
THE DUALITY OF HEDONISM IN THE AMBIVALENT WORLD OF POLARITIES

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Abstract

Social reality is distinguished under the conditions of late modernity by an ambivalent character in the form of a series of paradoxes and diverse ambiguities. The polar perception of reality as consisting of structures of mutually interacting and coexisting forces of opposites, which are experienced by social protagonists as concurrently acting qualities of dual significance, further contribute to this character. Hedonism as an approach to life is also distinguished by duality, whereby ambiguous life practices aimed at achieving the same principle based on the achievement of joy and pleasure develop in parallel. On the one hand, the polarity of predatory hedonism filled with boundless consumerism and the intensification of the present is systematically reinforced by the marketing industry, while on the other hand expressions of alternative hedonism form as the spontaneous and reflective practice of consumers looking for the measure of things and for peace. Hedonism therefore represents a possible source of ambivalent experience for consumers who self-centredly desire an ever greater degree of independence and sensual pleasure and at the same time call for the preservation of the existence of a responsible spirit oriented towards the future and resisting the impulses for instant gratification.

Keywords: alternative, ambivalence, Aristippus, culture, Epicurus

1. Introduction

Social reality in the era of late modernity is distinguished by a number of unprecedented occurrences [1], specific phenomena and complicated processes which have given rise to new forms of social life, qualities of interpersonal relations, the organisation of manufacturing, production and consumption [2]. Changes occur to the spatial and temporal organisation of life, new examples of behaviour and interaction are created and new ways of exerting power appear [3]. Last, but not least, the tendencies for the application of individualised life strategies, in which the social protagonists must constantly constitute and reconstitute their biographies [4], are strengthening markedly as a consequence of the loosening up of the hierarchical structures of society and the process of deinstitutionalisation [5]. The creation of these biographies takes place within

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the dynamic of the contemporary world of globalisation processes, mass communication and deregulation, where mobility and change become the dominating attributes of life [6]. The identity of a person thus becomes the result of the constant process of the construction and reconstruction of their life story, reminiscent of an authentic ‘work of art’ which is created and confirms in acts the significance and interconnection of the fragments of life into a specific meaningful whole. *“If we define ourselves again and endeavour to apply ourselves again, we undertake creative destruction. Every day.”* [7]

For many individuals (especially the younger generation), such a version of life may be attractive and agreeable, while promising more mobility and flexibility, less responsibilities and more freedom. Some authors have pointed to the wider cultural transformation of society in this regard, the central motif of which has become narcissism. Lasch’ concept of the “culture of narcissism” [8] or the “narcissistic society” has been further developed in a number of possible interpretations and reviewed in various philosophical or socio-psychological examinations [9]. According to some authors, narcissism represents a completely new form of individualisation which co-creates the contemporary ethos of relaxed hedonism and emotional consumerism [10].

At the same time, however, little attention has been dedicated to questions as to whether alternative forms of a hedonistic approach to life have also appeared alongside the consumer type of hedonism with narcissistic features realised according to the scenarios of the experience economy. These may be formed in opposition to the dominant commercialised version which is widespread in societies and which is based on the thesis of permanent growth in production and consumption.

The goal of the study is to draw attention to a problem which appears in a number of theoretical and empirical studies, in which hedonism is identified or mistaken for unlimited consumption and a commercialised lifestyle without any deeper critical reflection. We will endeavour to explain that this approach to the definition of hedonism is incorrect and that it does not correspond to the reality of everyday life, because hedonism is not practiced in its single consumer form, but also in an alternative form which has so far been paid little attention in scientific discourse to date. Hedonistic values are not defined exclusively by predatory consumerism, but they are also oriented towards more creative, less selfish and more considerate, economical and rational, sensitive and meaningful values in various forms and attitudes. We will further focus our attention on the phenomenon of the ambivalent nature of contemporary consumer culture as reflected in a number of social phenomena associated with acts of consumption and consumer practices which also include hedonistic attitudes [11]. We will explain this fact using the example of hedonism which can acquire a dual (polar) dimension in the ambivalent environment of consumer culture, when the intensification of one of its positions in the form of unrestrained self-indulgence can gradually give rise to precisely the opposite forces and contradictory reactions modelling a life practice which coexists in parallel and is based on entirely different attitudes and manifestations.

