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Higher pleasures

Mill's response to the second objection to utilitarianism—that it reduces all values to a single scale—also turns out to lean on moral ideals independent of utility. In *Utilitarianism* (1861), a long essay Mill wrote shortly after *On Liberty*, he tries to show that utilitarians can distinguish higher pleasures from lower ones.

For Bentham, pleasure is pleasure and pain is pain. The only basis for judging one experience better or worse than another is the intensity and duration of the pleasure or pain it produces. The so-called higher pleasures or nobler virtues are simply those that produce stronger, longer pleasure. Bentham recognizes no qualitative distinction among pleasures. “The quantity of pleasure being equal,” he writes, “push-pin is as good as poetry.”²⁴ (Push-pin was a children's game.)

Part of the appeal of Bentham's utilitarianism is this nonjudgmental spirit. It takes people's preferences as they are, without passing judgment on their moral worth. All preferences count equally. Bentham thinks it is presumptuous to judge some pleasures as inherently better than others. Some people like Mozart, others Madonna. Some like ballet, others like bowling. Some read Plato, others *Penthouse*. Who is to say, Bentham might ask, which pleasures are higher, or worthier, or nobler than others?

The refusal to distinguish higher from lower pleasures is connected to Bentham's belief that all values can be measured and compared on a single scale. If experiences differ only in the quantity of pleasure or pain they produce, not qualitatively, then it makes sense to weigh them on a single scale. But some object to utilitarianism on precisely this point: they believe that some pleasures really are “higher” than others. If some pleasures are worthy and others base, they say, why should society weigh all preferences equally, much less regard the sum of such preferences as the greatest good?

Think again about the Romans throwing Christians to the lions in the Coliseum. One objection to the bloody spectacle is that it violates the rights of the victims. But a further objection is that it caters to perverse pleasures rather than noble ones. Wouldn't it be better to change those preferences than to satisfy them?

It is said that the Puritans banned bearbaiting, not because of the pain it caused the bears but because of the pleasure it gave the onlookers. Bearbaiting is no longer a popular pastime, but dogfighting and cockfighting hold a persistent allure, and some jurisdictions ban them. One justification for such bans is to prevent cruelty to animals. But such laws may also reflect a moral judgment that deriving pleasure from dogfights is abhorrent, something a civilized society should discourage. You don't need to be a Puritan to have some sympathy with this judgment.

Bentham would count all preferences, regardless of their worth, in determining what the law should be. But if more people would rather watch dogfights than view Rembrandt paintings, should society subsidize dogfight arenas rather than art museums? If certain pleasures are base and degrading, why should they have any weight at all in deciding what laws should be adopted?

Mill tries to save utilitarianism from this objection. Unlike Bentham, Mill believes it is possible to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures—to assess the quality, not just the quantity or intensity, of our desires. And he thinks he can make this distinction without relying on any moral ideas other than utility itself.

Mill begins by pledging allegiance to the utilitarian creed: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure." He also affirms the "theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things . . . are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain."²⁵

Despite insisting that pleasure and pain are all that matter, Mill acknowledges that “some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.” How can we know which pleasures are qualitatively higher? Mill proposes a simple test: “Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure.”²⁶

This test has one clear advantage: It does not depart from the utilitarian idea that morality rests wholly and simply on our actual desires. “[T]he sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people actually desire it,” Mill writes.²⁷ But as a way of arriving at qualitative distinctions among pleasures, his test seems open to an obvious objection: Isn’t it often the case that we prefer lower pleasures to higher ones? Don’t we sometimes prefer lying on the sofa watching sitcoms to reading Plato or going to the opera? And isn’t it possible to prefer these undemanding experiences without considering them to be particularly worthwhile?

