad to save himself from Socratic influence. "His is, indeed, a life without a horizon, a life which has shrunk within the compass of the momentary present, a life of keen sensibility, with no end to satisfy the reason."

But behind all these are historical turns of events which are responsible for the growth of Hedonism. At the time of the birth of the Socratic movement Greece was divided into many small city-states,

each engaged in constant fight with the other. There was no solidity in the government of these states. The people were drifting hither and thither without any aim in view and the general moral tone of the people was very much depraved. They gave themselves up to the pursuit of sensual pleasure. The Peloponnesian war crushed the mighty power of Athens; the Corinthian war, the power of Corinth and the Theban war brought the Spartans to a complete defeat. At last Philip the king of Macedon defeated the Thebans and the Athenians after a protracted struggle. After Alexander the Great, Greece was delivered to a new hand—the Romans. In this state of affairs, the character of the people took a different turn. The old institutions were broken down and there came waves of demoralisation. The only aim and end of the Greeks became how to save themselves, that is, how to get the greatest good for their own selves. "How shall the weary soul find solace?" Such were the questions raised by the people who tried to answer this in different ways according to their own views. According to Epicurians the only worthy goal of life is pleasure or happiness. So this is the germ of the beginning of Hedonism.

Pure Hedonism or Cyrenaicism as has been indicated before, can only bring forth a life of despair rather than one of hope. To them the fulness of life is the perfect surrender to intensest passions. But reason cannot remain dormant under the predominant influence of senses only. It will then make our life sick and sorry. There is a picturesque description of Cyrenaicism in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* which shows that the author really caught the echo of the ancient creed. To borrow his own words, "How goodly had the vision been; one long unfolding of beauty and energy in things; upon the closing of which he might gratefully utter his *vixi* ... for still, in a shadowy world his deeper wisdom had ever been with a sense of economy, with jealous estimate of gain and loss, to use life not as a means to some problematic end, but, as far as it might be, from dying hour to dying hour, and in itself, a kind of music, all suffering to the duly trained ear, even as it died out on the ear."

Undoubtedly then, this Hedonistic spirit had been given its philosophic expression by the school of Aristippus. Yet we find the

law playing a predominant part in every walk of life, when we find no meaning of our life or any purpose thereof. In the trials and tribulations of our life—when the storm and stress runs over life's horizon, we generally lose faith in the life to come; we naturally then incline to the pleasure of the moment and think the present enjoyment to be the only good of life.

Omar, the great Persian poet, strikes the true Cyrenaic note of life, again and again. When our mind is distracted by the ills and disorders of life—when the joy and the prospect of life become meaningless, we turn to be moral sceptics—that is, to be sick of the momentary life, we take refuge in the delightful sensation of the moment—"Careless and unthinking abandon to the pleasure of the moment."

But none the less, the mind is not satisfied with vague and irresistible conviction that such a sensual pleasure cannot be all and end-all of our life—of a being who is by nature rational—who looks before and after and tries to generalise conclusions from the various experiences of life. So, however rigid sceptics and hedonists we may have been, we cannot give ourselves up completely to pure sensibility.

Even the Cyrenaics were unable to explain such convictions convincingly. Reflection is the trait of our character and this is a great mark of distinction between man and a lower animal. In order to construct some ideal of life, some sort of thinking process is extremely necessary. If sentient happiness, is in strictness, good, at all, any and every goodness of such a kind is not welcome. There must be some sort of selection and here the faculty of reasoning comes forth. Even Aristippus admits that prudence is necessary for the attainment of the ideal in life. The Psychology is, that we should not be slaves to our senses, but we should try to enslave them; and this is the work of reason. If not, our life will be drifted hither and thither by the waves of passions and appetite. So here we find the predominance of reason in our life and the work of modification seems to be impending.

Now we turn our attention to modified Hedonism or Epicureanism. Epicurus, the Grecian Philosopher, was the founder of this school of philosophy.

According to Socrates prudence is essentially necessary for the attainment of the ideals of life and it is also suggested later on by the



Cyrenaics. This principle was developed by the Epicureans who were influenced by Plato and Aristotle. The two philosophers are of opinion that it is impossible to conceive of virtuous life which is not judged by reason. Reason plays a predominant part in human life which is a continuous struggle for the attainment of some end. The end of life, they hold, is not the pleasure of the moment but a sum of pleasures; a pleasant life. "Reason is like a bridge to gulf over the transition from Cyrenaicism to Epicureanism.—Even among the Cyrenaics, Theodorous and Heggeſis for examples, held that the aim of life is not pleasure, but the avoidance of being unpleasant and to get a permanent state of gladness. But this is a mere reassertion of the Socratic principle of prudence in life, insisted, later on, by Plato and Aristotle, and this the construction over which the superstructure of Epicureanism is built.

