ONE

The Pursuit of Pleasure

The limits of pleasures are as yet neither known nor fixed, and we have no idea what degree of bodily bliss we are capable of attaining.

JEAN-ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN,
The Physiology of Taste (1825)

The heights of pleasure
What is your idea of perfect pleasure? What if you could conjure it up at will and in unlimited quantities? How would you really feel after endlessly sipping rum-based cocktails on a palm-fringed tropical beach and having neglected body parts stimulated in ingenious ways? A bit bored and dissolute perhaps? Even eating chocolate in the bath will eventually pall.

Pleasure is a slippery beast. We know it when we feel it. Wanting more seems obvious. But what of the troubles it leads us into? What of the gluttony, drunkenness, obesity, guilt, debt and poor complexion? What of that segue from pleasure to addiction – that dreaded slide from ‘This is nice’ to ‘This is destroying me and I can’t stop’? Secular and religious authorities have tried throughout history to control the main sources of human pleasure. Above all, they have sought to constrain our sexual behaviour, our use of
psychoactive drugs and what we eat. They seem to have shared Plato’s opinion that pleasure is the greatest incentive to evil.

My aim will be to explore the nature of pleasure and its unattractive alter ego, addiction. Along the way, we will look at the biological mechanisms that underpin pleasure and addiction, the subtle relationship between pleasure and pain, the surprisingly tenuous relationship between pleasure and happiness, and the neglected role of boredom in driving human behaviour. We will also inspect the lives of some real people who have taken their quest for pleasurable sensations to life-threatening extremes of hedonism. There will be sex and drugs of many kinds; and, of course, there will be chocolate. A central theme will be the fundamental distinction between pleasure and desire – the biologically ingrained difference between liking something because it gives us pleasure and wanting something because we have a desire for it. The twin forces of pleasure and desire lie at the heart of everything we do. We will see them at work in humanity’s relationship with the noble trinity of sex, drugs and chocolate.

Sex, drugs and chocolate are universal objects of desire. Each can become a focus for intense cravings. When used in the right way, all three have the potential to enhance mental and physical well-being. But they can also cause harm. Even sex has its hazards. Drugs are said by some to be uniformly dangerous substances that enslave you and then kill you, while chocolate, according to its critics, is sugary fat that will make you spotty and obese. (They are wrong.) All three sources of pleasure are constrained, to widely varying degrees, by social attitudes, religious doctrine and the law. And all three are, of course, capable of producing deep pleasure.

Sex in its many forms, both social and solitary, is a sublime delight enjoyed by virtually everyone at least once in a while. Even people who have sex for a living can still enjoy it. The twenty-first-century porn superstar Jenna Jameson talks
in her memoirs of her undimmed enthusiasm for purely recreational sex, despite the wearying demands of her day job. When not performing in front of the cameras, she reportedly enjoys making love with her boyfriend in hotel swimming pools, department store changing rooms and restaurants across the USA. Giacomo Casanova’s long and eventful life was famously enriched by sexual pleasure. According to his memoirs, the eighteenth-century adventurer and voluptuary was as adept at giving pleasure as he was at taking it. Recounting a tryst with one of his myriad lovers, Casanova wrote:

She was astonished to find herself receptive to so much pleasure, for I showed her many things she had considered fictions. I did things to her that she did not feel she could ask me to do, and I taught her that the slightest constraint spoils the greatest pleasures. When the morning bells tolled, she raised her eyes to the Third Heaven like an idolatress thanking the Mother and Son for having so well rewarded the effort it had cost her to declare her passion for me.

Not everyone is a fan of sex, however. Johnny Rotten once described it as two minutes and fifty-two seconds of squelching noises. A few years later he claimed it had become more like five minutes, thanks to a new technique he had acquired.

The intensity of sexual pleasure is rivalled by few things in life, but intoxicating drugs are one of them. Like it or not, some of the most deeply pleasurable sensations ever experienced by humans, as well as some of the very worst, have been created by intoxicating drugs. One elderly Asian opium-smoker, whose words were captured for posterity by a nineteenth-century scholar, described his experience as being carried into the seventh heaven: he heard and saw things that words could not relay and felt ‘as though his
soul soared so high above things earthly, during those precious moments of oblivion, as to have flown beyond the reach of its heavy, burdensome cage’. In similar vein (as it were), a fictional junky in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* declares that the sensations from injecting heroin are miles better than the best orgasm multiplied by twenty. The longer-term consequences are another matter, of course.

