Pleasure, desire and welfare in Buddhist and Hindu texts

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Introduction

The central question posed by the philosophical study of well-being is what, at the deepest conceptual level, makes a life go well for an individual. There is general agreement amongst multiple theories that certain items, such as dependable friendships and basic material goods, typically make a life go better. However, the most influential theories of well-being in the Western philosophical tradition give different responses to the question of what grounds these positive assessments of well-being value. The hedonist takes a subset of mental states, in particular pleasure and the absence of pain, as having intrinsic value. Friendships, then, have instrumental value because they are reliable sources of pleasure; they are good for me because I enjoy them. For the desire-theorist, by contrast, what makes a life go better for the individual, at the deepest conceptual level, is the satisfaction of his or her wants. Friendships increase my well-being, according to the desire theorist, because I want to have friendships, or the more particular events constituting a friendship, such as companionship, shared activities and so on. In the Western tradition, for the most part, philosophical study of well-being depends on getting to the conceptual foundations of what has value in itself.

When we turn to Hindu and Buddhists texts, it is a natural cross-cultural question to ask whether they would accept some version of one of these dominant Western theories of well-being, or some other kind of theory, or whether they might reject this question altogether. Moreover, given their negative assessments of pleasure and desire, initially it might seem that at least these two particular well-being theories are non-starters for most Buddhist and Hindu authors. John Taber, in his article "Did Dharmakīrti think the Buddha had Desires?" is one of the recent commentators on Buddhist and Hindu texts who has shown that

V. Eltschinger, B. Kellner, E. Mills, I. Ratié (eds.), *A Road Less Traveled* : *Felicitation Volume in Honor of John Taber*. (Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 100) Wien 2021, pp. 127–145.

matters are not so simple. Through engagement with both Buddhist and Hindu sources, in particular the Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti and the Vedāntin Maṇḍanamiśra, Taber's analysis reveals the considerable care both traditions show in considering whether there might be kinds of motivational states (whether we call them "desires" or something else) which are liberative, or at least not intrinsically problematic. Taber limits his interest in the article to the question of whether these authors accepted the possibility that liberated beings possess desires. In our contribution to this collection in his honor, we take his analysis as a starting point for considering the validity of hedonism and desire-theory as categories for understanding the commitments of certain Buddhist and Hindu texts on the topic of well-being.

In the first section, we lay out the initial case for the *prima facie* incompatibility of understanding proponents of either tradition as hedonists or desire-theorists. The next two sections reconstruct what we take to be a plausible initial characterization of the forms hedonisms and desire theories would have to take to be compatible with either tradition. An important part of our analysis here depends on the distinctions drawn by Dharmakīrti and Maṇḍana, regarding good and bad forms of motivational states, as illustrated in Taber's article. In the final section, we consider whether hedonism or desire theory fits best with the initial evidence we have assembled. Our conclusion is that at least much of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions may be compatible with, but uncommitted to either hedonism or desire-theory, in terms of their foundational conceptual commitments to well-being value. In so doing, we show that both traditions remain viable resources to be drawn upon by contemporary well-being theorists working from a hedonic or desire-theoretical perspective.[1]

1. Pleasure, desire, and disvalue in Buddhist and Hindu texts

In the past 10 years or so, interest in the topic of welfare in Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions has increased markedly. Most of the scholars who work on this topic concede that Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions do not explicitly endorse a specific theory of welfare. They tend to assume, however, that some theory of welfare might be inferred from these texts' and traditions' explicit claims about what to pursue and what to avoid (Keown 2001; Clayton 2006;

[1] In this essay, we are arguing for the compatibility of hedonism and desire-theory with at least many of the commitments of each tradition. This is not to say that other interpretations or developments of the traditions, such as a *eudamanistic* objective list theory, are not viable. We take no position on this question here.

Goodman 2009; Harris 2014; Irvine 2009; Salagame 2004, 2013; Banth and Talwar 2012; Framarin 2016, 2017).

This kind of project might seem unpromising. Two of the most popular types of theories of welfare in Western philosophy, after all, are hedonist theories and and desire theories. A hedonist theory states that the intrinsic value of a life for the person whose life it is derives exclusively from the intrinsic values of the experiences of pleasure and pain within that life. On this view, pleasure and only pleasure makes a life good, and pain and only pain makes a life bad.

A desire theory states that the intrinsic value of a life for the person whose life it is derives exclusively from the intrinsic values of desire satisfactions and frustrations. Desire satisfaction and only desire satisfaction makes a life good, and desire frustration and only desire frustration makes a life bad. Hedonist and desire theories about welfare seem especially out of place in many Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions, however, because these texts and traditions discourage both pleasure and desire.

