

Hedonism

Philosophers commonly distinguish between psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism. Psychological hedonism is the view that humans are psychologically constructed in such a way that we exclusively desire pleasure. Ethical hedonism is the view that our fundamental moral obligation is to maximize pleasure or happiness. Ethical hedonism is most associated with the ancient Greek philosopher [Epicurus](#) (342-270 BCE.) who taught that our life's goal should be to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. In fact, all of our actions should have that aim:

We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. [Letter to Menoecus]

In *A Letter to Menoecus* - one of his few surviving fragments - Epicurus gives advice on how to decrease life's pains, and explains the nature of pleasure. As to decreasing life's pain, Epicurus explains how we can reduce the psychological anguish that results from fearing the gods and fearing death. Concerning the nature of pleasure, Epicurus explains that at least some pleasures are rooted in natural and, as a rule, every pain is bad and should be avoided, and every pleasure is good and should be preferred. However, there is delicate relation between pain and pleasure. Every pain we have is bad, and we should minimize pain when possible. However, sometimes simply minimizing life's pains is sufficient to attain happiness, and we need to go a step further and actively increase pleasure. He argues that we should not pursue every possible pleasure, such as when they produce more pain. Also, argues that the fewer desires we have, the easier it will be to experience happiness.

During the middle ages, Christian philosophers largely denounced Epicurean hedonism, which they believed was inconsistent with the Christian emphasis on avoiding sin, doing God's will, and developing the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Renaissance philosophers such as [Erasmus](#) (1466-1536) revived hedonism and argued that its emphasis on pleasure was in fact compatible with God's wish for humans to be happy. In his famous work *Utopia* (1516), British philosopher Thomas More (1478-1535) explains that "the chief part of a person's happiness consists of pleasure." Like Erasmus, More defends hedonism on religious grounds and argues that, not only did God design us to be happy, but that uses our desire for happiness to motivate us to behave morally. More importantly More distinguishes between pleasures of the mind, and pleasures of the body. He also argues that we should pursue pleasures that are more naturally grounded, so that we do not become preoccupied with artificial luxuries. In the 18th century, the moral theme of pleasure and happiness was more systematically explored by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1747) and [David Hume](#) (1711-1776), whose theories were precursors to [utilitarianism](#).

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