If it were true that the hit from mainlining heroin really *is* miles better than the best orgasm multiplied by twenty, then imagine how it feels while simultaneously plunging to earth at terminal velocity from a great height. This challenging form of recreational activity, known as pharma-diving, is imagined in Aniruddha Bahal’s novel *Bunker 13*. The fictional pharma-diver feels like a seer, soaring and swooping in heaven. He sees the ground rushing towards him but the act of pulling the ripcord is almost an afterthought, so deep is his tranquillity. Injecting yourself in a vein can be tricky during free fall, with only sixty seconds to play with before total oblivion. The solution, according to Bahal, is to pharma-dive in pairs, with one parachutist administering the injection while the other plummets ‘in a beautiful bubble of stupefaction’. Please do not try this at home.

In case the hugely illegal and life-threatening thrills of pharma-diving fall outside your personal comfort zone, there is always chocolate to fall back on. The sensual pleasures of chocolate may be somewhat less extreme, but they have a subtlety and depth of their own, especially when the substance consumed is the real thing, rather than the sugary industrial pap that often masquerades as chocolate. Here, for example, is how the chocophile Paul Richardson described the final phase of one brief encounter with a small chunk of Venezuelan Gran Samán:

> The flavours lingered on in the mouth and in the mind, reaching a nice sort of closure with a brilliant final twist
of espresso coffee. Infused with a sensation of physical contentment, together with a feeling that I would not be requiring for some time another bite, another nibble, another whiff of this twenty-four-carat black gold, I pushed the recline button and lay back in my seat.

Beyond the universal pleasures of sex, drugs and chocolate lie more personalised joys. Each of us has our own preferred sources, perhaps discovered by happy accident. We all harbour different ideas of what constitutes ultimate bliss – or heaven, as some call it. With one eye perhaps on posterity, John Keats claimed that heaven for him meant books, fruit, French wine, fine weather and a little music out of doors played by somebody he did not know. For Auberon Waugh it was playing bridge on a summer’s afternoon with agreeable companions while drinking crème de menthe frappée through a straw. Hmm. The writer Iain Banks said that his idea of what heaven would look like was the wine cellar of the Champanay Inn at Linlithgow in Scotland – if it didn’t have windows. And if he wasn’t an atheist.

The heights of pleasure can be found in even more idiosyncratic places. Intense joy came to Albert Camus when swimming in the ocean and to Michel de Montaigne when his kidney stones stopped hurting. ‘Is there anything so delightful’, he wrote, ‘as that sudden revolution when I pass from the extreme pain of voiding my stone, and recover, in a flash, the beauteous light of health, full and free?’ Dostoevsky experienced raptures of delight before one of his recurrent epileptic attacks, describing it as ‘a feeling of happiness such as it is quite impossible to imagine in a normal state and which other people have no idea of’. When asked to nominate his most joyful experience, the legendary Soho drinker Jeffrey Bernard recalled catching a ball in a cricket match after running in twenty yards from deep mid-off to extra cover. The gentle pleasures of cricket might
have fallen short of the mark for Vaughan, a character in J.G. Ballard’s novel *Crash*. For him, the supreme ecstasy was to die in an orgasmic head-on vehicle collision with the actress Elizabeth Taylor’s car. You might regard that as an overspecialised taste.

**Hedonism then and now**

A life lived for the pursuit of pleasure is the life of a hedonist. We are therefore all hedonists to some degree, because pleasure is plumbed deep into our brain. As we shall see in the next chapter, pleasure is a biological currency which evolved to guide our everyday behaviour. Even so, the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure, when taken to extremes, is rarely an enjoyable spectacle for onlookers and can end in tears for the hedonist.

What happens when someone with a powerful lust for pleasure can have absolutely anything they want, within the limits of physics and chemistry? The Roman Empire offers some illuminating case histories. As far as the puritans of later ages were concerned, imperial Rome epitomised the worst kind of decadence and deserved to collapse under the weight of its own sin. For a student of pleasure, it is a rich source of data.