Buddhist references to the disvalue of pleasure are frequent, beginning with early Buddhist texts and continuing for much of the Indian tradition. For instance, the *Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering Sutta*, in the early Pali canon, claims that pursuit of sense pleasure causes physical hardship, emotional distress when wealth is lost, animosity and warfare amongst and between communities, as well as theft and other kinds of non-virtuous behavior (M i 85–88, trans. Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli 1995: 181–182). Moreover, the great Buddhist poet Aśvaghoṣa likens pursuit and attainment of pleasure to stoking fire with firewood, suggesting cycles of addiction in which pleasure stimulates waves of unsatisfiable craving.

> For men overwhelmed by pleasures (*kāma*) find no relief
>
> In triple heaven, much less in this mortal world;
>
> For pleasures do not sate a man full of desires (*tṛṣṇā*),
>
> As firewood a fire accompanied by the wind. (Aśvaghoṣa, *Buddhacarita*, trans. Olivelle 2008: 304–305)

Some of the most incisive language critiquing pleasure comes from the 8th century CE Buddhist poet philosopher, Śāntideva.

> In the cycle of existence, there is no satisfaction in sensual desires (*kāma*), which are like honey on a razor's edge. (Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Wallace and Wallace 1997: 7.64)

This quote provides an example of what Buddhist texts often call *vipariṇāma duḥkha*, or the suffering of change. This refers to the dissatisfactory aspect of

pleasure, in being followed by physical and emotional pain. Pleasure is enjoyable, but dangerous in that it stimulates craving and future dissatisfaction. Moreover, Śāntideva does not limit his attention to the disvalue of sense pleasure, but also draws attention to the emotional distress which follows attaining the longer term goals which we pursue.

> At the loss of praise and fame, my own mind appears to me just like a child who wails in distress when its sand castle is destroyed. (Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Wallace and Wallace 1997: 6.92–93)

We can notice that the disvalue referenced in most of these quotes is closely linked to pernicious desire. This is explicit in the quotation by Aśvaghoṣa, in which enjoyment of sensual pleasure results in an intensification of craving. However, it is also implicit in the other quotations, such as Śāntideva's reference to the drawbacks of praise and fame. It is not only the enjoyment of worldly success, but our craving for its continuation, which sets us up for emotional anguish when a pleasant experience or situation ends. This indicates that in many Buddhist texts, the disvalue of pleasure and desire are closely linked; at least in part, pleasure is bad because it stimulates craving. This is formalized in the 12 links of dependent origination, in which the feeling (*vedanā*) link, which includes pleasure, is the causal condition for the arising of desire (*taṇhā*/*tṛṣṇā*) and craving (*upādāna*). Moreover, as suggested in the Aśvaghoṣa passage, such craving is unsatisfiable; temporarily achieving our aims simply stokes the fires of desire even higher. The solution, as represented in the relationship between the second and third Noble Truths, is to eliminate desire, and therefore the entire round of rebirth and suffering.

These Buddhist treatments of the interlinked disvalue of pleasure and craving show what at least appears problematic about developing a hedonism or desire-theory which is compatible with Buddhist commitments; pleasure and desire satisfaction, which are the fundamental units of well-being for these two theories, are problematized by numerous Buddhist texts.

Hindu descriptions of pleasure and desire are equally forbidding. In his *Nyāyabhāṣya*, Vātsyāyana explains that pleasure predictably produces desire. "The self, having experienced that pleasure (*sukham*) which is due to the proximity of an object of a certain type, experiencing [it again], desires to acquire (*upādātum icchati*) an object of that very type" (1.1.22). When a person sees something that they have enjoyed in the past, they want it. The experience of pleasure produces the desire for that which produced the pleasure in the first place.

Yogaśāstra 2.7 also explains desire as the state produced by pleasure. "Desire (*rāgaḥ*) is the consequence of pleasure (*sukhānuśayī*)." The *Nāradaparivrājaka Upaniṣad* 142 attests to the connection between pleasure and desire as well. "Desire (*kāmaḥ*) is never pacified by the enjoyment (*upabhogena*) of what is desired (*kāmānām*). It [only] grows (*abhivardhate*), as a fire only grows (*kṛṣṇavartma… bhūya eva*) from an oblation" (cf., *Mānavadharmaśāstra* 2.94, *Bhagavadgītā* 3.39).

Desire, in turn, causes problems for the agent in a number of ways. First, desires are often frustrated, and desire frustration causes pain. The sagely butcher of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* explains that "people are connected with pains (*duḥkhair*) due to contact with the undesired (*aniṣṭasaṃprayogāc*) and separation from the desired (*viprayogāt priyasya*)" (*Mahābhārata* 3.206.16). When a person desires something, but does not get it, they experience pain. They also experience pain when they experience something they desire to avoid. Vidura says the same thing in his counsel to Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the war. "Because of contact with the undesired (*aniṣṭa*) and separation from the desired (*prayasya*), people are joined with pain (*duḥkhair*)" (*Mahābhārata* 11.2.18).[2]

Desire harms the agent in other ways as well. In a famous passage from the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa outlines a series of consequences that originate from desire.

