

# Hedonic motivation and the performative self

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*«Within education hedonism mainly relies on three key concepts: pleasure, curiosity and desire.»*

# HEDONIC MOTIVATION AND THE PERFORMATIVE SELF

Fabian Reiner



⟨Landscape of becoming⟩  
Mount Etna, Sicily, 2016

A hedonist argues that the pursuit of pleasure is the primary goal of human life. Then, increasing positive momentary sensations, acknowledging curiosity and allowing desire can unfold the potential of immanent identities. Since higher education can embrace these identities through intuitive and unrestrained learning, the institution has to be a place where the relational encounter among individuals allows many possibilities for growth. Taking part in the formation of the Self, education should recognize that individuals are unsteady entities situated in a 'landscape of becoming'.<sup>1</sup>

Already the Cyrenaics established a concept of hedonism during the 4th century BCE, overcoming the one set forth by Epicurus. While Epicurus postulated to satisfy solely natural needs, the Cyrenaics proposed to gratify inner demands beyond the necessary. In their practice the Cyrenaics glorified the pleasures of the body and abandoned the restraint. For them hedonism was a means to positively enjoy momentary sensations. Since sensations are individual, it was, according to them, impossible to know about externalities. If the individual was affected by tasting sour, it could not be guaranteed that another individual tastes sour, too. Acknowledging solely immediate sensations caused the Cyrenaics to value the physical above the intellectual. Not only did they appreciate the physical, they even advocated and encouraged it. It was meant to fill their lives with satisfaction and delight, since a blessed afterlife could not be guaranteed. Feeling and experiencing were not only the most intense and legitimate ways of living, but also the only possible criteria of knowledge. Emotion was prior to the intellect, and elemental experience came before the solely rational. Pleasure was the sole aim and happiness the accumulation of pleasures. The desire to maximize pleasures which would ultimately constitute happiness served to value and to conduct.<sup>2</sup> While the hedonism of Epicurus stands out for valuing long-term pleasures achieved through practice of modesty, the hedonism of the Cyrenaics is recognized for its tribute to social obligations in a sense the French philosopher Michel Onfray would describe as: «One must never be indulged at the expense of sacrificing the other.»<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the basic idea of bodily pleasures of the Cyrenaics (a school that would later succumb to the overall more sophisticated Epicurean ideals), we need to acknowledge that in contemporary society the same recognition should be paid to intellectual stimulation. Not only to craft a more engaged society, but also a well-educated one. One that is not solely educated with the necessary, but also with the desired. One that not only forwards knowledge, but also shapes critical identities. One that not only bears the possibility of reacting to society, but also of effectively shaping it.

Within this essay the term 'hedonic' is used in its productive connotation and steers away from common misinterpretations such as self-indulgence and self-realization. It neither praises the Epicurean way of appreciating the solely necessary nor the Cyrenaean way of practising the temporarily pleasant. It tries to go for a course where both parts, the naturally needed and the ideally desired, take place. It asks for a discourse where pleasure does not contradict existing pedagogical methods, but is regarded as extension of them. An hedonix attitude seeks to manifest itself in a realm

where curiosity is not considered charming but plays a vital role; where desire is not characterized as naive but essential to boost the imagination. This essay should be understood as an attempt to establish a validation for a hedonic attitude within the realm of an educational discourse.

Stating that in the framework of an institution mental pleasure should be embraced raises questions and doubts. The risk of encouraging immanent identities lies within the uncertainty that comes with it. Often reckless self-realization casts a shadow on the fact that hedonic motivation generates a productivity which outreaches regulative methods of teaching and learning.

In particular, since higher education is a privileged good, hedonic motivation bears the highest potential for those who can gain access to its teachings. Already your preference for a specific field of study and research or your choice of a certain profession, is triggered by particular ideas and desires. School needs to be equipped with the right tools to ensure that these energies and passions are not restrained but absorbed, fed and fostered to produce 'subjects' who will flourish and act on the impact of pleasure and enjoyment, thus finding access to a knowledge of their genuine self.