The highs and lows of Roman hedonism were chronicled by Suetonius in his history of *The Twelve Caesars*, written almost two thousand years ago. It recounts the lives of successive Roman emperors from Julius Caesar, who was assassinated in 44 BC, to Domitian, who died in AD 96. Suetonius is deliciously revealing (if not always entirely reliable) about the chosen pleasures of these twelve unimaginably powerful men. His catalogue starts relatively mildly with Julius Caesar, who merely enjoyed luxury and sex. Julius was succeeded by Augustus, who was excessively fond of sex, expensive furniture, Corinthian bronzes and gambling. Augustus was a notorious womaniser. Even in
old age, he revelled in deflowering virgins, who were collected for him from all over the empire. He was also a gambler, and proud of it. We will return to the addictive snares of gambling later.

Augustus was succeeded by Tiberius, who succumbed to what Suetonius calls ‘all the vicious passions’. In his youth, Tiberius Claudius Nero was such a heavy drinker that he acquired the nickname ‘Biberius Caldius Mero’, meaning ‘drinker of hot undiluted wine’. (There will be no more Latin jokes in this book, I promise.) As emperor, he demonstrated the double standards of many rulers up to the present day: while campaigning publicly to raise standards of morality, he spent much of his private time in orgies of feasting, whoring and boozing. Hedonism even acquired a bureaucratic status under Tiberius, who established the official position of Comptroller of Pleasures.

Tiberius’s hedonism burgeoned after he retired to his private pleasure-ground of Capri. There, Suetonius tells us, groups of young men and women performed exotic sexual acts in front of the emperor to titillate his ageing libido. The rooms of his Capri pleasure palace were decorated with the most erotic pictures, books and statues obtainable, including sex manuals from Egypt and puppets demonstrating ‘wanton postures’. Suetonius found certain aspects of Tiberius’s lewdness too vile to elaborate on, although he drops some pretty strong hints. Young boys, whom Tiberius called his little fishes, were trained to follow him when he went swimming and to get between his legs and lick and nibble him. We are also told that Tiberius used babies not yet weaned from their mother’s breast ‘to suck at his breast or groin’. On one occasion, the disgusting old lecher took a fancy to a young acolyte at a ceremonial sacrifice; he could barely wait for the ceremony to end before bundling the young man and his brother, who was the sacred trumpeter, out of the temple and indecently assaulting both of them.
When they protested at his outrageous behaviour he had their legs broken. Tiberius was succeeded by Gaius, known as Caligula, who continued in much the same way.

Caligula pursued every imaginable form of pleasure with energetic abandon. One of his favourite pastimes was to watch people being tortured and executed. According to Suetonius, he had no regard for anyone’s chastity and enjoyed large numbers of homosexual relationships. One young man revealed publicly that he had ‘buggered the emperor’ and quite worn himself out in the process. Caligula had sex with most women of rank in Rome, including his three sisters. After inviting a selection of respectable ladies to dinner with their husbands, he would examine each one in turn. Later, when the mood took him, he would summon his choice and leave the banquet to have sex with her. After returning to the meal, he would openly discuss her performance with his guests. Caligula’s many other indulgences included drinking pearls dissolved in vinegar and feeding golden bread to his dinner guests. Unsurprisingly, it took him less than a year to squander his fortune. Caligula died at the age of twenty-nine and was succeeded by Claudius.

Claudius continued the imperial tradition of drunkenness, gambling, womanising and feasting. After developing a burning passion for his niece, he changed the law so that he could marry her. Claudius was a renowned trencherman who rarely left a dining-hall until he was ‘gorged and sodden’, whereupon a servant would put a feather down his throat to make him vomit so that he could start gorging again. He was also a devoted gambler and published a book on the subject. Claudius was succeeded by Nero – a name that has done more than most to give hedonism its dark reputation.

Nero’s pleasure-seeking knew no boundaries, leading one modern commentator to describe him as one of the biggest creeps in history. His feasts lasted from midday to midnight.
and his guests would generally include a substantial contingent of prostitutes. Like his predecessors, Nero enjoyed plentiful sex with men and women. He had one of his favourite slaves castrated and then married him. His more mundane excesses included never wearing the same clothes twice and using a golden net for fishing. Another in a long line of imperial gamblers, he would often stake thousands of gold pieces on a single throw of the dice.