> For the person focused (*dhyāyato*) on objects, pleasure (*saṅga*) in them arises. From pleasure, desire (*kāma*) arises, from desire, anger (*krodho*) arises. From anger, there is bewilderment (*saṃmohaḥ*). From bewilderment, the confusion of memory (*smṛtivibhramaḥ*). From the confusion of memory, the destruction of the mind (*buddhināśo*), and from the destruction of the mind, [the person] is ruined (*praṇaśyati*) (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.62–63).

In his commentary to this passage, Śaṅkara explains *saṅga* as *prīti* – pleasure (*Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* 2.62). A person takes pleasure in those objects that grab and hold their attention.[3] This pleasure produces desire. Desire, in turn, leads to anger, which presumably arises – like pain – when the desire is frustrated.

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[2] Both passages specify that mental pains (*mānasam duḥkham*), in particular, arise from desire frustrations. The distinction between mental pain and bodily pain is not explicit in the discussion that follows. For an interpretation of this distinction in the *Mahābhārata*, see Framarin 2019. For an interpretation of this distinction in Buddhist contexts, see Harris 2014.

[3] In the passage just below, the sage Śaunaka outlines a similar chain of events. He describes the initial state as one in which the mind is *coditam* – driven, impelled, or incited. This supports the interpretation here, of *dhyāna* as a focus or fixation of the mind – a state in which the attention of the mind is seized and retained by its object.

Once a person becomes angry, Śaṅkara explains, they become bewildered with regard to right and wrong actions in particular (2.63). Confusion of memory amounts to the loss of "impressions (*saṃskāra*) deposited by scripture and the instruction of teachers." This amounts to the destruction of the mind, which Śaṅkara again explains in terms of "the failure of the mind in discriminating between right and wrong actions" (2.63). One ultimate consequence of desire, then, is the loss of moral agency. Along the way, the harms of anger and confusion also arise.

Other passages from the *Mahābhārata* repeat and elaborate links in this causal chain. In his counsel to the exiled Pāṇḍavas, the sage Śaunaka compares the onset of desire to an attack of arrows.

> The person whose mind is incited (*coditam*) toward the objects of the senses, his desire (*autsukyaṃ*) arises, and activity occurs. Then, that person is pierced by desire (*kāmena*)… Due to [being pierced by] arrows of the objects [of desire], the person falls in the fire of greed (*lobhāgnau*), like a moth from its greed for fire. Then, stupefied (*mohitaś*) by pleasures and foods, the person is plunged in the mouth of great confusion (*mahāmoha*), not knowing the self (3.2.64–66).

Here desire grows into greed, which pushes the person into profound confusion and – like the moth – personal destruction.

The person's ignorance with regard to the self, in particular, guarantees rebirth in *saṃsāra*. The end of the passage explains that desire, confusion, and consequent actions result in rebirth.

> In this way, a person falls into *saṃsāra*, into these and those wombs in the world. Thus, like a wheel, the person wanders, due to ignorance, action, and desire (*tṛṣṇā*). The person is reborn in beings, beginning with *brahmā* and ending with grasses, being born again and again in water, on earth, and likewise in the sky (3.2.67–68).

These endless rounds of rebirth, in turn, are pervaded by significant pain. All of these negative consequences for the agent, again, originate in pleasure and desire.

So both Buddhist and Hindu texts discourage pleasure and desire. They note – often in graphic detail – the harms associated with both pleasure and desire. These harms include pain, loss of self-control and moral agency, ignorance, rebirth, despair in the forms of confusion, addiction, and anger, and so on. In both traditions, pleasure and desire invite endless suffering – often literally – on those whom they afflict.

If Buddhist and Hindu texts discourage pleasure, then it seems implausible that they derive the intrinsic value of a life from the intrinsic values of the pleasures and pains within that life. And if Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions discourage desire, then it seems implausible that they derive the intrinsic value of a life from the intrinsic values of the desire satisfactions and frustrations within that life. All of this makes the project of inferring a theory of welfare from Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions seem misguided.

2. Hinduism, Buddhism, and hedonism

In the last section, we surveyed passages in both Buddhist and Hindu texts which express negative attitudes towards pleasure. Initially, it might seem that this would rule out the possibility of developing a plausible hedonism from Hindu or Buddhist texts. There are broadly two strategies for replying to this concern. First, Buddhist and Hindu authors can distinguish between different kinds of pleasure, some of which are *saṃsāric* and impoverished and some of which are conducive to well-being. The claim then is that negative evaluations of pleasure found in Buddhist and Hindu texts refer only to the impoverished kinds of pleasure, and are thereby compatible with a refined hedonism, which emphasizes only certain kinds of pleasure as having well-being value. In this section, we provide evidence that both Buddhist and Hindu authors claim that at least some kinds of pleasure possess positive well-being value.