2. Life in the time of ambivalence and the polarity of reality

Various efforts to name or designate contemporary society, which has unshackled itself from the principles of the functioning of an industrial modernity, formed gradually, developed new principles of social existence and predetermined as yet difficult to predict directions of further development in the flow of rapid changes in the global world have appeared in sociological discourses on late modernity. The theoretical efforts aimed at the suitable designation of contemporary society essentially constitute an attempt to identify and explicitly express some of the dominant aspects or priority aspects of the life of society which reliably depict its very essence [10, p. 23-24]. According to Kumar, these attempts are an expression of the unlimited plurality of approaches on the one hand, while, on the other hand, they are also an expression of the tendency for convergence, coalescence and the discovery of the universal [12]. Just as it is possible to identify hundreds of different concepts and perspectives of late modern society in the plurality of these approaches, frequently contrasting and conflicting ones, the situation is also similarly unclear when searching for the universally functioning principles and unifying elements in the life of society. Despite this, we can state that a certain degree of conformity exists among the analysts of the late modern society in the conviction as to the fact that the lives in the late modern situation constantly oscillate between mutually irreconcilable motivations and opposed forces, such as engagement and passivity, imitation and invention, routine and spontaneity or certainty and freedom [7, p. 91].

According to Lipovetsky, "*each reality is ambivalent*" [13]. In saying this, he ascribes late modern society a character, which is supposed to be a typical characteristic of contemporary life in consumer societies which penetrates into a series of areas of human life in the form of the most varied paradoxes. According to Roberts, for example, the growing standard of living, material security and the expansion of consumer opportunities in affluent societies has not reached a place of expected life satisfaction and happiness, but more one of disillusionment, disappointment and anxiety [14]. Not only public space should be affected by ambivalence, but also the private sphere and intimate life. This phenomenon is, for example, clearly visible in many individual attitudes which are rooted in various extreme positions of the obsession for a healthy lifestyle, self-control and self-observation, in which we simultaneously identify pathological expressions of individual behaviour including excessive consumption, exuberance, indifference and a total absence of self-discipline and a sense of responsibility. As such, we can observe the simultaneous growth of individualism and the strengthening of the meaning of sensuality and emotionality, while preserving the existence of a responsible soul oriented towards the future and resistant to the impulses for instantaneous satisfaction.

Unlike the sociologizing theories explaining the ambivalent elements of social reality in this context, the philosophical point of view is oriented towards the problem of the polarity of reality [15]. In the philosophical perspective, the

perception of the world should mark the polarity or the natural tendency to think and perceive reality and to understand aspects of the external world in the form of opposites (mass vs. spirit, good vs. evil, truth vs. lies, courage vs. cowardice, wisdom vs. foolishness...).

One of the fundamental features of the post-modern era is rooted in the symbiosis of principles which generate contrasting forces, while simultaneously supporting both the values of individual freedoms and autonomy as well as dependency and limitation. As a result, a number of opposing and mutually contradicting forces do not create a static set of oppositely acting and mutually dichotomous worlds, but a dynamic and mutually interconnected complex reality of relationships, in which the polarities can be unified in concurrently coexisting 'hybrid' units. For example, the values of individual freedom may therefore be simultaneously experienced in the presence of feelings of the new forms of dependency and limits, without this experience having to necessarily be filled with either only the first or the second case. Manifestations of fear and anxiety also appear concurrently alongside consumer self-indulgence and carelessness, while worries, vulnerability and uncertainty arise alongside the frivolous playfulness of life and lightness.

Similarly, hedonism also constitutes a significant part of consumer culture and the expression of the hypertrophy of the individualism of late modernity has the nature of polarity. On the one hand, this involves a life attitude expressing the principles of unlimited individualism, selfishness and narcissism, a loss of self-control, an orientation towards ephemeral experiences and the instant gratification of sensory perceptions or the unwillingness to assume responsibility and obligations around oneself and on behalf of others. On the other hand, the opposite tendencies of responsibility, caution, temperance, voluntary modesty, minimalism in life and other socially, ethically and environmentally sensitive life practices following the principles of bliss and its achievement in anti-consumption attitudes are reflected in hedonistic practices.

