

# Ancient Wisdom – Hedonism

In his 1969 book entitled, "It's a Playboy World," Bill Banowsky quoted "**Life**" magazine as saying "more than forty billion dollars a year are spent on the pursuit of pleasure, an amount greater than is spent on education and religion combined." [**It's a Playboy World**, Bill Banowsky, pp. 26-27, 1969.] If that statement was correct twenty years ago, it would most certainly be true today. We live in a society that is consumed with the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. In a time when many societies in our world are living day by day, in pursuit of sustenance and the basic necessities of life, we are spending hundreds of billions of dollars each year on a pursuit of pleasure. We live among and are witnessing a generation of people who see no redeeming value in an activity unless the activity brings them pleasure. The church has not even escaped the reach of this philosophy. Multitudes are clamoring for worship that is geared toward entertainment. It is a sad reality that far more congregations than I would like to admit, have allowed a secular society, which knows little to nothing about genuine spirituality, dictate to God's children how they should worship. This pursuit of pleasure that we are witnessing is known as the philosophy of "hedonism."

## Definition of Terms

The term "Hedonism" is derived from the Greek word "hedoné" which means "pleasure." Hedonism denotes the creed or philosophy that pleasure is or should be the sole end and aim of human action or conduct. [**Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics**, James Hastings, ed., Vol. VI, p. 567, 1913]. In other words, hedonism is the philosophy that states pleasure determines that which is good. Consequently, anything that increases the sum of pleasure is considered good, and conversely, anything that increases pain is wrong.

There are a variety of forms or classes of hedonism. Therefore, it would be helpful to define these variations.

**"Egotistic Hedonism"** – is the philosophy that states whatever brings the individual pleasure is good and whatever brings the individual pain is bad.

**"Altruistic Hedonism"** or **"Utilitarianism"** – is the philosophy that states whatever brings pleasure to the greatest number is good and whatever brings pain to the greatest number is bad.

**"Epicureanism"** – is the philosophy that states that whatever brings us freedom from pain is good and whatever brings us pain is bad. However, epicureanism makes a qualitative distinction between pleasure, stating that pleasures of the mind are greater and of more value than bodily pleasures.

**"Eudaimonism"** – differs from hedonism in that it states that whatever brings happiness is good whereas hedonism states that whatever brings pleasure is good.

## A Brief History of The Philosophy of Hedonism

Aristippus of Cyrene (435-366 B.C.), a disciple of Socrates was the first great exponent of

Hedonism, teaching that the individual person should perform whatever act yields the maximum momentary pleasure. He is known as the “Father of Hedonism.” [**The Catholic Encyclopedia**, vol. VII, Charles G. Herbermann, ed. p. 187, 1913.]

A generation later, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) revised this philosophy by placing a “qualitative” value to pleasure. Epicurus taught that pursuing pleasures of the mind, or intellect were of more value than pleasures of the body. He further emphasized that maximal long-term pleasure should be the goal of an individual as opposed to the momentary, short-lived pleasure.

Hundreds of years later, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) denied the “qualitative” differences in pleasure as Epicurus taught, and combined the principles of “pleasure” and “utility.” Bentham parted ways with the egotistic hedonist and promoted altruistic or utilitarian hedonism. Thus, according to Bentham, right and wrong were to be determined by what brings the most people the most pleasure.

Finally, John Stewart Mills (1806-1873) agreed with Bentham’s altruistic approach to hedonism, but parted ways with Bentham in affirming, as did Epicurus that there were qualitative differences in pleasure. Therefore determining right and wrong was not simply a matter of seeking the pleasure for the greatest number, but also involved seeking the greatest quality of pleasure for the greatest number.

From this brief history of Hedonism, one can see that there is quite a diversity of thought which is to be expected. Any philosophy, or way of life, that lacks an absolute, objective moral standard is bound to be characterized by division. However, the common thread that is woven into each variation of this philosophy is the principle that right and wrong are determined by pleasure and pain.