A second kind of response is to argue that pleasure is characterized as negative by Buddhist and Hindu texts, not because it has intrinsic well-being disvalue, but because it has instrumental disvalue in stimulating desire and leading to other negative circumstances. Here, the idea is that pleasure of itself is intrinsically good, but is recognized as potentially harmful in its conduciveness to various negative circumstances, and above all to the arising of pernicious desires. Such a position is consistent with hedonism, since it claims that pleasure of itself has positive well-being value. In this section, we argue that both of these strategies are plausible for interpreting Buddhist and Hindu texts. Therefore, we conclude that hedonism remains consistent with Buddhist and Hindu attitudes towards pleasure.

In terms of the first of these strategies, Buddhist authors are often explicit that certain kinds of pleasure accompany virtuous mental states. Śāntideva, for instance, discusses the joyful mind (*tuṣṭamanāḥ*) which accompanies generous action (Śāntideva, *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, trans. Goodman 2016: 28), and rejoicing (*muditā*) in other's achievements (Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Wallace and Wallace 1997: 3.1, 3.3, 5.77, 6.77) as being positive forms of pleasure. Moreover,

in the Pali canon, the Buddha frequently references the salubrious pleasures of meditation which are without the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. A particularly striking passage occurs in the *Shorter Discourse on the Mass of Suffering*, in which the Buddha boasts that his enjoyment of pleasure in meditation is many times greater than that enjoyed by the richest king.

> But, friends, I can abide without moving my body or uttering a word, experiencing the peak of pleasure for one day and night. … for two, three, four, five, and six days and nights … For seven days and nights. What do you think, friends? That being so, who dwells in greater pleasure, King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha or I? (M i 94, trans. Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli 1995: 189).

The pleasure referenced in this quotation is regarding two kinds of meditational experience, pleasure (*sukha*) and bliss (*pīti*/*prīti*), both of which are conducive to developing deep states of concentration (Gunaratana 1980: 128–140). Moreover, the Buddha is clear that this pleasure experienced in meditation has none of the negative drawbacks of sensual pleasure, such as stimulating pernicious craving.

One way to develop a plausible hedonism in regards to Buddhist texts, therefore, is to distinguish sense pleasure from other kinds of pleasure, such as that accompanying virtuous action or that which is experienced in subtle meditational states. It can then be claimed that a Buddhist hedonism takes only certain kinds of non-sensual pleasure, like those just listed, as having intrinsic well-being value. This is not the only option open to a Buddhist hedonist, however.

We have already seen that many of the passages in which Buddhist texts critique pleasure do so by indicating its propensity to stimulate craving, as well as to lead to negative situations like societal strife and non-virtuous behavior. We also saw that the 12 links of dependent origination characterize pleasure as the causal factor which gives rise to craving (*taṇhā*) and eventually negative karma, future rebirth, and future suffering. These remarks suggest a complimentary but distinct approach to developing a hedonistic reading of Buddhist texts. According to this second interpretation, all pleasure has intrinsic well-being value. However, some kinds of pleasure, and much sense pleasure in particular, has instrumental disvalue in stimulating craving and leading to other negative circumstances. This is consistent with hedonism's basic commitments; all hedonisms accept that pleasure and its pursuit can lead to negative consequences, and that therefore some kinds of pleasure are best avoided.[4] In doing so, however, they can still maintain that all pleasure is, of itself, good. We have then two strategies interpreters can

[4] The strategy here will be similar to that developed by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus.

take in understanding Buddhist critiques of pleasure in a way that is compatible with hedonism. First, they may simply take Buddhists to differentiate between good and bad kinds of pleasure; in this interpretation, Buddhists can be hedonists, but of a variety which accepts only a subset of pleasurable mental states as having intrinsic well-being value. Second, they may take a stronger position and claim all pleasure has intrinsic well-being value, but that some kinds of pleasure should not be pursued because of its instrumental disvalue.

When we turn to Hindu texts, we find resources for the same replies. Texts commonly describe the experience of the successful renunciate as a state of perfect, unending bliss. *Kuṇḍika Upaniṣad* 27, for example, says that the renunciate "always enjoys the *ātman* (*ātmārāmaḥ sadā*)." *Maitreya Upaniṣad* 110 says that the liberation seeker, "attains imperishable joy (*sukham avyayam*)." *Nirvāṇa Upaniṣad* 226 reports that the renunciate experiences "the highest bliss (*paramānandī*)." The *Bhagavadgītā* says that "the person whose self is joined in yoga with *brahman*, they attain unending pleasure (*sukham akṣayam*)" (5.21). Some Buddhist texts also describe the awakened state as joyful. Joy (*pīti*), for example, is one of the seven factors of awakening present at the moment of enlightenment (Gethin 2001: 154–155). Likewise, numerous Buddhist texts describe nirvana as the highest happiness (Collins 1998: 207–213).[5]

The emphasis that these and other texts place on the pleasure of the renunciate suggests that they take certain pleasures to contribute intrinsic value to the life of the person whose pleasures they are. The life of such a person is exceedingly good for them because it contains immense and constant pleasure. This appears to support a hedonistic interpretation of welfare in these texts.