An important feature of the system of the polar perception of reality lies in the fact that polar thought sometimes leads to paradoxes in cases where energy invested in supporting or increasing the significance of one of the two polar components may lead in the end to the very opposite of the original endeavour. The efforts to reinforce one of the polarities can then paradoxically mean the weakening thereof while simultaneously (and unwittingly) invoking the opposite reaction

This can also be an inspiration for the duality of hedonism, where the volatile and unlimited consumerism of experiential hedonism which has long been intensively and systematically supported by the marketing industry can lead to alternative attitudes of a moderate and more sober hedonism of ethically, socially and environmentally more responsible consumption. We will approach this further using the example of the duality of the ancient concept of hedonism and its echoes in the similarly dual model of the contemporary era of late modernity.

3. The duality of hedonism as an ethical direction in the ancient concepts of Aristippus and Epicurus

Contemporary sociological and psychological approaches usually simply identify as or mistake hedonism (in the form defined by discourse) for modern consumerism and a commercialised lifestyle [16]. From this perspective, hedonistic orientations are typified by efforts to acquire consumption value, superficial experiences and ephemeral delights accompanied by disquiet and volatility, a desire for adventure, independence and mobility, permanent youth and health [17]. In the consumer concept of hedonism, self-centred attitudes of hypertrophying individualism, the aggressive assertion of personal preferences and consumer opportunities initiated by the marketing industry in order to reinforce the conviction that the value of a person is derived from said person's ever increasing share of consumption are applied. A life besieged by the glory and shine of objects is so tempting and attractive that it gives rise to the impression "*that pleasure never ends, that it can be continuously intensified and experienced again and again, that everybody must enjoy delight and whoever is unable to do so is ashamed of him or herself*" [18].

In the expert discourse, the consumption type of hedonism is often encumbered with a critical accent of moral-ethical appeals and judgements, while in more radical versions of value-based, normative interpretations it is designated as "*signum diabolicum*" which represents the potential of the destructive powers endangering the social and psychological dimension of human existence and, as a final consequence, degrading the feeling of happiness and satisfaction in life [19]. In his New Year's message of 1st January 2018, Pope Francis called upon all people of good will not to lose hope for a better world. Upon this occasion during the mass in Saint Peter's Basilica, he mentioned that the prerequisite for the preservation of a person's inner freedom is the rejection of "*the viscous banalities of consumption*".

The Pope's New Year's message warning against a consumer approach to life can, of course, find deeper and scientifically verified support in a number of empirical studies pointing to the fact that an egotistically oriented relationship towards the excessive consumption of consumer goals and a liking for superficial and short-term entertainments and pleasures driven by hedonistic life preferences does not lead to the expected feelings of happiness and positive life experiences, but on the contrary to feelings of isolation and loneliness and to new forms of bondage [20]. Researchers have also endeavoured in further empirical studies to verify the hypothesis that the self-centred essence of hedonism should in fact suppress any feelings of happiness and joy of life, whereas acts of generosity and magnanimity orientated towards and with sensitivity for the needs of the social environs reinforce positive feelings of spiritual welfare and satisfaction [21]. This has led some authors to the conviction that a hedonistic liking for the intensive and unlimited acquisition of goods and the concentration of experiences, including the costly acquisition of luxury products, leads to a paradoxical reduction in feelings of joy of life and

happiness. This thesis has also been supported by a number of empirical studies aimed at monitoring the relationship between the degree of experienced happiness and material luxury [22].

Can we, however, simply identify hedonism with the volatile and restless consumerism of the post-modern epoch of contemporary consumer culture? Can hedonism be unilaterally reduced to a set of values and attitudes oriented towards consumer self-indulgence and unlimited consumption? Or does the essence of hedonism lie rather in its ambivalent nature as identified in Ancient Greece? Does hedonism represent merely an active and impulsive attitude to life oriented towards the acquisition of exciting experiences and emotional pleasures or can it simultaneously involve a moderate and less dramatic life strategy based on the values of calm, modesty and other transcendental values exceeding direct sensory experience?