### **A Criticism of Hedonism**

***As a Philosophy to Live by, Hedonism is Insufficient to Answer Fundamental Ethical Questions.*** The pursuit of pleasure is not as simple a matter as it may sound on the surface. There are many ethical questions that must be answered along the way, and hedonism provides no objective way to ascertain the answers. For instance, one may ask, “Does one pursue pleasure for self (egotistic hedonism) or does one pursue pleasure for others (altruistic hedonism)?” Or, to suggest a third alternative, “Is good to be measured by what is the most pleasurable for both self and others?” The philosophy of hedonism provides no answer. One could ask, “Is it good to pursue short-range, immediate pleasure or should one forgo the short-range pleasure to pursue long-range pleasure?” Or, “Which is more desirable, ‘quality’ or ‘quantity’ of pleasure?” Again, the philosophy of hedonism provides no objective moral standard to answer these fundamental questions. Everything is subjective. Hedonism has no objective way to answer these questions. At best, the one who asks these questions can only receive the subjective opinions of the one they are asking.

***As a Philosophy, Hedonism is Self-Destructive.*** Rather than what is good being defined by what is pleasurable, one must sometimes forgo the pleasure to achieve the

good. Since one could find little, if any, pleasure at all in having surgery, would the hedonist not feel morally compelled to refuse the surgery? If drug abuse, alcoholism, and smoking brings one pleasure, again, would the hedonist not feel morally compelled to engage in such activities? Eating a steady diet of “junk food” may be pleasurable, but one knows it is not good for him. Taking a spoonful of distasteful medicine is not pleasurable, but it is good. And injecting oneself with insulin is not pleasurable, but for the diabetic, it is good. Hedonism, if followed to its logical end, is self-destructive to its practitioners.

***As a Philosophy, Hedonism Justifies Moral Atrocities since Hedonism Affirms that Ethics Is Individual and Autonomous.*** Within hedonism, one man’s ceiling is another man’s floor. What brings a man pleasure (and is thus, good according to hedonism), is subjective and may and does differ from one person to the next. Upon what moral basis could a hedonist condemn a child molester who finds pleasure in his actions? Or, how could a hedonist condemn lying, stealing, cheating, or murder if one finds pleasure in such activities? Hedonism cannot consistently condemn any action if the practitioner finds pleasure in it. Imagine the implications of such a philosophy!

***As a Philosophy, Hedonism Rejects and Opposes the Christian Ethic as Set Forth in the Bible.*** If the Christian ethic is true, and it is, the philosophy of hedonism stands as a grossly immoral way of life. A casual examination will reveal that good and evil, right and wrong, are not determined by pleasure and pain, but by the objective revelation of God’s will (John 17:17).

### **The Christian Ethic Opposes the Philosophy of Hedonism**

While the Christian ethic opposes hedonism, the Christian ethic is not an ascetic lifestyle (Colossians 2:23). While there is self-denial and self-discipline, there is balance. God wants man to be happy and to enjoy life (1 Timothy 6:17; Matthew 5:3-12).

The Bible frequently demonstrates that pleasure is not the motive, nor the goal of all action. Moses rejected the philosophy of hedonism when he refused the passing pleasure of sin to suffer affliction with his people (Hebrews 11:24). Joseph rejected the philosophy of hedonism when he refused the pleasures of sexual gratification and suffered in prison as a result (Genesis 39:6-20). The apostle Paul was willing to endure persecution, reproach, and affliction for a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17; 12:10). Finally, consider our fate if Jesus had lived by the hedonistic philosophy. Rather than pleasing himself, he died to take away our sins (Romans 15:3). He became poor that we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). He humbled himself that we might be exalted (Philippians 2:5-8; James 4:10). Had Jesus been a hedonist, we would all still be in our sins, condemned before God.

These godly men, including the perfect, sinless Son of God all lived and practiced a philosophy of life that diametrically opposed hedonism. Rather than spending their lives in a pursuit of pleasure, these godly men spent their lives in pursuit of obedience to God.

The philosophy of hedonism is becoming pervasive in our society. Its apparently wide

acceptance is also an explanation for much of the moral decline and degeneracy in our nation today. Hedonism is a terribly immoral philosophy by which to live, and an even more reprehensible and tragic philosophy by which to die.

Steve Higginbotham  
107 Trappers Trail  
Glasgow, KY 42141  
shigg@glasgow-ky.com  
<http://www.church-of-christ.org/~shiggi>

#### Biographical Information

Steve Higginbotham is a 1984 graduate of Freed-Hardeman. He and his wife, Kim (Pierce) have three children, Kelli (10), Michael (6), and Matthew (2). Steve has preached for the South Green Street Church of Christ in Glasgow, KY for the past 10 years.