Within education hedonism mainly relies on three key concepts: pleasure, curiosity and desire. The first, pleasure, refers to the rationalization and determination of a certain reward. The second, curiosity, is an attitude which, by embracing it, can lead to sincere and immediate engagement. The third, desire, is the agent, which can function as a powerful drive to stimulate imagination. Placed in a hierarchy we find that pleasure belongs to the superficial structure (easy to reach temporarily), curiosity positions itself within the deep structure (harder to reach, but more sustainable) and desire applies to the implicit structure (should establish itself as a habit and is defined as attitude).<sup>4</sup>

Education as a necessary part of our growth contributes very much to our learning regarding given or found matters. Ideally, our education makes use of a hedonism, where the brain's capacity is used to its fullest and propels a 'perpetuum mobile', in a way that joy, engagement and imagination stimulate each other mutually and continuously. Compared to a utilitarian institution, where the moral worth of an action is determined, a hedonic one opts to surpass and improve upon it.

Emerging hedonic goods, whether socially or culturally, physically or psychologically conditioned, then work through a rationalization of joy and manage to satisfy beyond. They satisfy beyond because they come from within the self, are immanent and release energy. In fact, all goods bear the potential to be hedonic. It is not about the what, but about how something becomes tangible. A camera, for example, given to you or chosen by you will make a difference in your engagement with it. Because of this personal connection your joy and appreciation will last longer. Latent potential, then, tends to be recognized more easily. This satisfaction (the difference which results when subtracting 'need' from 'demand') propels us to positively enjoy experiences<sup>5</sup> and can foster subject matters, but more necessarily school as institution, within us as productive and lasting encounter. By trying to ascribe to school the potential to

please beyond its common role, we may learn to embrace hedonic motivation in higher education already in our childhood years.

In our childhood we are set apart from adults neither through ignorance nor lack of skills, but through an enormous capacity for curiosity and joy. This lets us grow in our most innate way and defines intuition as an important element on our path later on. It is the inner and most intimate disposition which allows us to engage fully and sincerely with our environment and to acknowledge the precious skill of curiosity.

Curiosity regarding a <thing> and an attachment towards this <thing> are and always have been productive forces that constitute knowledge. The aim of education should be not only to contribute to one's expertise, but also to teach hedonism as a constant activator that perpetually incites the production of knowledge. In fact, a hedonic approach should not be seen as a naive emotional endeavor, but as a strategy to heighten the intensity of engagement and to propel a prolific <landscape of becoming>.

Children instinctively possess an active concern in knowing more about their surrounding. It gives the youngest a chance to tinker, employ and explore their own thoughts. Full immersion and pleasure are characteristics adults often, especially besides academia, dedicate a big part of their lives seeking, albeit considering it a charming but irrelevant byproduct of youth. The ability to become deeply absorbed in something ensures dedication and genuine concern and creates sincere and long-lasting relations.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, what is really valuable is the fact that children play without expectations, and do it for the mere sake of it. Neither causes nor consequences are evaluated. Through this naive but honest engagement new potentialities arise.

What we can learn from childhood is that at this stage of life inner curiosity far outreaches inner needs, whether it is conscious or not. In fact, curiosity enables a person to think carefully and process complex information. It is in fact the <sine qua non> and pleasure is the acknowledged reward. This releases hormones and acts again upon our hedonic motivation.<sup>7</sup> Especially so, during childhood, where curiosity becomes the very core of intellectual achievement. Claims to embrace curiosity and acknowledge pleasure within an institution should not be seen as an attempt to advocate an overly *laissez-faire*, but rather as a necessary complementary agenda to a strictly predefined script.

Recognizing curiosity as a means to achieve pleasure, we can identify desire as agent and perpetual motor. While a hedonic education accepts individuals being in flux, it unfolds the immanent within identities through a <pedagogy of desire>.<sup>8</sup> It is through that form of education, that it mobilizes creative, transgressive and pleasurable forces and contributes to a <landscape of becoming>. That the individual as well as the institution are rendered as transformative entities, not only pleases, but also challenges us to question and actualize both of them constantly.

Within education, desire should not be seen as a temporary feeling or emotion, something sporadically embraced or spontaneously determined, but acknowledged as imbedded in the self, where it needs constant impulse to actively

shape one's identity. A <pedagogy of desire> as advocated by Deleuze and Guattari is explored as a practice where the relational encounter among individuals creates many possibilities for growth and where the relation between teacher and student becomes rather dynamic and intimate. A <Pedagogy of desire, in the best case, works to develop in students and teachers a criticality about knowledge, affect and the events and meanings of everyday learning and teaching practices.><sup>9</sup>