This assessment is consistent with the extensive claims about the disvalue of pleasure described earlier. While the pleasures that the renunciate takes in *brahman*, *ātman*, and so on contribute intrinsic value to their life, other pleasures – perhaps paralleling the sensory pleasures of Buddhist traditions – diminish the intrinsic value of a life. Such a theory would not be a *universal* hedonism. It would not assert that all experiences of pleasure are intrinsically valuable. It would be a hedonist theory nonetheless, however, if it claims that only pleasure states contribute positive intrinsic value to a life.

The second strategy discussed above is also available in certain Hindu contexts. The fact that Hindu texts claim that certain pleasures should be avoided does not entail that these pleasures are intrinsically bad, or even neutral. The fact

[5] On the other hand, when final *nirvāṇa* is attained, then the *skandha* of *vedanā*, which includes pleasant sensation, has ceased. See Collins 1998: 207–213 for a discussion of this apparent contradiction.

that many pleasures cause wide-ranging harm to the person explains why many Hindu texts discourage them. The fact that these pleasures have these consequences, however, is consistent with the claim that they contribute positive intrinsic value to a life. The point, instead, is that the positive intrinsic value that these pleasures contribute to a life is inevitably outweighed by the negative value that they contribute by causing eventual harm.

In both Buddhist and Hindu traditions, most pleasurable experiences only further immiserate a person, by causing desire, pain, anger, confusion, rebirth, and so on. This is consistent, however, with the claim that even these pleasures have intrinsic value. Indeed, so long as the intrinsic value of these pleasures is invariably outweighed by the disvalue of the harms that they cause, the prescription to avoid pleasure is sound hedonist advice.

So both Buddhist and Hindu texts might reply to the initial arguments against hedonist interpretations in either of two ways. First, they might draw a distinction between pleasures that contribute positive intrinsic value to a life, and pleasures that contribute negative intrinsic value to a life. Claims that pleasure should be avoided, on this reading, refer to pleasures that contribute negative intrinsic value to a life. Second, they might insist that all pleasures contribute positive intrinsic value to a life, but allow that the negative instrumental value of a wide subset of pleasures outweighs the positive intrinsic value of the pleasures themselves. On this reading, only pleasures of the latter sort should be avoided.[6]

3. Hinduism, Buddhism, and desire theory

Parallel arguments can be developed to support a desire theory interpretation of welfare in Buddhist and Hindu texts. The first argument for a hedonist theory draws a distinction between pleasures that are conducive to well-being, and pleasures that are not. The parallel argument for a desire-based theory might draw a distinction between desire-satisfactions that are conducive to well-being and those that are not. The claim, then, is that negative evaluations of desire found in Buddhist and Hindu texts refer only to impoverished desires, and are thereby compatible with a desire theory that emphasizes only certain kinds of desire-

[6] Both interpretations might be taken to assume that pain has intrinsic disvalue. It is the disvalue of pain, after all, that seems to make the overall value of pleasure – or at least most pleasures – exceedingly negative. If this assumption is accurate, then even if the relevant texts deny the intrinsic value of (certain) pleasures, they assert a form of hedonism. This kind of account can be described as an asymmetric form of hedonism, according to which experiences of pain contribute intrinsic disvalue to a life, but experiences of pleasure do not contribute intrinsic value to a life.

satisfactions as having well-being value. John Taber's work is especially helpful in developing a case for this interpretation. John Taber begins by considering Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛttiṭīkā* 1.12, in which Dharmakīrti cites the Buddha as a counter-example to the claim that action entails desire. The Buddha, Dharmakīrti says, is not motivated by desire (*rāga*), but compassion (*karuṇa*) (Taber 2011: 439).

Some might object that compassion is a desire. Dharmakīrti replies that there is an important distinction between a motivation (*prayojana*) that is based on ignorance, and a motivation that does not arise from error (Taber 2011: 440). The word "desire" is typically used to refer to motivations based on ignorance. Dharmakīrti mentions false beliefs that things are eternal, pleasant, self, or belong to the self, in particular, as paradigmatic examples. The motivations that arise from such false beliefs are desires in the usual sense. If this is the sense of the word "desire" here, then the opponent is mistaken to classify the compassion of the Buddha as a desire, since his compassion is not based on any erroneous conception. If, instead, "desire" is used to refer to motivations more broadly, with no implication about their basis in ignorance, then compassion is indeed a desire. Even in this case, however, there is no fault (*doṣa*) in the compassion of the Buddha (Taber 2011: 441).

Taber notes that the Advaitin Maṇḍanamiśra draws a parallel distinction in his *Brahmasiddhi*. Maṇḍana denies that the successful liberation seeker is motivated by desire (*rāga*). Instead, they are motivated by "mere wishing (*icchāmātram*)." The opponent might insist that this mere wishing is desire. Maṇḍana, like Dharmakīrti, replies that the word "desire (*rāga*)" normally refers to motivating states based in false beliefs. Desire usually refers to "attachment to a non-existent quality brought about by ignorance" (Taber 2011: 443). The motivation of the liberation seeker (*mumukṣu*), however, cannot be characterized as desire in this sense, since the motivation of the liberation seeker is "due to the purification brought about by the vision of reality" (Taber 2011: 443).

