

“The Concept of Hedonism: A Comparative Study of Greek and Cārvāka Philosophy”

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the concept of hedonism, its different forms, and its development in both Greek and Indian philosophical traditions. Derived from the Greek term *hedone* (meaning pleasure), hedonism holds that pleasure is the ultimate aim of human life and the basis for moral judgment. According to this view, actions that increase pleasure are considered good, while those that produce pain are regarded as bad. Henry Sidgwick classifies hedonism into two main types: psychological hedonism, which explains human behavior in terms of the pursuit of pleasure, and ethical hedonism, which prescribes how individuals ought to act.

Ethical hedonism is further divided into egoistic and altruistic forms. Egoistic hedonism can again be categorized into crude (gross) and refined types. Aristippus, a key representative of crude hedonism, emphasized immediate sensory pleasures as the highest good. A similar outlook is found in the Cārvākatradition of Indian philosophy, which prioritizes present enjoyment and rejects belief in the afterlife.

In contrast, Epicurus developed a more refined version of hedonism that values mental peace, moderation, and lasting happiness over fleeting bodily pleasures. He argued that true happiness lies in inner tranquility and freedom from pain.

Overall, the essay demonstrates that hedonism is not a single, uniform doctrine but a diverse and evolving theory, ranging from unrestrained sensualism to a more disciplined and rational pursuit of well-being in both Greek and Indian thought.

KEYWORDS – Hedonism, Psychological vs Ethical Hedonism, Egoistic vs Altruistic Hedonism ,Gross vs Refined Hedonism Aristippus, Epicurus, Cārvāka Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The Greek word “*Hedone*” means pleasure. Therefore, according to this view, the ultimate goal of a happy life is pleasure, which is known as Hedonism. Hedonists evaluate the morality of actions based on the pleasure they produce. An action that brings more pleasure is considered good, while one that causes more pain is considered bad.

However, not all hedonists share the same viewpoint. Although they all accept pleasure as a moral standard, there are different forms of hedonism. Some thinkers believe that pleasure is the natural object of human desire; this view was described by Sidgwick as psychological hedonism. On the other hand, those who argue that people ought to act in pursuit of pleasure are called ethical hedonists by Sidgwick.

Even among ethical hedonists, there are differences of opinion. Ethical hedonism can broadly be divided into two types:

1. Egoistic Hedonism – This view holds that individuals should aim to maximize their own pleasure through their actions.
2. Altruistic Hedonism – This perspective suggests that individuals should seek the happiness of others or the greater good rather than their own personal pleasure.

Egoistic hedonism can further be classified into two types:

1. Gross Hedonism – It emphasizes physical or bodily pleasures as the main goal of human actions.
2. Refined Hedonism – It focuses on mental or intellectual pleasures as the higher form of satisfaction.

Similarly, altruistic hedonism can also be divided into:

1. Non-evolutionary – which includes: a) Gross b) Refined
2. Evolutionary – which explains the pursuit of general happiness in terms of development or progress over time.

Gross Egoistic Ethical Hedonism: Aristippus and the Cārvāka

Aristippus (c. 435–356 BCE), a disciple of Socrates and a philosopher from Cyrene in ancient Greece, is regarded as one of the earliest proponents of hedonism. Like other Greek ethical thinkers, he believed that every human action is directed toward some ultimate goal. He raised a fundamental question: What is the final end of all our actions? What do we desire purely for its own sake?

According to Aristippus, pleasure (sukha) is the ultimate end of human life. Everything we do—education, work, relationships—is ultimately aimed at attaining pleasure. Pleasure alone has intrinsic value, meaning it is desirable for its own sake and not as a means to something else.

A key feature of Aristippus' ethics is that he prioritized bodily or sensory pleasures over mental pleasures. He emphasized differences in the intensity (quantity) of pleasure rather than differences in quality. For instance, he believed that the pleasure derived from a rich meal cannot be equated with the pleasure of listening to music; each pleasure is distinct in its intensity and immediacy. Therefore, individuals should aim to maximize intense and immediate pleasures.

This view leads to what is often called gross or crude hedonism, where sensory enjoyment becomes the highest good. According to this perspective, sacrificing present pleasure for uncertain future benefits is irrational. The future is beyond our control, but present pleasure is within our grasp. Hence, momentary enjoyment is considered the most valuable. Aristippus argued that reason (buddhi) should serve the senses, helping individuals organize their lives in a way that maximizes physical enjoyment. His famous attitude is captured in the idea: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.”

The Cārvāka View (Gross Egoistic Hedonism in Indian Philosophy)

In Indian philosophy, a similar form of gross hedonism is found in the dhūrta (crude) followers of the Cārvāka school. Their ethical outlook can be summarized as follows:

1. Hedonism (Pleasure as the Highest Goal)

The Cārvākas maintain that the primary aim of human life is to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

2. Primacy of Sensory Pleasure

They give special importance to bodily pleasures—such as eating, seeing, and hearing—considering them the most real and valuable forms of enjoyment.

3. Focus on the Present

Since the future is uncertain, it is unwise to sacrifice present happiness for something that may never come. The emphasis is on living in the present moment.

4. Rejection of Afterlife and Soul

The Cārvākas deny the existence of afterlife, soul, and rebirth. Their famous motto is: “As long as you live, live happily.”

5. Pleasure Even at the Cost of Debt

They advocate: “Borrow if necessary, but enjoy life (even by consuming ghee).” This suggests that immediate enjoyment should not be restricted by concerns about future consequences.

