

The Pleasure Paradox

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We are stuck in a paradox. This paradox is based on the paradox of hedonism, in which we maximize our pleasure which leads to more dissatisfaction. Hedonism is not a new concept, as it was seen in texts as old as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the more modern *The Sun Also Rises*. However, our society now faces this paradox widespread. Our modern age has allowed us to consume more pleasure than ever before: sugar, smartphones, social media. And yet, we are more depressed than ever (Generation Z reports higher in categories such as depression, mental problems, and burn out).

The issue isn't hedonism per se. It can bring benefits if you are chasing after pleasures such as academic success, friendship, and happiness. However, in recent times, humans have often been fogged up by very short-term pleasure. Scrolling and eating sugar may give us temporary dopamine bumps without needing to put in effort (which inspires us to do it again), but fade very quickly. Spending the average U.S. screentime a day—mainly on social media and videos—can add up to over 2 months on your phone. We have allowed stimulation to become satisfaction/pleasure. This loop is enforced by what I call the algorithm.

The algorithm is not just your phone algorithm. It is every modern creation that allows us to be filled with dopamine without real effort. The algorithm tempts us as it portrays itself as the simplest way for quick satisfaction. It allows us to feel pleasure, but also takes this pleasure away from us just as fast. We become trapped in a cycle of seeking (in a sense) artificial reward and feeling low after. This prison also prevents us from achieving large goals, as we are sucked into—for up to 2 months of a year—this algorithm. We no longer read, interact with friends as much, or create opportunities to feel pleasure in the long run.

This algorithm taps into the very fabric that makes us human. Dopamine has allowed humans to survive for thousands of years as it motivated us to hunt, defend, find food, mate, and reward us when we succeeded. In a way, it was our superpower. However, as society evolved, this neurotransmitter stayed, and the algorithm took hold of it. This architecture understands our craving for dopamine and programmed food, phones, and interactions (even online) to provide this easily. No longer did we have to hunt for food all day to access dopamine, now we could simply open up an app and scroll.

Beyond the change in dopamine triggers, humans are losing other traits we once carried as a result of this algorithm. We are no longer able to focus on one thing, much less for a long time. We have access to so many results and opportunities at our fingertips, the idea of dedicating hours to one event seems bizarre. Although it may seem like a weird trend, the idea of watching a split-screen between a minute-long clip and an app being played reveals this very issue. Humans struggle to be alone with their own mind, and have almost completely removed boredom altogether. Now, when one is bored, there is food and apps to fulfill this. From this, our creativity that emerges during boredom is lost. Our species-being is changing, as we prioritize

quick fulfillment, that typically leaves us more empty than before, over long-term goals and achievements.

Substance over stimulation is the ultimate goal. We will not feel as quickly fulfilled with real pleasure than artificial pleasure seen on an app or by doomscrolling. However, the long-term impacts allow us to build more of an identity, and it will allow us to be active participants rather than passive ones. We don't need to remove these pleasures as a society, but rather rank the pleasure by its outcome. Finishing a book and scrolling for hours both may give us satisfaction and release dopamine, but only one enlarges our capability, while the other distracts us from our potential.

The solution is not to remove or deny pleasure to ourselves, but rather to embrace the activities that grow us. We must understand the algorithm is aimed at sucking us in, but it will leave us empty and distance us from our full potential. Humans must acknowledge the abundance we have today, with social media, food, and our phones. More importantly, we must prevent it from altering us and removing our potential as humans.