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Hegesias the Death-Persuader; or, the Gloominess of Hedonism

WALLACE I. MATSON

In the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero explores the idea that death should not be thought of as an evil because it deprives us of good things; rather, it is a good because it cuts off bad things. 'So,' he concludes tentatively,¹

death takes us away from the bad, not the good. ... Indeed the Cyrenaic Hegesias argued for this so eloquently that it is alleged he was forbidden by King Ptolemy to make those statements in his classes because many on hearing them committed suicide... There is a book by Hegesias entitled *The Man Starving Himself to Death* in which someone dying of self-starvation is called back by his friends, and in answer to them he enumerates the unpleasant aspects of human life. I could do the same, although less emphatically than he, for he thinks that living is to absolutely nobody's advantage, whereas I say nothing about other people, only asking whether it is to *my* advantage.

This is our only biographical notice of Hegesias of Cyrene, who held forth in Alexandria in the third century BC. Cicero does not vouch for the truth of the story about Hegesias's students killing themselves, and some authorities writing early in our century pooh-pooh it, deeming it incredible that anyone could take philosophical lectures so seriously. Today we may not be so sure.

If the anecdote is true, Hegesias may have a claim to the dubious honour of being the first professor to have his academic freedom infringed by the government. In any case he occupies a unique niche in the history of philosophy: he is the only philosopher who positively advocated suicide. The majority who have taken a stand, from Socrates and Aristotle through Aquinas and Spinoza to Kant, have condemned it as irrational. Those who have excused it, such as the Stoics, Hume, and Mill, have supposed it to be rational only in desperate circumstances. But Hegesias seems to have reasoned that killing oneself is what the wise man will do, in a cool hour after calm deliberation. It is unlikely, however, that he followed his own prescription.²

¹ Chapter 34, section 83.

² Here the argument from silence is strong: if he had, Cicero would have mentioned the fact.

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Hegesias was a hedonist, holding that Pleasure is The Good. To many—readers of Lucretius and *Playboy* alike—hedonism is a liberating and joyous philosophy. Nevertheless, it is logic that smooths the slope to suicide, as we shall see.

There were two Greek versions of hedonism, the Cyrenaic and the Epicurean. The former, and older, was founded by Aristippus, stigmatized by historians as a ‘minor Socratic,’ who developed that strain of Socrates’ thought that emerges in Plato’s *Protagoras* where he asserts, or perhaps merely plays with the idea, that the good is the pleasant and useful. After Socrates’ death Aristippus went back to Cyrene, something of an ancient Los Angeles in climate, topography and lifestyle, where he became the ancient Hugh Hefner, enabled to live *la dolce vita* by money obtained from the tyrant Dionysius (the Younger) of Syracuse, who was also the patron of Plato. In accordance with his principles, such as they were, he had no qualms about using flattery to this end.

He and his school held that there are two conscious states of the body, pleasure and pain, which are ‘smooth’ and ‘rough’ motions respectively, and that the goal of life is to achieve the former and avoid the latter. Pleasures do not differ *qua* pleasure. Pain is an altogether distinct sensation. Happiness is a mere general name for a summation of particular pleasures. That pleasure is the end is proved by the (alleged) fact that everybody seeks it. (Thus Aristippus, like hedonists generally, derived ought from is, the ethical doctrine—we should pursue pleasure—from the psychological—we do in fact pursue pleasure and nothing else—‘unless their minds are perverted,’ he added to take care of apparent exceptions.) There are psychical pleasures, such as delight in the prosperity of one’s country, but these are not so good as the physical pleasures. Absence of pain is not pleasure, any more than absence of pleasure is pain; the neutral state is like being asleep.

Aristippus conceded that the necessary means for obtaining certain pleasures are in themselves painful. Do a cost/benefit analysis, he recommended. Take the cash, let the credit go, seize the day: though even the Cyrenaic sage will not always be able to live pleasantly, for no one has complete control over what sensations he is going to have. (Here is the seed of Hegesias’s pessimism.)

The Cyrenaics were sceptics in theory of knowledge—we know our sensations, but not what causes them, hence Aristippus rejected physics—and held that morals are conventional only. The only real reason not to do ‘wrong’ is fear of punishment.

Aristippus taught this simple philosophy to his daughter Arete and to a disciple Antipater. Thence it descended, coming in the fifth philosophical generation to Hegesias and Anniceris, the last of the school.

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Hegesias was to Aristippus much as Hume was to Locke: he ruthlessly deduced the consequences of the founder's basic principles. It is pleasure we seek and pain we shun. Whose pleasure and pain? Our own. Hence there is no such thing as altruism.

There is no such thing as gratitude or friendship or beneficence, because it is not for themselves that we choose to do these things but simply from motives of interest, apart from which such conduct is nowhere found.³

Moreover, pleasure is pleasure; there can be more of it or less, but pleasures do not differ except quantitatively.

Poverty and riches have no relevance to pleasure; for neither the rich nor the poor as such have any special share in pleasure. Slavery and freedom, nobility and low birth, honour and dishonour, are alike indifferent in a calculation of pleasure.