Nero was succeeded briefly by Galba, whose two main characteristics, according to Suetonius, were cruelty and greed. He was a heavy eater and a homosexual with a penchant for ‘mature and very sturdy men’. Galba died after less than seven months as emperor, to be succeeded by Otho, whose reign was even briefer. Next in line came Vitellius, who had spent his adolescence among Tiberius’s male prostitutes on Capri. As emperor, Vitellius became notorious for every sort of self-indulgence. He banqueted three or four times a day, often making himself vomit to create space for more. For one feast, he commissioned a dish containing ingredients from every corner of the empire, including pike livers, peacock brains, flamingo tongues and lamprey milt. Suetonius describes Vitellius as unusually tall, with an alcoholic flush, a huge paunch and a crippled thigh. He was succeeded by Vespasian, who was a model of virtue by comparison. Vespasian liked to nap, which makes him a big favourite of mine. (We will return to the joys of napping in the final chapter.) His successor was Titus.

Suetonius describes Titus as profligate and cruel. He held riotous parties far into the night and owned a troupe of homosexual prostitutes and eunuchs. Titus was succeeded by Domitian, whose lustfulness was of a high order, even by the standards of the day. Domitian referred to sex as ‘bed-wrestling’ and treated it like a competitive sport. He enjoyed swimming with prostitutes, shaving his concubines’ pubic hair and having sex with married women.
The behaviour of the Caesars and subsequent emperors did little to improve the tawdry image of hedonism. Nonetheless, hedonism has had its principled defenders. One of its most vociferous advocates was the Greek philosopher Aristippus, who died in 366 BC. He contended that pleasure (hēdonē) could be equated with good and that every person should live their life so as to maximise pleasurable experiences. Aristippus vigorously practised what he preached, acquiring a reputation as a man who really knew how to have a good time. When he was not mounting a defence of hedonism he could usually be found mounting someone else.

Around the same period as Aristippus, the Chinese philosopher Yang Chu was also championing the idea that we have only one life and should enjoy it as much as we can. Yang Chu espoused a simple – some would say simplistic – philosophy of hedonism. Life is short, he argued, and the only truly good things in it are the sensual pleasures of music, sex, fine clothes and tasty food. His ideas were later absorbed into the Taoist philosophical tradition. Several hundred years after he died, his ideas resurfaced in the Taoist Book of Lieh-tzu. In one passage, Yang Chu’s starkly hedonistic worldview is expressed in an argument that goes like this. The longest any of us can hope to live is a hundred years. Even if we are lucky enough to live that long, half our useful life is lost in unconscious infancy and old age. Of the remaining years, a further half is either wasted or spent asleep. Pain, sickness, sorrow and fear use up at least half the rest. That leaves us only about ten years for enjoyment. Even then, every hour is plagued with anxiety because we are driven by social pressures to conform and achieve. Our anxieties prevent us from enjoying ourselves, leaving us no better off than chained criminals. Instead, we should spend our time seeking pleasure from sex, good living, beauty and music. Yang Chu was exhorting us in clear and simple terms
to grab pleasure while we can – or, as others have variously put it, to eat, drink and be merry, seize the day, and gather rosebuds while ye may.

In the post-Enlightenment England of the eighteenth century, there was much gathering of rosebuds, reflecting a widespread view that humans were built to pursue pleasure and that doing so was good for society as a whole. Growing affluence made this aspiration a reality for many. The pleasure industry boomed – not just for the enjoyment of the rich and powerful, but for the masses. Whole towns became devoted to enjoyment. The Prince Regent chose Brighton as the site for his pleasure palace and millions of fun-seekers followed him there. Resorts such as Bath, Cheltenham and Buxton made their wealth from visitors seeking health and pleasure. Predictably, the quest for pleasure often trumped the quest for health, prompting much sniping from moralisers. The Methodist preacher Charles Wesley described Bath as ‘Hell on earth’.

Georgian London was known for its two hundred or so pleasure gardens. Among the most famous was Vauxhall Gardens, which was renowned for its erotic ambience. Men and women of all backgrounds could stroll, dance, eat, drink and enjoy themselves to the sound of music. Anyone who could afford the modest entrance fee had the prospect of an erotic encounter. Ranelagh in Chelsea was said to be favoured by the greatest beauties and was described by one contemporary writer as the finest market in England.

Sexual activity was widely regarded at this time as a legitimate source of pleasure rather than a sin. Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin and an eminent scholar himself, described sex as ‘the purest felicity in the otherwise vapid cup of life’. Sex was easily obtained on a commercial basis. As many as 30,000 streetwalkers plied their wares in the streets of Georgian London. Any punter interested in ‘country matters’ could buy publications such as Harris’s
List of Covent Garden Ladies or The Man of Pleasure’s Kalendar, which listed the local prostitutes and detailed their erotic specialities. James Boswell wrote in his diary that it was impossible to stroll in St James’s Park or walk down the Strand without being propositioned by scores of harlots – something he found hard to resist.