According to Librová, today's consumerism has been wrongfully identified with hedonism, because it does not acknowledge hedonism's basic value; *"the ratio of things and calm"* [23]. Librová recalls the original sources of the idea and focus of hedonism formulated in ancient philosophy in the 4th century BC.

Hedonism originally represented an opinion according to which the highest goal and motive of a person is to achieve bliss in the form of sensual pleasure. Hedonism was a program of egoism which has two different and in many way contradictory historical forms in the ancient tradition. In the more radical interpretation of Aristippus, the essence of hedonism was rooted in the maximisation of physical delights and the instant gratification of the body with pleasure. The goal of all human actions is to achieve bliss and human rationality has been adapted to this and instrumentalised with the motivations of pleasure and displeasure. According to Aristippus, the sense of life practice should be played out in a constant calculation of bliss and hardship; *"Who dies with the most toys, wins"* [24]. Aristippus rejected calm and he considered it to be a bane and recommended moderate movement, i.e. pleasure which can only be sought in the present moments of life. He understood delight as a bodily state of sensual experience which does not brook any delay and must be accessible as quickly as possible and at the correct given moment due to the uncertain future. The principle of a blissful life in Aristippus' interpretation was subject to the rule *"hic et nunc"*.

Whereas Aristippus defended a form of active and impulsive hedonism filled with change, movement and drama, Epicurus' in some way competing concept of hedonism represented a different model for achieving happiness in life in the position of a far calmer and more fluid life cycle based on the minimisation of changes and upheaval and the calm harmony of passion (*ataraxia*). In this more moderate form of hedonism bliss was reoriented towards spiritual harmony, life balance, moderateness, balance, temperance and calm. Unlike the hedonism of Aristippus, Epicureanism is a somewhat more modest program. Its moderateness was found in the instructions for a satisfied and calm life which were not based on the motifs of a costly, sumptuous life of plenty and

the constant acceleration of corporal pleasures, but on deeper values consisting of the surrounding beauties of the world, friendship, harmony in one's private life, but also significantly designated by the art of avoiding suffering.

The time perspective of Epicurus' form of hedonism also underwent changes. It was not only oriented towards the present, but it also had a significant overlap into the past and the future. An important fact involved the positive perspective of the past and a significant orientation towards the future which supported the ability to resist present temptations and unsettling impulses seducing the orientation of the mind towards the volatile moments of life. The approach to life was supposed to be rational and balanced; in this case, a state of bliss did not involve any sensual pleasures of the body, but mainly experiences of the mind.

4. The ancient legacy of Epicureanism in the form of the alternative hedonism of the late modern age

The ancient concept of hedonism is distinguished by an ambivalent essence expressed in the coexisting philosophical schools of the traditions of Aristippus' and Epicurus' thought. This legacy has disappeared in modern thought, whereby hedonism is regularly only ascribed a reduced meaning and an incomplete sense identified with the values of self-indulgent consumerism. The hedonism which has been combined with today's consumerism has lost most of the fundamental attributes which constituted the basis of the Epicurean tradition which understood hedonism as a voluntarily modest and temperate life following the ratio of items and calm. Is then Epicurus' concept of hedonism so distant from the current lifestyle trends that his tradition has failed to acquire a stronger position in the current sociological discourse and has remained in the shadow of the dominant conviction that hedonism can be inferred from the degree of the consumption of consumer values? Has the Epicurean variant of hedonism become so out-of-date under current conditions, that it is now applied predominantly only as a synonym for consumer self-indulgence? Clearly, not at all. We will therefore endeavour to show that, as in the ancient tradition, the hedonism of the late modern period is showing ambivalent features and manifests itself in various opposite and contradictory modalities of life. We will outline two possible forms of hedonism formed under the conditions of the consumer culture of the late modern society. In the first case, we will outline the variant of predatory hedonism and its close connection to Aristippus' philosophical school, while in the second case, we will present alternative hedonism as a modified and adapted return to the Epicurean tradition of hedonism.

Unlike Epicurean hedonism, the current type of consumer hedonism is distinguished by activity, impulsiveness, restlessness and especially repletion where it applies that '*enough is never enough*'. Today's consumer hedonism is in many respects definitely more distant from Epicurus' version of hedonism and therefore slightly closer to the principles of hedonism as set out by Aristippus.