Shakespeare versus The Simpsons

When I discuss Mill’s account of higher pleasures with my students, I try out a version of his test. I show the students three examples of popular entertainment: a World Wrestling Entertainment fight (a raucous spectacle in which the so-called wrestlers attack one another with folding chairs); a *Hamlet* soliloquy performed by a Shakespearean actor; and an excerpt from *The Simpsons*. I then ask two questions: Which of these performances did you enjoy most—find most pleasurable—and which do you think is the highest, or worthiest?

Invariably *The Simpsons* gets the most votes as most enjoyable, followed by Shakespeare. (A few brave souls confess their fondness for the WWE.) But when asked which experience they consider qualitatively highest, the students vote overwhelmingly for Shakespeare.

The results of this experiment pose a challenge to Mill's test. Many students prefer watching Homer Simpson, but still think a *Hamlet* soliloquy offers a higher pleasure. Admittedly, some may say Shakespeare is better because they are sitting in a classroom and don't want to seem philistine. And some students argue that *The Simpsons*, with its subtle mix of irony, humor, and social commentary, does rival Shakespeare's art. But if most people who have experienced both prefer watching *The Simpsons*, then Mill would be hard pressed to conclude that Shakespeare is qualitatively higher.

And yet Mill does not want to give up the idea that some ways of life are nobler than others, even if the people who live them are less easily satisfied. "A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering . . . than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence." Why are we unwilling to trade a life that engages our higher faculties for a life of base contentment? Mill thinks the reason has something to do with "the love of liberty and personal independence," and concludes that "its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other."²⁸

Mill concedes that "occasionally, under the influence of temptation," even the best of us postpone higher pleasures to lower ones. Everyone gives in to the impulse to be a couch potato once in a while. But this does not mean we don't know the difference between Rembrandt and reruns. Mill makes this point in a memorable passage: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question."²⁹

This expression of faith in the appeal of the higher human faculties is compelling. But in relying on it, Mill strays from the utilitarian premise. No longer are *de facto* desires the sole basis for judging what is

noble and what is base. Now the standard derives from an ideal of human dignity independent of our wants and desires. The higher pleasures are not higher *because* we prefer them; we prefer them because we recognize them as higher. We judge *Hamlet* as great art not because we like it more than lesser entertainments, but because it engages our highest faculties and makes us more fully human.

As with individual rights, so with higher pleasures: Mill saves utilitarianism from the charge that it reduces everything to a crude calculus of pleasure and pain, but only by invoking a moral ideal of human dignity and personality independent of utility itself.

Of the two great proponents of utilitarianism, Mill was the more humane philosopher, Bentham the more consistent one. Bentham died in 1832, at the age of eighty-four. But if you go to London, you can visit him today. He provided in his will that his body be preserved, embalmed, and displayed. And so he can be found at University College London, where he sits pensively in a glass case, dressed in his actual clothing.

Shortly before he died, Bentham asked himself a question consistent with his philosophy: Of what use could a dead man be to the living? One use, he concluded, would be to make one's corpse available for the study of anatomy. In the case of great philosophers, however, better yet to preserve one's physical presence in order to inspire future generations of thinkers.³⁰ Bentham put himself in this second category.

In fact, modesty was not one of Bentham's obvious character traits. Not only did he provide strict instructions for his body's preservation and display, he also suggested that his friends and disciples meet every year "for the purpose of commemorating the founder of the greatest happiness system of morals and legislation," and that when they did, they should bring Bentham out for the occasion.³¹

His admirers have obliged. Bentham's "auto icon," as he dubbed it, was on hand for the founding of the International Bentham Society in the 1980s. And the stuffed Bentham is reportedly wheeled in for meetings of the governing council of the college, whose minutes record him as "present but not voting."³²

Despite Bentham's careful planning, the embalming of his head went badly, so he now keeps his vigil with a wax head in place of the real one. His actual head, now kept in a cellar, was displayed for a time on a plate between his feet. But students stole the head and ransomed it back to the college for a charitable donation.³³

Even in death, Jeremy Bentham promotes the greatest good for the greatest number.