

DARWINIAN HEDONISM  
AND THE EPIDEMIC OF UNHEALTHY  
BEHAVIOR

Psychological hedonism – the idea that people tend to act in ways that maximize pleasure and minimize displeasure – has a decidedly poor reputation among academics who study human behaviour. Opinions range from outright rejection to those who believe it to be intuitively obvious, but untestable and therefore unhelpful. In this book, the author introduces an empirically testable and useful theory of psychological hedonism based on contemporary theory and research in the emerging field of affective neuroscience. He goes on to argue that humans are genetically endowed with a tendency towards psychological hedonism as a function of Darwinian processes. This view of psychological hedonism in light of its Darwinian origins – thereafter referred to as *Darwinian Hedonism* – is essential to address the growing global epidemic of unhealthy behavior, such as poor diet, physical inactivity, and substance use.

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DAVID M. WILLIAMS

*Brown University, Rhode Island*



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*For Joe, Julie, and Charlie*

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## *Preface*

As a psychologist working in a school of public health, a big part of my job is to try to understand human behavior related to health or *health behavior*. My focus over the past 10 years or so has been on trying to understand why people engage in, or fail to engage in, regular physical exercise. More specifically, I have spent a lot of time measuring how people feel – good versus bad – when they exercise. My big “discovery,” as my wife sarcastically refers to it, is that people who feel good during exercise are more likely to exercise in the future, and vice versa.

I can understand why my research may seem somewhat less than spectacular to my wife and probably to many readers. It is because the basic idea that those who feel good during exercise will be more likely to do it again is intuitive and obvious. It is consistent with a more general principle of human behavior that ancient scholars wrote about over 2000 years ago and many times since; it is the principle of psychological hedonism: People generally tend to behave in ways that maximize pleasure and minimize displeasure.

But despite the long history of psychological hedonism and its intuitive appeal, contemporary academic philosophers are not so keen on the idea. And their criticisms make a lot of sense. For example, psychological hedonism, when defined in terms of immediate pleasures and displeasures is often wrong. That is (sticking for now to the example of exercise), people often exercise even though they feel miserable during exercise. To account for this problem, psychological hedonism may be defined more broadly to accommodate more temporally distal pleasures and displeasures (i.e., “I may feel miserable while I’m exercising, but I’ll feel good when I’m done.”). But, in the latter case, it is not clear what we should use to predict behaviour – the immediate displeasure someone feels during exercise or the satisfaction that someone feels after finishing the exercise. And so, the theory becomes untestable, which is a fatal flaw for a theory of

human behavior. Because of these concerns, philosophers who study such things have relegated the principle of psychological hedonism to a status somewhere between trivially true and completely useless.

Although psychological hedonism has fallen into disrepute in contemporary academic philosophy, psychologists continue to study the concept of reward. A concept that appears, at least on the surface, to be fairly similar to the idea of psychological hedonism. Indeed, reward and pleasure seem intimately connected. (After all, what makes a reward rewarding if not the pleasure one experiences upon receiving the reward?) But as with the principle of psychological hedonism, there are conceptual problems with the concept of reward. For starters, there has been disagreement on what a reward is: Is it defined by pleasure? Or is it better thought of in terms of the allegedly more scientifically rigorous (but, as we will see, ever mysterious) concept of “reinforcement”? Moreover, what is it that makes a reward one day lead to behavior the next day? The answers to these questions are unclear. And so, the concept of reward, like the principle of psychological hedonism, suffers from some fundamental conceptual problems.

And so, herein lies the problem. The philosophical principle of psychological hedonism and the psychological concept of reward appear to be different ways of expressing a single undeniable law of human nature. Yet scholars and scientists of human behavior either do not see the value in the idea or cannot agree on the details and so far have failed to connect the two lines of inquiry that seem so obviously related but stem from different academic disciplines.

My goal in this book is to address this problem by offering a new formulation of psychological hedonism, a Theory of Hedonic Motivation, based on recent research in the emerging field of affective neuroscience. The Theory of Hedonic Motivation offers a version of psychological hedonism that is intuitively appealing and scientifically viable. Moreover, I will examine psychological hedonism from an evolutionary perspective, thus offering a further explanation for why people tend to maximize pleasure and minimize displeasure and, for that matter, why we experience pleasure and displeasure in the first place. For example, I will argue that the tendency to experience pleasure in response to sweet tastes and, for many of us, displeasure in response to vigorous physical exertion has an evolutionary origin. I will refer to this grounding of psychological hedonism in Neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology as Darwinian Hedonism.

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I realize though that scientific theories can be difficult to digest, not to mention care about, if they do not have a practical application. Thus, returning to my jumping-off point, I present my ideas in the context of one of the most significant practical problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century – the problems of physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, substance abuse, and other unhealthy behaviors that, taken together, account for an ever-growing proportion of chronic disease and premature death. It is this epidemic of unhealthy behavior that provides an applied context for the Darwinian Hedonism perspective that is the focus of this book.

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Thanks to my wife, Vanessa, for her patience and support while I worked on this book through many evenings and weekends over 5 years. Thanks to my children, Joe, Julie, and Charlie, for their excitement about the idea that dad was writing a book – they provided an unyielding source of inspiration!

Finally, I thank Michael Ruse. After reading Michael's book, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, I cold-emailed him to see if he would have any interest

in working with me on the idea for this book. Not only did he respond immediately, he invited me to visit him at Florida State University and stay with him and his wife, Lizzy, so we could discuss the idea. He later came to visit me at Brown University to help me further refine the idea. Michael was originally a co-author when we first signed the book contract. However, as time went by, Michael acted more as a mentor for me, helping me to get my ideas out on paper, to refine those that were worthy of pursuit, and to discard those that were not. As the book neared completion, Michael gracefully volunteered to step aside as co-author despite the significant time he put into mentoring me, arguing that, while he would be proud to be a co-author, it really would not be justified. He then continued to mentor me, providing feedback and guidance all the way through to the final submission. I can easily say that this book would not exist without him. Perhaps more importantly, Michael provided for me an exemplar of kindness and selflessness toward one's junior colleagues. I can only hope I will follow his example when my chance comes.

## *Audience*

The ideas I present in this book represent a synthesis of philosophy, psychology, affective neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and behavioral ecology/evolutionary psychology. As such, the main target audience is academics and advanced graduate students from these fields. However, no prior training in these fields is necessary, and thus I hope the book also will appeal to academics and professionals in other fields, as well as to interested lay readers.

This book can be read from two perspectives. Those interested in public health may view Darwinian Hedonism as a new framework for improving the science and practice of public health. Those with a broader interest in understanding human behavior can view the focus on public health as an example of the utility of the Darwinian Hedonism approach.

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