

REDEEMING PLEASURE

— [HOW THE PURSUIT
OF PLEASURE
MIRRORS OUR HUNGER
FOR GOD] —

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PROLOGUE

A TALE OF TWO MICE

LIKE MANY KIDS, I grew up with all sorts of animals as pets: dogs, hamsters, mice, rats, lizards, frogs, fish, snakes, turtles, and even an African land crab. But never cats. Each animal brought unique experiences and memories. I remember feeding the crab everything from goldfish to Cheetos. I remember catching a bunch of tadpoles and raising them in my backyard as my own, only to find one day they had literally grown legs and jumped away. And I remember the mice, rats, and hamsters all enjoying the running wheel.

I've always found it fascinating to watch those little rodents churning away on the wheel. They run. And run. And run.

I wonder, why do they run?

It looks exhausting to me, but I suspect they find some enjoyment in it. Otherwise, why would they do it? Maybe it's like a spin class for rodents. It allows them to get a good sweat on and work off the extra calories from all that food in their little dish. I'm sure there's a self-conscious rodent or two out there thinking, *Does this cage make my fur look fat?*

That's about the extent of my extrapolations concerning the running wheel, but other people take this thought further. Some folks have argued that mice run on the wheel because they feel stress and anxiety from life in a cage. From that point of view, all that running doesn't sound so pleasurable. Is the mouse wheel a form of pleasure or is it a sign of unhappiness?

There's a big difference between the two, but how do we know?

This isn't a question just for mice. It's the question we should ask ourselves today. Are the behaviors and choices we make signs of pleasure or signs of captivity? And what exactly are we captive to? Do the messages we receive daily bring us the pleasure we think they do, or do they merely reflect our captivity to something else?

Here I have to hand it to science. Never one to leave a question like this unanswered, two researchers from the Netherlands decided to find out. Creating an experiment any junior high boy would love, they set up running wheels in the outdoors to see whether wild mice would choose to run on them voluntarily. (It's fun to imagine two serious-looking people in lab coats walking through the forest with tiny running wheels.) Would the mice choose to run for pleasure or would they reject the wheels because they didn't need them to relieve stress?

The surprising conclusion they found was that "mice came to the wheels like human beings to a health club holding a spring membership sale."¹ Evidently, mice actually love running on wheels whether they are caged or living in the wild. It is indeed a sign of pleasure.

That answers our mouse question, but not our human question.

Is your lifestyle giving you the pleasure you crave? Or does it reveal your captivity to a way of life that doesn't deliver as you expected? You probably have your own knee-jerk answer to this question. But like the researchers from the Netherlands, we'll take some time to explore the issue to provide us with a more objective answer to our question.

But I do know this for sure: We don't need to settle for a counterfeit pleasure when the real version is available.