If the word "desire" is instead used to refer to motivations more broadly, with no suggestion that it must be based on ignorance, then the liberation seeker's desire for liberation is of course a desire. But the fact that the liberation seeker is motivated by desire in this sense is consistent with the insistence that their motivation is importantly different from that of the ordinary person.

Both of these passages suggest two ways to describe motivations. First, motivating states might be described as a broad class of states that includes, but is not limited to desires. On this reading, all desires are problematic, but motivations that are not desires are unproblematic – and potentially advantageous.

The Buddha and the liberation seeker are entirely desireless, on this reading, but retain those motivations required to act.

Second, motivating states might be taken as coextensive with desires. On this reading, all motivations are desires, but only some of these desires are problematic. Others are unproblematic, and potentially advantageous. The Buddha and the liberation seeker are not entirely desireless on this reading. They retain those desires that are required to act, but without incurring or causing harm as a result.

Having noted the distinction between problematic and unproblematic motivating states, the desire theory interpretation of welfare in Buddhist and Hindu texts seems more plausible than it initially appeared. If all motivating states are counted as desires, then the desire theory interpretation might claim that Buddhist and Hindu texts count the satisfaction of desires based in knowledge as conducive to welfare. When they claim that desire should be eliminated, on this reading, they claim that desires based in ignorance should be eliminated. If, instead, there are motivating states that are not desires, then the desire theory interpretation might claim that Buddhist and Hindu texts count the satisfaction of non-desire motivations based on knowledge as conducive to welfare. On this reading, all desires are based in ignorance, and all desires should be eliminated. In either case, Buddhist and Hindu texts might plausibly be taken to endorse the satisfaction of motivations that are based in knowledge. When they claim that desire should be eliminated, then, they claim that motivations based in ignorance should be eliminated.[7] The classification of this latter view as a desire theory

[7] Either interpretation might be an actual desire theory or an ideal desire theory. An actual desire theory claims that the satisfaction of desires that the agent actually has contributes intrinsic value to their life. An actual desire theory in the Buddhist and Hindu contexts might claim that only the satisfaction of those actual desires/non-desire motivations that are grounded in knowledge contributes intrinsic value to a life. The satisfaction of actual desires that are grounded in ignorance, unsurprisingly, does not contribute intrinsic value to a life. This view would imply that the satisfaction of most of the actual desires that an ordinary person might have would not increase the intrinsic value of that person's life. And this would make good sense of the generally discouraging attitude toward desire found in many Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions.

An ideal desire theory claims that the satisfaction of ideal desires contributes intrinsic value to a life. Ideal desires are often characterized as desires that a fully informed, rational agent would have. An ideal desire theory in the Buddhist and Hindu contexts might claim that only the satisfaction of those desires/non-desire motivations that a fully informed, rational agent would have contributes intrinsic value to a life. This seems roughly identical to the claim that only the satisfaction of those desires/non-desire motivations grounded in knowledge, rather than ignorance, contribute intrinsic value to a life. The satisfaction of desires that a fully informed and rational agent would not have, in contrast, do not increase welfare value.

might seem strange, since it denies that any desire-satisfaction has intrinsic value. The basic intuition of the desire theorist, however, is that a life goes well for a person insofar as they get what they want. If the word "want" in this context refers to motivating states, and if those states include both desire and non-desire states, then this view is consistent with the basic intuition of desire theory. A life goes well for the person whose life it is insofar as (certain) motivating states are satisfied.

The second argument for a hedonist interpretation of welfare in Buddhist and Hindu texts, which we reviewed in the last section, claims that all pleasures contribute intrinsic value to a life. It explains the negative characterizations of a wide subset of pleasures in Buddhist and Hindu texts by citing the disvalue of the consequences of these pleasures. These consequences include the pain of desire frustrations, anger, confusion, rebirth, and so on.

The parallel argument for a desire theory interpretation of these traditions claims that all desire-satisfactions contribute intrinsic value to a life. It explains the negative characterizations of a wide subset of desires by citing the disvalue of the consequences of these desires. Indeed, most of the consequences of pleasure arise because pleasure produces desire. So the consequences of problematic desires are generally identical to the consequences of problematic pleasures.

Since desire causes a wide range of harms, it has significant negative instrumental value. The negative value of the further ends toward which desire is a means, however, does not affect the intrinsic value of the desire satisfactions themselves. The negative instrumental value of desire is sufficient to explain the prohibition on desire in certain Buddhist and Hindu texts and traditions. In the long run, most desires only further immiserate a person, by causing pain, anger, confusion, and rebirth. This conclusion is consistent, however, with the claim that desire satisfactions have intrinsic value. So long as the intrinsic value of desire satisfactions is invariably outweighed by the disvalue of the harms that desires cause, the prescription to avoid desire is sound advice.