6. Rejection of Dharma and Moksha

Among the four traditional goals of life—Dharma (duty), Artha (wealth), Kama (pleasure), and Moksha (liberation)—the Cārvākas accept only Artha and Kama, rejecting Dharma and Moksha as meaningless.

Refined Egoistic Ethical Hedonism and Cārvāka –

Epicurus (341–270 BCE) was an ancient Greek philosopher and the founder of the school known as Epicureanism. Influenced to some extent by Socrates, Epicurus argued that a truly happy and well-ordered life must be guided by reason and thoughtful reflection.

According to him, a life filled only with continuous feasting, drinking, celebrations, and sensual pleasures cannot lead to genuine happiness. Instead, he emphasized the importance of intellect in ethical life. Human beings should not be driven solely by their senses; rather, they must exercise rational control over their desires. In fact, excessive bodily pleasures often become the source of anxiety and disturbance.

Epicurus believed that the main aim of philosophy is to achieve a happy and peaceful life. Such a life is characterized by mental tranquility, freedom from fear, and the absence of pain. Although he did not explicitly classify pleasures into higher and lower types, he clearly gave greater importance to mental pleasures over physical ones. For instance, he suggested that engaging in intellectual activities like literature or philosophy provides deeper satisfaction than mere enjoyment of rich food.

For Epicurus, pleasure is the good and pain is the evil. Whatever brings joy is good, and whatever causes suffering is bad. Therefore, the goal of human life should be to live calmly and happily. He also advised people not to fear death, since death marks the end of both body and soul, and thus there is no possibility of experiencing pain after death. Furthermore, Epicurus held that gods do not interfere in human affairs. Hence, there is no need to fear divine punishment or hope for divine reward. He also explained that the world is composed of atoms and functions according to natural laws. Unlike Aristippus, who emphasized immediate and intense pleasures, Epicurus rejected short-lived and excessive enjoyment. Instead, he advocated a balanced life aimed at long-term satisfaction. Moderation, self-control, friendship, and inner peace are, for him, the true sources of happiness.

Epicurus ultimately defined the ideal human life as one of stable mental equilibrium, where neither pleasure nor pain, gain nor loss, can disturb the mind. True happiness does not lie in intense sensory excitement, but in a calm and composed state of mind. This happiness is not emotional excitement but a deep inner peace, often described as a detached or tranquil condition. He further pointed out that the root cause of human unrest is the feeling of lack or unfulfilled desire. The more desires a person has, the greater their suffering becomes. Therefore, reducing unnecessary wants and living a simple, moderate, and self-sufficient life is the highest ethical ideal.

The Three Schools of Cārvāka and Their Ethical Views-

In Indian philosophy, the Cārvāka system is generally known as a form of hedonism, which holds that pleasure is the highest goal of human life. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all Cārvākas advocated the same crude form of pleasure-seeking. In fact, different trends or schools can be identified within Cārvāka thought.

1. Dhūrta Cārvāka (Gross Hedonism)

This is the most extreme and popular interpretation of Cārvāka ethics. It advocates unrestrained sensual pleasure as the highest good. It rejects all forms of moral restraint, discipline, and social responsibility. The

famous maxim reflects this view: “Eat, drink, and be merry.” According to this school, since there is no afterlife, soul, or moral law, one should enjoy life to the fullest without worrying about consequences. This view is known as Gross or Egoistic Hedonism.

2. Suśikṣita Cārvāka (Refined or Cultured Hedonism)

A more sophisticated form of Cārvāka thought is represented by Vātsyāyana, the author of the Kāma Sūtra. He accepts three aims of human life:

1. Dharma (virtue)
2. Artha (wealth)
3. Kāma (pleasure)

However, he maintains that pleasure (kāma) is the ultimate end, while dharma and artha are means to achieve it. Unlike the gross hedonists, he emphasizes: Self-control (brahmacarya), Moral discipline (dharma), Cultured and refined living (nāgarika-vṛtti). He also argues that: Pleasure must be refined, disciplined, and educated. Without culture and restraint, pleasure becomes merely animalistic. Therefore, this view is called Refined or Cultured Hedonism.

3. Moderate or Rational Cārvāka- This group represents a more balanced and practical approach. They do not support extreme indulgence like the Dhūrta Cārvākas. Nor do they emphasize strict discipline as much as the refined group. Instead, they advocate rational enjoyment of pleasure.

According to them:

- Pleasure should be pursued wisely and cautiously
- One should avoid pleasures that lead to pain
- Both artha (wealth) and kāma (pleasure) are important in life

This view may be called Moderate or Rational Hedonism.

In conclusion, Cārvāka ethics, though fundamentally hedonistic, is not a one-dimensional doctrine of crude pleasure-seeking. While the Dhūrta Cārvākas advocate unrestrained sensual enjoyment, the Suśikṣita Cārvākas, represented by Vātsyāyana, emphasize refined, disciplined, and cultured pleasure. The moderate thinkers further present a balanced approach, combining rationality with enjoyment.

Thus, Cārvāka philosophy shows a gradual development from gross hedonism to refined and rational hedonism. In this sense, it bears some similarity to the ethical views of Epicurus, who also advocated a controlled and intellectual form of pleasure. Therefore, Cārvāka ethics should be understood not merely as blind indulgence, but as a diverse and evolving tradition within Indian materialism.

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