

HEDONISM

John Zmirak

Hedonism is the belief that the pursuit of pleasure—intellectual, emotional, or physical—and the avoidance of suffering ought to guide human decisions.

People say that it's fun to be young. People say a lot of things. Middle-aged parents and teachers have probably told you things like, "These are the best years of your life—make the most of them!" College calendars are stuffed with enough events to grind the hardest party animal into a pile of motionless sawdust, and for once your parents aren't around to set deadlines, dole out spending money, sniff your breath or clothes for "substances," or otherwise babysit you. If you're living away at school, this is the most independence you've ever had. You've got cash and a flexible schedule (all those books won't read themselves, but the end of semester seems years away and you've always been good at cramming).

From watching your parents, you are pretty sure that middle age is a snore: If there is any time you are going to really enjoy life, college seems to be it. This is your one window of opportunity to really cut loose, sow some oats, have wild romances with people you wouldn't normally fool with, and in general live the way those maniacs do in college movies you've been watching since you turned thirteen. You might even feel a duty to get "out there" and see what happens. Indeed,

if you aren't having as good a time as you feel you're expected to, you will actually feel guilty.

Is this vague sense one has at a certain age the moral obligation to spit beer all over the wall the same thing as Hedonism? Certainly, they are connected. If your expectations of college life are similar to those we have just mentioned, you are likely to engage in some pretty seriously hedonistic behavior—and no, it won't turn out to be as much fun as it does in the movies. The director usually cuts away before the drunk “girl gone wild” gets sick and starts sobbing in the corner, or the stoner dude flunks out of school and ends up dunking fries at McDonald's in between twelve-step meetings.

Still, the *Animal House* mentality hardly rises to the level of a heresy that would rate inclusion in this kind of book, alongside such deadly poisons as Relativism (see essay 2) and Feminism (see essay 10). Such misbehavior—and the fantasies people have of the really *awesome* naughty fun other folks must *somewhere* be having, if only we could get invited to their parties—can largely be chalked up to people being immature and easily led. If someone's ideas on how to spend four whole years of his life, and a huge chunk of his parents' money, have actually been formed by repeated viewings of *Old School*, his problem isn't really philosophical. He just needs to grow up—and let's hope he does before he catches an incurable disease, wrecks his liver, marries a maniac on a whim, drunk-drives into a school bus, or fathers an “unwanted child” whose survival is uncertain.

Many glamorous figures in the arts have seemed to live according to such a degraded ethic. We still remember “great lovers” like Casanova and Lord Byron, tough guys like Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, romantic rebels against convention like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence—and that's not even getting into the world of popular music, where jazz players and rock singers blazed whole new trails in search of “extreme experiences.” There's nothing that will boost an artist's reputation like his willingness to challenge “stale, bourgeois conventions” of right and wrong—which is I guess what author William Burroughs was doing when he drunkenly played “William Tell” with an apple on top of his wife's head. She died, but it happened down in Mexico, so feminist critics give him a pass.

The mindless pursuit of short-term pleasure at any cost is the best way to describe the phenomenon we now know as addiction. Cocaine offers anyone who snorts a little powder the same feeling he would have if he had won the world's most attractive spouse, beaten his enemies to death with his Academy Award, then carried his bride up Mount Everest. All this, from a little snort of powder. No wonder such abuse wears out the "pleasure centers" in the brain, which soon require regular doses of drugs just to keep the addict out of clinical depression. Casual sex works much the same way, greedily grabbing the ecstasy our body offers as a reward for forming a lasting, loving relationship and procreating the species.

Hedonism: Suffering is a Miscalculation

But there is no point in making a philosophical argument against selfish and self-destructive behavior. There is something more serious going on when we talk about Hedonism, a worldview that makes coherent claims about the nature of man and his bodily existence, the meaning of suffering, and the ethical standards that should guide our behavior all through our lives—not just in our leisure time or in college. There have been serious thinkers throughout history who have argued for what boils down to Hedonism.