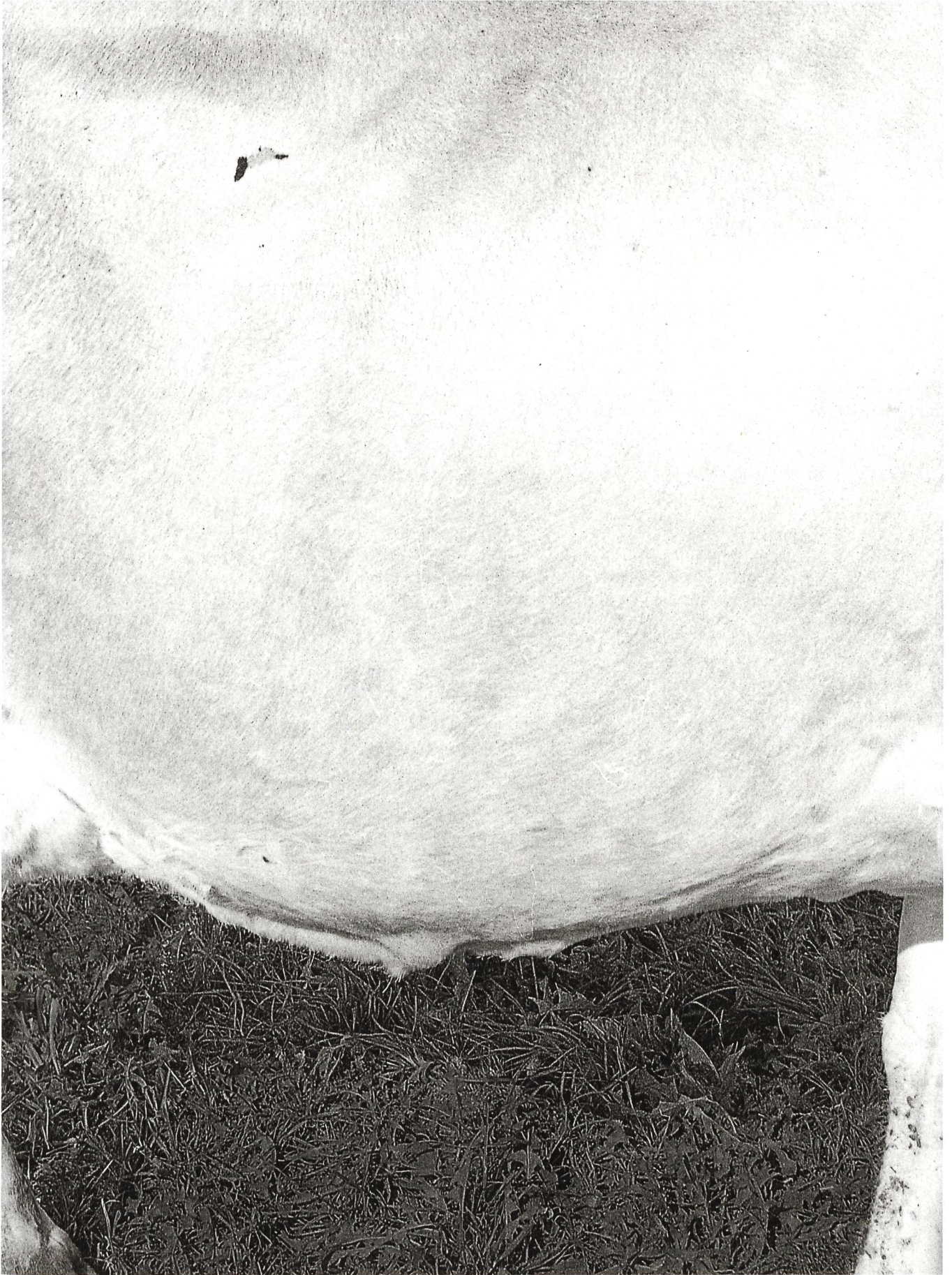
Through practicing a hedonic approach, uncertainties and irregularities occur, which are undoubtedly necessary to any form of social transformation. The understanding of the individual towards himself and the mind and body of the other should be constantly challenged. In this whole movement of steady transformation desire serves as the original prompter. It is created continually, and so is knowledge. So why do we not allow them to be mutually stimulating?