The Hegesiacs held that the hedonic calculus always yields a negative bottom line:

They denied the possibility of happiness, for the body is infected with much suffering, while the soul shares in the sufferings of the body and is a prey to disturbance, and fortune often disappoints. From all this it follows that happiness cannot be realized.

Death, which is the absence of consciousness, is neither good nor bad, hence better than life, which is bound to be bad; so, suicide is rational, and 'whatever appears rational should be done.'

Notwithstanding this impeccable logic, not all the Hegesiacs killed themselves, nor, as I have mentioned, did the Master himself. Perhaps an excuse can be found in their sceptical epistemology: 'they held that allowance should be made for errors, for no man errs voluntarily, but under constraint of some suffering'—another Socratic echo. At any rate, in Diogenes's account the conclusion is toned down from outright death-persuasion to the ambiguous statement that 'the wise man will not have so much advantage over others in the choice of goods as in the avoidance of evils, making it his end to live without pain of body or mind.'

This strategy of prudence marks the transition from Cyrenaic to Epicurean hedonism. Epicurus was obsessed with risk avoidance, saying that prudence was more precious even than philosophy. And prudence meant living as austere as the Stoics and Platonists, who theoretically despised pleasure. How come? Where did the joy of living go?

³ This quotation, and those following unless otherwise noted, are from Diogenes Laertius's summary of the tenets of 'the Hegesiacs,' II, 93–96. Diogenes is our source for the epithet 'death-persuader,' *peisithanatos*.

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It is essential to the structure of hedonist philosophy that rational activity is viewed as being done in order to obtain/avoid a payoff distinct from the activity: the sensations of pleasure/pain. Now, the payoff is something uncertain, not (entirely) in the power of the agent. And not only can we not tell for sure what the consequences of our actions will be, we often cannot even tell what they will *probably* be. So what is the rational policy?

The hedonists anticipated the game-theoretical solution to this problem, which is that if forced to gamble where the odds are unknown, a rational player will adopt the strategy designed to maximize the minimum payoff: 'maximin' in the jargon. Among policies available to him he will choose the one such that its worst outcome is better than the worst outcomes of the alternatives. In other words, he will always seek to minimize risk.

Now, what action in particular does the maximin strategy dictate for life as a whole? Well, what gives complete assurance of no negative payoff? Only one thing: suicide.

The axioms and theorems of John von Neumann's brain child the theory of games, which lead to this conclusion, are widely taken to define rational choice, as for instance in John Rawls's celebrated *A Theory of Justice*, which, though not explicitly hedonist, views the rational and just society as one in which the entire social product is dedicated to compensating for the unjust outcomes of 'the natural lottery,' as Rawls calls the various inequalities—in talents, parental status, good looks, even disposition to industriousness—with which we are saddled at birth. The main Rawlsian idea is that those who win the lottery must give most of their prizes back to the losers, being allowed to keep only the minimum necessary to motivate them to use their talents productively. The reason behind this requirement, according to Rawls, is that the principles of justice are whatever would be chosen by rational individuals who do not know what their position will be in the society they are choosing the principles for. So, they would follow the maximin strategy and choose that state of affairs in which the worst off are better off than they would be under any other arrangement. (Rawls never discusses why his rational persons behind the veil of ignorance do not opt for prenatal suicide, though Hegesias could justly claim that he owes it to us to do so.)

Well, must we, if we are rational, accept such conclusions? Revulsion against suicide is almost universal; likewise, many would find the Rawlsian riskless welfare state unutterably dreary (and—dare we say it?—unjust). Are these attitudes merely more irrationalities built into the human frame, along with love and religion?

No, mere logic cannot compel us to swallow either suicide or

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Rawls. The reasoning is vitiated at its very beginning, in its game-theoretical model of life. In a non-metaphorical game such as poker, The Payoff is a specifiable thing, money, and what is done in the game is done in order to get as much of it as possible. The payoff and the playing are distinct. According to hedonism, life is a poker game writ large, its payoff, pleasure, likewise distinct from 'the pursuit of happiness.' But this is a false model for most of life. True, many things are done thus, for the sake of the pleasure payoff, and nature has seen to this with regard to a few especially necessary actions. But many more of the things we voluntarily do are done for their own sake, because we like doing them, the activity is *its own* payoff—or rather, the very notion of a payoff is misplaced. Mountaineers get satisfaction out of climbing mountains; but if all the dangers and pains were eliminated, the satisfaction would be diminished rather than increased. The mountaineer who can't make it to the top unless he is promised a bottle of champagne when he gets there is not much of a mountaineer.

Some philosophers, among them Plato and the Stoics, have grasped this point, but have then overshot the mark in condemning pleasure altogether. It was Aristotle, as usual, who got it exactly right. Pleasure, he said, is *a* good, though not *the* good. *The* good is 'activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.' When pleasure is present, it 'completes the activity as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age.' Or as Nietzsche would have put it had he lived in our century, Man does *not* strive for happiness: only the Rawlsian does.⁴ We need to be reminded of this from time to time to free ourselves from hedonistic gloom and timidity.

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⁴ Cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Maxims and Arrows' 12.