Epicurus is the most famous, and since his very name has come to be a synonym for "really good restaurant," his arguments deserve our careful scrutiny. Epicurus rejected as unproveable Plato's assertion that the transient objects we see before our eyes—such as rocks, trees, and let's be candid, each other—are actually imperfect earthly copies of timeless "forms" that exist (as we might put it today) in the mind of God. Instead, Epicurus held what we might recognize as an almost modern view: The world and everything in it is simply composed of tiny particles called "atoms," which make up each one of us for the brief period of time that we actually exist. At some point, those atoms will fall apart, and we will dissolve into nothingness, and that's the end of the story. Epicurus' views were taken up again by the Roman writer Lucretius, whose *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things") put the Epicurean theory of "atomism" into the form of an epic poem.

Now, Epicurus didn't preach a gospel of party-hearty, live-for-

the-moment sensualism. No educated Greek would have favored something like that—and if he had, his views would be easy to dismiss. Indeed, Epicurus argued that pleasure was the only real good and pain the only evil, but he knew enough about life to see that the animalistic pursuit of instant gratification was pragmatically counterproductive. You can't very well go around stealing food off other's people's plates just because you're hungry or forcing unwilling partners into bed. If you do, you will quickly end up suffering a great deal more pain than any pleasure you might have enjoyed. (Looters might have fun smashing windows and stealing appliances, but their chances for gratification will be radically curtailed once they are locked up in prison.) So Epicurus advised that people practice self-control and delayed gratification, prudently calculating how to gain the greatest pleasure over the long run. This is the principle behind all those "safe sex" seminars you were offered during Freshman Orientation—the trick is to get the highest possible ratio of orgasms to unwanted pregnancies or STDs. The one who dies with the most joys "wins."

Put this way, Epicurus's views appear less eccentric—in fact, they sound eerily like the way most modern secular Westerners plan and live their lives. Here is an easy way to spot a modern Epicurean: It's anyone who uses the phrase "consenting adult" in any context whatsoever. The most famous American Epicurean thinker was founding father Thomas Jefferson, who followed the Enlightenment impulse to reject revealed Christianity and reach back behind it to more "rational" Classical models. (As president, Jefferson tipped his hand: He rewrote the New Testament, editing out all the miracles and prophecies—leaving behind a curious collection of dubious advice given by a wandering Jewish carpenter with no particular competence or authority. This book was printed and distributed at U.S. government expense.)

Stoicism: Suffering is Radio Static

The Epicureans weren't teaching in a vacuum. They faced serious philosophical competitors. Beside the Platonists (who would educate St. Augustine before his conversion) were the Stoics, who believed in a distant, inscrutable God who ruled the world through the irresistible

force that they called Fate. It was God's realm of spirit that was *really* real, while the "lower" world of bodies, rocks, and broccoli was an illusion—even a snare.

The Stoics taught that whatever suffering we endure in life is part of that illusion. Even the emotions of suffering or enjoyment are fundamentally fantasies; the lasting core or essence of each person is his reason—and as long as you have that faculty, you are free to focus your mind on the "higher" things, like philosophy and mathematics. Whether you are locked in a dark, dank prison, starving in a camp, or undergoing torture shouldn't matter to you one whit—any more than you should let your head be turned by pleasure or success. The greatest Stoic writer was the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* displayed his cool detachment from the absolute power and infinite perks that came with his office. Instead of indulging himself like some of his more decadent predecessors (Nero and Caligula come to mind), Marcus Aurelius sternly focused his mind on his civic duties, urging his readers (and subjects) to do the same.

Gnosticism: Suffering Comes from the Evil God

The other important contenders for the minds of ancient Romans and Greeks were the groups who called themselves Gnostics (which roughly translates as either "the smart guys" or "the know-it-alls"). Like the Stoics and the Platonists, the Gnostics held that the world of the body is fundamentally meaningless. They went even further, and declared that the body is, in fact, evil.

It is easier to understand how people might come to such a conclusion in an age before modern hygiene, painkillers, or any effective medicine. Looking at spiders, maggots, vultures, and even "noble" predators like the lion, and considering the pain of childbirth and the transitory nature of earthly life, the Gnostics concluded that whatever was behind the material world, it wasn't our friend. In fact, the Gnostics taught, the earth was the creation of lesser demonic spirits ... essentially fallen angels.

According to the Gnostics, the One God was not directly accessible, but had to be approached through an elaborate hierarchy of intercessory spirits—the nature of which was secret, and could only