So both Buddhist and Hindu texts might reply to the initial arguments against desire interpretations in either of two ways. First, they might draw a distinction between problematic and unproblematic motivations, and claim that the satisfaction of unproblematic motivations contributes intrinsic value to a life. Unproblematic motivations, in turn, are those based on knowledge. Claims that desire should be eliminated, on this reading, refer to those problematic motivating states – again, whether they are called desire motivations or non-desire motivations – that are based on ignorance. Second, they might insist that all desire satisfactions contribute positive intrinsic value to a life, but allow that the

negative instrumental value of a wide subset of desire satisfactions outweighs the positive intrinsic value of the satisfactions themselves. On this reading, only desires of the latter sort should be avoided.

4. Indeterminacy about welfare

The preceding suggests that Buddhist and Hindu texts might be taken to imply a hedonist theory of welfare or a desire theory of welfare after all. Initially, however, there seem to be good reasons to prefer the hedonist theory over the desire theory. Buddhist and Hindu texts describe *saṃsāra* as exceedingly painful. They also endorse the pursuit of certain pleasures – like those that arise as a result of virtuous mental states, those that arise in meditation, those that arise in relation to *ātman* and *brahman*, and so on.

The hedonic explanation of these claims seems straightforward. *Saṃsāra* should be avoided because lives within the cycles of rebirth are exceedingly painful. Pain contributes negative intrinsic value to the life of the person whose life it is. The pain of *saṃsāra* makes the life of the person who experiences it intrinsically bad. Experiences of virtuous mental states, meditation, *ātman*/*brahman*, and so on, in contrast, are good for a person because they are pleasurable. Pleasure contributes positive intrinsic value to the life of the person whose life it is. The pleasure of these states makes the life of the person who attains them intrinsically good.

The desire theory, in contrast, offers a more complicated explanation of these claims. The desire theory must say that Buddhist and Hindu texts prescribe escape from *saṃsāra* because it satisfies a desire – or because it precludes desire frustrations. Likewise, it must claim that Buddhist and Hindu texts endorse the pursuit of virtuous mental states, meditation, *ātman*/*brahman*, and so on because the attainment of these states satisfies a desire.[8] Given the emphasis that these texts place on pleasure and the avoidance of pain, a desire theory presumably must say that Buddhist and Hindu texts prescribe escape from *saṃsāra* because it satisfies the desire to avoid pain. It must claim that these texts endorse the pursuit of virtuous mental states, meditation, *ātman*/*brahman*, and so on because they satisfy a desire for pleasure.[9]

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[8] See footnote seven above for the distinction between actual and ideal desire theories.

[9] Śāntideva can be understood as making this point. "When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone? When fear and suffering are disliked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I protect myself and not the other?" (Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Wallace and Wallace 1997: 8.95–96).

So while both the hedonist and desire theories might explain the relevant prescriptions found in the texts, the desire theory must add an additional layer of explanation. Texts claim that *saṃsāra* is painful, and that *saṃsāra* should be avoided. The hedonist interpretation draws the simple inference that *saṃsāra* should be avoided *because it is painful*. Texts endorse the pursuit of virtuous mental states, meditation, *ātman/brahman*, and so on, and claim that these states are pleasurable. The hedonist interpretation draws the simple inference that these states are good *because they are pleasurable*.

The desire theory, in contrast, takes the claim that *saṃsāra* is painful, and the claim that *saṃsāra* should be avoided, to imply that *saṃsāra* should be avoided, not because pain is intrinsically bad, but *because people desire to avoid pain*. It takes the endorsement of virtuous mental states, experiences of meditation, *ātman/brahman*, and so on, and the claim that these states are pleasurable, to imply not that pleasure is intrinsically valuable, but that these states are endorsed *because they satisfy a desire for pleasure*.

In short, the hedonistic interpretation seems preferable on the grounds of Ockam's Razor. As Mark Siderits and others note, Buddhist and Hindu texts frequently invoke the same exegetical principle, according to which the theory that posits the fewest unevidenced claims/entities is counted as the more plausible, all other things being equal (Siderits 2015: 12, n. 6).

The problem with this argument is that it fails to recognize that in many conversational situations, there will be no attempt to distinguish instrumental and intrinsic value in relation to items of well-being. In such cases, whatever unit of well-being value is relevant will be referred to directly, with no characterization of what explains its well-being value at the deepest conceptual level. Simplicity in expression, therefore, should not be taken as evidence for a commitment to intrinsic value of a referenced item. In explicating this response, it is helpful to reemphasize that assigning importance to a given item of well-being does not entail that it has intrinsic value. For a hedonist, curing a contagious disease is important, not because bodily health has intrinsic value, but because it has instrumental value in preventing painful states from arising. Likewise, marking a given item as having intrinsic well-being value does not of itself mean it is especially important. The pleasure of eating skittles has intrinsic value for hedonists who like candy, but not very much of it. Curing cancer is more important than experiencing the pleasure of eating skittles for hedonists, even though the second item, and not the first, has intrinsic value (see also Harris 2015).