Transforming curiosity into pleasure only takes full advantage if desire is propelling the process. Indeed, desire enacts to energetically put together all information available. By embracing it one produces his or her own immanent being rather than discovering its orderly form. Desire seeks immersion and generates an event of creation rather than the feeling of lacking fulfillment. It triggers action, embraces engagement and gains reward. Desire affects as it is affected. In fact, if we find ourselves appreciating the output initially triggered by desire, we can be sure to activate it again. According to Deleuze and Guattari desire <is a process, not a fixed structure, it is affect, as opposed to feeling, it is event, as opposed to thing or person.><sup>10</sup> Its role is creative and can therefore be seen as a vital agent.

A hedonic education is always an extension to pedagogy. It is not autonomous and seeks to develop knowledge of its connection to external forces. It produces subjects who deplore pleasure and take risks. It dissociates itself from common strategies of education in order to embrace neglected aspects of learning and teaching such as pleasure, curiosity and desire. <It educates visionaries, not bureaucrats.><sup>11</sup>

To establish and maintain a hedonic education, new sets of strategies have to be invented. What we see, however, is that all too often even radical forms of education are systematized. There is this contradictory problematic of regulating the uncertain. One could argue, that the institution as such produces individuals able to take on responsibility for society. If someone is not able to meet predefined requirements they will not only harm their own reputation but also that of the institution. What we are facing here, is that these considerations do not necessarily touch upon a hedonic education itself, instead they look for a legal justification of the practical realm. In the end each individual will carry the consequences themselves, by naturally not performing well in what they did not acquire.

The task for a hedonic education is to open the framework within which teachers and students function to create a new sense of interconnection and intersubjectivity with others. A solely superficial and objective engagement does not inform a being-in-the-world. Education should allow to gain varying standpoints and open up fields of discussion



«Anonymous actor within landscape of becoming»  
ETH Hönggerberg, Zürich 2018

for further individual progress. The process of becoming should employ practices that draw multiple lines of dependencies. Deleuze described this as follows: «Pedagogy of desire means composing the singular points of one's own body or one's own language with those of another share or element, which tears us apart, but also propels us into a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems.»<sup>12</sup>

What it requires is to overcome traditional understandings of the institution as such and to be able to acknowledge «landscapes of becoming». The moments of uncertainty are then used to ensure productivity in all its facets. Higher education could embrace «hedonic motivation» as a valid approach towards a performative self. Then in the end it is about stimulating the unfolding of life.

What is challenged now is that even seemingly open ways of teaching tend to be systematized versions and seldom produce dynamic and individual relations between teachers and students. It is essential that during youth a narrative exploration has to be undertaken. The importance of one's self-performance is clear and the influencing role of the institution obvious.

A hedonic approach within higher education could add to the debate at institutions a youthful and egalitarian dynamic. Especially the environment of the university, a place highly influential on its beneficiaries, can foster its relevance by embracing hedonism within teaching and learning. A hedonic education could aim for a «becoming» of individuals in the most effective and efficient manner. Every student bears latent potentials and it is his own as well as the institution's responsibility to activate them. School [seen as object] bears the possibility to loosen the framework, offer a wide range of courses, address a wide range of skills, allow multiple narratives, create parallel as well as hierarchical courses and challenge students to question their very own performance. School [seen in its subjects] employs pedagogues with a much higher impact, as they can stimulate students emotionally as well as intellectually and by this act upon them more immediately and intimately. The school provides the framework while the narrative is written by oneself.

A hedonic approach unfolds diverse narratives as it enables to be partially free from all connected reasoning and seeks for the intrinsic good in something. In the best cases it opens up new forms of seeing, thinking as well as understanding.

Hedonic motivation should not be seen as hindering education, but as enriching students, not only with knowledge but also with sincere satisfaction. Nevertheless, valuing someone's own experience should not lower the ambition and professionalism towards a certain subject. Establishing a culture of discussion within teachers and students can help individuals to constantly assess and prove themselves. Even if we can opt for whatever we feel pleased, whatever we are curious about, whatever we desire, in the end we prove ourselves through presentations, discussions, debates, lectures and exams show what we already know and practise. In fact, a hedonic education makes use of current pedagogical methods as much as it is seeking for ideals.

The youth's search for potent ingredients for intellectual advancement should be supported by tutors who provide

students with the right seeds for growth. Forms of knowing which established themselves in the current culture need to be newly discussed. Therefore, it is important to not only value mental pleasure, but also sincere interest and inherent desire to re-evaluate the productivity of the individual as well as the collective. It is our duty to acknowledge the notion of hedonism and accept its productivity.