
Two Types of Psychological Hedonism

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Abstract

Session: Psychological Altruism from a Biological Point of View - Some Recent Perspectives (Christine Clavien, Justin Garson, Armin Schulz, Elliott Sober, Chandra Sripada, Stephen Stich) **Abstract:** I develop a distinction, suggested by LaFollette's 1988 paper, "The Truth in Psychological Egoism," between two types of psychological hedonism. *Inferential* hedonism (or "I-hedonism") holds that each person only has ultimate desires regarding his or her own hedonic states (pleasure and pain). *Reinforcement* hedonism (or "R-hedonism") holds that each person's ultimate desires, whatever their contents may be, are differentially reinforced in one's cognitive system only by virtue of their being associated with pleasure. In short, I-hedonism is a theory about the content of ultimate desires; R-hedonism is a theory about their *function*. I'll argue that accepting R-hedonism and rejecting I-hedonism coheres well with the neuroscientist Anthony Dickinson's theory about the evolutionary function of hedonic states, the 'hedonic interface theory.' In his view, pleasure and pain regulate one's hierarchy of desires *not* by being part of the representational content of one's ultimate desires, but by serving as a kind of reinforcement mechanism that grounds the "belief-desire psychology" in the biological needs of the organism. Finally, I'll defend R-hedonism from a potential objection. In *Unto Others*, Sober and Wilson develop a fairly compelling argument that psychological altruism (as a view about the content of one's ultimate desires) is more likely to have evolved by natural selection than I-hedonism. I'll suggest that their argument against I-hedonism cannot be converted in any straightforward way into an argument against R-hedonism, because, unlike I-hedonism, we have no *a priori* basis for comparing R-hedonism and its alternatives with respect to their energetic efficiency (or metabolic cost).

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