Moreover, in many philosophical and non-philosophical conversations, it is the importance of elements of well-being, rather than the question of their

intrinsic value, which structures conversations and debates. We can imagine two doctors, one of whom is a hedonist and one of whom is a desire theorist, debating the treatment of a patient. Both doctors agree that it is important to lessen the patient's pain; their disagreement lies at a deeper level of conceptual foundations in which the ultimate conceptual grounding of the disvalue of pain is at issue. However, in the practical context of the doctor's office, there is no reason to raise these theoretical questions. Both doctors would simply refer to pain, since it is the relevant item with importance. Simplicity of expression, here, does not indicate that the desire theorist has become a hedonist, but rather that the conversation is not one in which discussions of the conceptual foundations of value are relevant. Likewise, we need not assume that an individual is always committed to a given foundational theory of well-being value; we can imagine the two doctors consulting with a third who had formed no theoretical commitments as to whether pain has intrinsic or instrumental disvalue. What is important in the conversation between the doctors is the importance of the pain itself, not its underlying conceptual foundations.

Arguably, the medical example parallels discussions of pain and pleasure found in many Buddhist and Hindu texts. It is true that such authors often speak of the value and disvalue of pleasure and pain, and typically do not explicate this in terms of the frustration of a deep seated desire for happiness or the avoidance of suffering. However, it may be that these philosophers are only interested in considering the importance of pleasure and pain in terms of our well-being, rather than the conceptual foundations for that value. The fact that Buddhist texts often use medical analogies to characterize the role of the Buddha in lessening suffering is worth emphasis. Since the primary purpose of Buddhism is to eliminate suffering, it may be that positing the additional question of whether pleasure and pain have a conceptually deeper explanation for their value or disvalue is not necessary.

We can see, then, that an appeal to Ockham's Razor cannot settle the question of whether there is a hedonic element to Buddhist and Brahmanical texts. It may be that these authors have simply not raised the question of whether important items of well-being have intrinsic or instrumental value. If this is the case, the vocabulary they will use to discuss items of well-being will follow non-philosophical customs for talking about terms of value. Both hedonists and desire-theorists simply talk about the value of pleasure and pain in contexts in which their foundational well-being commitments are not in question. This does not imply that desire-theorists are inconsistent; it simply shows that a certain kind of philosophical precision is not required in all contexts.

A potential worry at this point is to wonder whether we can still take Indian philosophers seriously, as ethicists, if they do not take a position on the central question of what, at the deepest conceptual level, constitutes well-being. But this is to assume that Buddhist and Hindu texts share the common assumption in Western philosophy that determining which items have intrinsic well-being value is among the most important topics of philosophical work on well-being. Much of the philosophically important work which Buddhists and Hindu thinkers do is in considering the importance of specific common elements of well-being for human life. Buddhists, for example, claim that humans massively overestimate the value of sense pleasure, and give a variety of reasons in support of their position (Harris 2014). Since all plausible theories of well-being must give careful attention to the value and potential disvalue of pleasure in a life, Buddhist reflections on this topic will be helpful for these theorists. Similar responses could be developed regarding distinctions Buddhist and Hindu authors make regarding good and bad desires, as well as virtuous and afflictive mental states that promote or decrease well-being respectively. All of these philosophical insights are valuable, whether or not they are built into a theory which takes a position on what has intrinsic or instrumental well-being value.

Conclusion

Initially, it may seem that hedonism and desire theories are unlikely candidates for understanding Buddhist and Hindu commitments to well-being, given these traditions' emphasis on the disvalue of pleasure and desire. In this essay, we have shown that matters are not so simple. Buddhist and Hindu authors have at least two options for developing viable versions of hedonism and desire theory. First, the hedonist can distinguish between good and bad kinds of pleasure, and the desire theorist can distinguish between good and bad kinds of desire-satisfaction. The claim then will be that Buddhist and Hindu critiques of pleasure and desire refer only to the bad kinds of each relevant item. Second, they may accept that all pleasures or desire-satisfactions have intrinsic well-being value, but that this can be outweighed by instrumental disvalue. Here, Buddhist and Hindu critiques of pleasure and desire-satisfaction refer to this instrumental disvalue of the item in question. We concluded, therefore, that hedonism and desire-satisfaction theory remain viable options for ethicists working from Buddhist or Hindu frameworks.

Finally, we considered whether the Ockham's Razor might make a hedonistic interpretation of at least certain passages surveyed more plausible. We concluded that it is likely such passages may not be intended to spell out the deepest conceptual foundations of well-being. If this is the case, reference to the value of pleasure

may simply indicate simplicity of expression in line with conversational norms, rather than a commitment to a particular foundational theory. What this suggests is that authors working from Buddhist and Hindu frameworks have the resources within their traditions to develop interesting and sophisticated versions of hedonism and desire theory, even if the traditions themselves may not be explicitly or implicitly committed to either.

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