Introducing confidence—adjusted intrinsic attitudinal hedonism (CAIAH), and its implications for ethics of technology

Johnny Harz SØRAKER
Department of Philosophy
University of Twente, The Netherlands
j.h.soraker@utwente.nl

Hedonism, as a theory of the good life and as foundation for ethics, claims that only pleasure has intrinsic value and only pain has intrinsic disvalue. Hedonism in this naive form has been rightly criticized due to its counter-intuitive implications, but several philosophers have recently tried to refine the theory so as to keep its intuitive aspects while avoiding common objections. Feldman (2004) proposes a variant entitled Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism, according to which the good life does not consist in experiencing pleasure, but engaging in activities and experiences that you attitudinally take pleasure in. The move towards a higher-order, reflective account of pleasure already takes care of some problems, but in order to deal with so-called arguments from false pleasures (Kagan, 1992; Nozick, 1993), Feldman also introduces what he refers to as Truth—Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (TAIAH). This entails that attitudinal pleasures must be grounded in true states of affairs, or at least that the strength of attitudinal pleasure is partly determined by its truth conditions. In this paper, I will build on Feldman’s theory, but argue that intrinsic attitudinal hedonism should be adjusted for confidence rather than truth, yielding Confidence—Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (CAIAH). In line with Feldman, CAIAH holds that the good life consists in having activities and experiences that you reflectively take pleasure in (not necessarily at the time of doing the activity). But adds that you need to be confident about that which you take attitudinal pleasure in—or at least that the strength of attitudinal pleasures is partly determined by your confidence that they correspond to something real, that they are sustainable, that they are reciprocal, and a number of other determinants of confidence. The degree of confidence can be determined by truth, meaning that self-deception will usually lead to cognitive dissonance, which by its very nature erodes confidence. However, CAIAH allows for confident yet possibly erroneous beliefs to constitute well-being. Thus, CAIAH, in contrast with most other theories of the good life, allows for spiritual and other unfalsifiable beliefs to constitute well-being regardless of whether they are objectively true. It also allows for a range of potentially false yet confident beliefs to determine happiness, including love, trust and suspended disbelief. CAIAH is initially a “thin” theory of the good life, which means that it tries to set out formal conditions for a good life without specifying concrete, objective requirements. However, both the reflective nature of attitudinal pleasures and the confidence adjustment entails several concrete implications—especially for ethics of technology.

A first implication is that technological mediation often determines confidence. For instance, several philosophers have criticized virtual relationships for being inferior to actual relationships (see e.g. Cocking and Matthews (2000)). According to CAIAH, there is
nothing inherently problematic about virtual relationships, and they can give rise to many of the same attitudinal pleasures, but virtual relationships are inferior when it comes to the confidence they provide. Having lived with someone and experienced their person in different circumstances allows for a level of confidence unattainable in virtual environments. It is this difference in confidence that in practice make actual relationships more conducive to well-being than virtual ones. Closely related, and relevant to many online activities, ‘trust’ is not necessarily grounded in true states of affairs. Still, diminished trust online comes with reduced opportunity to be confident about the corresponding activities. CAIAH also entails that the online information glut, including increased exposure to alternative lifestyles and increased knowledge of the suffering of others, may lead to reduced confidence in the life we have chosen for ourselves. Moreover, CAIAH forms the theoretical basis for an approach defended elsewhere, entitled Prudential—Empirical Ethics of Technology (PEET) (Søraker, J. H., 2012). This approach evaluates the impact concrete technologies may have on our subjective well-being by drawing on research from ‘positive psychology’, a field that studies subjective well-being empirically (cf. Peterson (2006)). In the full paper, I will defend CAIAH more substantially, outline the close connection between CAIAH and PEET, and describe the normative recommendations that follow (e.g. regarding authenticity, education, social isolation, skill—demanding activities and a range of other activities that have been made possible by and/or profoundly redefined by online activities. In conclusion, the purpose of the full paper is to defend CAIAH as a general theory of the good life that solves several counter—intuitive implications inherent to other theories, and to show how it is substantive enough to provide normative recommendations, especially for the role of technology in a good life.

References


* * *