A prominent figure of this period was Teresa Cornelys, otherwise known as the Empress of Pleasure. She created London’s first exclusive nightclub. The Society in Soho-Square, as it was called, was based in her Soho mansion and opened for business in 1760. It was a glittering pleasure palace for the rich, which helped establish Soho’s abiding association with hedonism. A typical night there would start with a concert performed by top musicians in sumptuous surroundings. Then the real fun would begin, as the guests ate, drank, danced and gambled until dawn, some slipping away to discreet bedrooms for more intimate pleasures. The English were as obsessed with celebrities then as they are now: crowds of onlookers would swarm around Soho Square, hoping to catch a glimpse of the rich and famous, including younger members of the royal family.

All this bawdy revelry upset the Church, which tried hard to have The Society in Soho-Square shut down. In 1770 the bishop of London begged the king to ban a huge masked ball that Cornelys was arranging, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Salt was later rubbed in the ecclesiastical wound when it transpired that the guests included the bishop’s own wife and the wives of three other senior clerics. Religious and secular attempts to constrain pleasure-seeking is an eternal theme that we shall return to later.

Teresa Cornelys’s genius at creating pleasure for others was a natural reflection of her background. She came originally from Venice, a city where the pursuit of pleasure had become an art form. She travelled to London with her child, whose father was none other than Giacomo Casanova.
Teresa Cornelys was born close to Casanova’s family home in Venice and they met in their teens. Their mutual love of pleasure made them kindred spirits.

Casanova managed to pack more sensual experience into his life than most of us could dream of. Born in 1725, he died seventy-three years later, having variously been a novelist, poet, gambler, soldier, musician, spy, adventurer, free-thinker and prolific lover. He travelled widely, forged relationships with many famous people and enjoyed everything that life had to offer. When Casanova came to write his memoirs, shortly before his death, he looked back with evident enjoyment. ‘What pleasure’, he wrote, ‘in remembering one’s pleasures!’ He felt little regret at how he had chosen to live his life:

Cultivating the pleasures of the senses was my principal concern throughout my life; none, indeed, was ever more important to me. Feeling as though I was born for the fair sex, I have always loved it and let it love me as much as I could. I have also passionately loved good food and all things made to arouse curiosity. . . . As a great libertine, a bold talker, a man who thought only of pleasure in life, I could not find myself guilty of anything.

Back in Georgian England, the pleasure-seekers were receiving heavyweight support from a number of prominent thinkers. Foremost among these was the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Like Aristippus before him, Bentham regarded pleasure as the ultimate aim in life. He famously argued that behaviour, morals and laws should be judged according to how much they fostered ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. As far as Bentham and like-minded Utilitarians were concerned, humans were intended by nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain. In 1785 he wrote an essay entitled ‘Paederasty’, in which he argued that society’s disapproval
of anal sex stemmed from an irrational antipathy towards pleasure, especially sexual pleasure. Bentham even tried to devise an objective method for calculating exactly how much ‘felicity’ any particular action would unleash, but this proved too difficult. Indeed, it remains the case to this very day that no one is entirely sure how best to quantify happiness or pleasure.

Strong echoes of Bentham’s philosophy are evident in current thinking that national governments should pursue policies and enact laws that are specifically intended to maximise national happiness, in contrast with their conventional preoccupation with maximising national wealth. However, it is often unclear what the proponents of such policies really mean by ‘happiness’, which they sometimes seem to equate with pleasure, or just feeling good. As we shall see later, pleasure and happiness are two quite different entities.

What does hedonism look like in the early twenty-first century? Much the same as in Georgian London or imperial Rome, it would appear. A far wider variety of mind-altering drugs is now available, but the familiar mainstays of sex, alcohol, food and gambling remain as popular as ever. In the UK, for example, the average household devotes about 4 per cent of its total expenditure to those two ancient and deeply entrenched drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Psychological research and social surveys consistently find that people around the world continue to derive most of their pleasure from having sex, eating, drinking, relaxing and socialising with family and friends. In private, many of them also seek chemical pleasure from illicit drugs, which is why drug trafficking is estimated to account for around 8 per cent of all international trade. But enough of the social history: it is time now for a little science.