Whereas Aristippus' thesis on the maximisation of corporal bliss is closer to the axiom 'More is Better' which currently complies with the reality of today's hedonistic consumerism, the more moderate and modest model of Epicurean hedonism is closer to the axiom 'Less is More' which contradicts the very principles of the hedonistic lifestyle as defined by growing consumption.

The current theories of hedonism represented especially by the texts of K. Soper [25] or J. Schor [26] clearly reflect the very attributes which characterise some typical features of the Epicurean ethos, i.e. modesty and a certain restraint when attaining material values in their approaches. The first attempts to offer an innovative concept of so-called *alternative hedonism* representing an as yet insufficiently developed, but for all that original and open platform for the criticism of consumer hedonism have appeared there. "*Alternative hedonism is a theory which deals with what some consumers start to discover about the 'anti' or 'contra' consumer aspects of their needs and preferences.*" [27]

Similarly to the way in which Epicureanism gradually defined itself as a refined form of the original form of predatory hedonism, today too alternative hedonism has formed as the opposite side in the polarity of predatory consumerism. Alternative hedonism depicts a number of contradictions and risks inside the very practices of consumer hedonism and it questions the mechanisms for its social support and its concrete effects on the social, ethical, environmental and psychological level of human existence. Like Epicureanism before, alternative hedonism now accents the principles of a temperate, moderate, balanced and considerate life without giving up the life motif of 'enjoyment'. Like alternative hedonism, the Epicureans, did not present aesthetic programs, but rather they were aware of the potential of life bliss in the places where the path to such bliss is most accessible and least demanding. The trick is, however, to search for these paths, while courage is to set off along them and to make sufficient use of the potential for bliss surrounding the paths. In the concept of alternative hedonism, it is therefore possible, for example, to maximise life pleasure by minimising the investment of time, energy and personal effort to achieve those goals, which are considered to be reliable sources of pleasure, life bliss and more permanent satisfaction in the logic of consumerism and marketing support. Alternative hedonism (like Epicureanism) presupposes creativity and the courage to be indifferent to the ephemeral goals of commercial consumption initiated by marketing, which may free a person and release his or her capacity in the direction of activities leading to a higher degree of personal satisfaction and joy of life. This involves creativity leading to the kind of everyday practice and life orientations which bring the protagonists towards the fulfilment of the axiom 'Less is More', in which they will be able to experience pleasure and to seek out further priorities for their personal interests. This therefore involves the *ratio of items*. An alternative hedonist creatively avoids real and potential hardships and suffering by voluntarily giving up the ethos of consumerism mutated into the axiom 'More is Better' as defined by a rushed, stressful, costly and exhausting effort to maintain (ideally accelerate) the tempo of consumption where the motto 'No Limits' applies. He or she searches for a

slower life tempo and replaces the luxury of consumer values with restrained consumption and deferred gratification. Alternative hedonism is therefore not lacking, just as was the case with Epicureanism, *calm* alongside the *ratio of items*.

5. Conclusions

The theoretical discourse into the consumer culture has so far developed only to a minimum extent in the area of the identification and elaboration of possible ambivalent expressions generated by the mechanisms of the consumer society and a consumer lifestyle.

Various theories of hedonism have been developed within the framework of the discourse on consumer culture, usually identified with an orientation towards consumer values and accelerated consumption. At the same time, hedonism cannot be simply, unequivocally and statically exchanged for modern consumerism and the volatility of consumers looking for sources of pleasure in life and joy in increasing and intensifying acts of shopping and acquiring items and things. In the ambivalent environment of the polar differentiation of various aspects of the world, it is impossible to ignore (including as early as in the ancient tradition) the concurrently coexisting hedonistic practices which in many regards have been based on the opposite value system of moderation, voluntary modesty, self-control, self-reflection or creative searching or the creation of models of a satisfied and meaningful life filled more with the values of interpersonal relations, calm and creative self-realisation than with the hoarding of items, the acquisition of services or superficial and often merely passive entertainment.

Hedonism can therefore be understood to be a process involving the contemporary growth of individualism, the amplification of the significance of sensuality and emotionality and the preservation of the existence of a responsible spirit oriented towards the future and resistant to impulses for instant gratification.

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