"It is not an unbroken succession of drinking feasts and of revelry, not the pleasure of sexual love, nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a splendid table, which produces a pleasant life, it is sober reasoning, searching out the reasons for every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which greater tumults take possession of the soul. Of all this, the beginning, and the greatest good, is prudence. Therefore, prudence is even a more precious thing than philosophy : from it grow all the other virtues,—for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, not lead a life of prudence which is a life of honour and justice which is not also a life of pleasure. For virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them."

Epicurus, the founder, states that mere sense-experience cannot lead us to our goal, that reason plays an important part in guiding us to our satisfaction in life, and that "reason is the handmaid of sensibility and without the aid of the former the latter would be reduced to impotency." Momentary pleasures cannot therefore be the guiding principle of our life, because our life will be not one of pleasure but one of utter remorse, if we work at the beck and call of our senses. "Therefore" says Epicurus, we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life."

It is also said that pleasure is the standard by which we choose or reject an object ; but not all pleasure. We pass over

come in favour of some greater pleasures. So, we see the work of prudence at every step of our life. Therefore, though all pleasures are good, yet we do not prefer all of them.

Now we see, what is actually meant by Hedonism. There are varieties of hedonism. All of them suggest that men have been trying for ages to erect some standard of morality by which a distinction can be made between right and wrong.

At the very outset we must make a clear-cut distinction between Psychological and Ethical hedonism. According to Psychological hedonism, it is quite natural for a man to seek pleasure and to avoid pain, and we normally do seek it, as it is a trait of our real character; because, it is psychologically proved that man tries to continue pleasure and avoid pain. But according to the latter view pleasure is to be desired, as it is the best standard of morality. It is proved in the above lines that pleasure is the *sumum bonum* of man. It is pleasure which is ultimately conducive to our end or ideal; so, we should always seek pleasure.

Ethical Hedonism, again, is divided into two portions — Egoistic or Individualistic and Altruistic or Universalistic.

The word 'ego' means *self*, so 'according to this doctrine whatever man does, he does only because it is pleasurable to him. So, this school of philosophers have made the agent's own pleasure as the standard of morality.

An action is good according as it is conducive to one's own greatest pleasure, and bad when there is the absence of such pleasure. This presupposition is based on psychological studies. For according to them it is the inclination of every one—a natural characteristic of every soul that it ought to seek its own greatest pleasure. The maxim is "Everyone for himself." So, by nature man is egoist. Egoism itself is of two types,—gross or sensualistic egoism and refined egoism. Mandeville and Helvetius were the two ardent exponents of this doctrine. To borrow their own words "Man centres everything in himself and either loves or hates, but for his own sake." So, according to them, if there is any virtue in this world, it is self-love. They do not condemn luxury, selfishness etc. This fact shows the reassertion of Cyrenaicism.

Refined, Egoism, on the other hand, is found to approach towards Epicureanism, which professes a more refined form of pleasure-seeking. Pleasure is the end, but this end can never be attained by proper reason or prudence. For the mere feeling of sensation cannot be a guiding star of our destiny. These philosophers give stress more on mental pleasures than on physical.

Then comes a transition from old spirit of egoism to its modern shape propounded by Hume, Bentham, Mill, Baine, etc, who called it altruism or universalistic hedonism. According to this theory we seek pleasure, not of our own alone, but pleasure in general or Universal happiness; or to borrow Bentham's own words, "Greatest good of the greatest number." The standard of morality, therefore, should be sought in the promotion of happiness in general. Mill calls it Utilitarianism, for what we judge according to this theory is utility or usefulness of an action which has the capacity of sympathy or fellow-feeling.

This school of philosophy shows a tendency to effect a reconciliation between Egoism and Altruism. This hedonistic calculation is not supported and discarded in favour of the standard according to the Evolutionists. It is seen from the above definitions of this theory that it is practically impossible in case of an individual, as much difficulty lies in it. So, if the difficulty is found in case of one person, the difficulty will increase in case of the "greatest number" "Every man is nearer to himself than he can be to any other man and no other man can make way for him, his pleasure and pain."

Himself must necessarily be his own first concern. As regards feelings of pleasure and pain, there are lots of difficulties which have not yet been evaded. For what is pleasure to one person may not only be no pleasure to another, but also may be extremely painful to him, again person may feel pleasure by an action, but he may not feel the same in its next repetition.

Observation of these facts clearly shows, then that hedonistic calculation has no practical value. Moreover this difficulty has increased to a large extent by Mill's argument of qualitative differences among pleasure. In the face of these facts, it is clearly shown that hedonistic calculation fails at the end to give us an adequate standard of morality.

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