

Does Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures provide a successful defence of Hedonism?

In what follows, I will defend the view that Mill's attempt to defend Hedonism against the "philosophy of swine" objection through the distinction of higher and lower pleasures has significant flaws. Not only could one question whether Mill's theory, in recognizing values other than pleasure as intrinsically valuable, is a form of Hedonism. But, more importantly, whether his idea of higher and lower pleasures is feasible. I will argue that Mill's "decided preference criterion" – his method of distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures – is problematic. I will demonstrate this by outlining the "philosophy of swine" objection, Mill's response to this objection, and issues with Mill's solution.

The "philosophy of swine" objection to Hedonism posits that most people, given the choice between a life of an immortal oyster and the exciting life of the composer Joseph Haydn, would choose the latter. From a Hedonist perspective, this seems to be the wrong choice. Over the lifetime of the oyster, because it is immortal, it will eventually experience more pleasure than Haydn experienced during his lifetime, despite the difference in intellectual lives. Mill seeks to resolve this objection by arguing that not only the quantity and intensity of a pleasure should be considered, but also its quality. Typically, intellectual pleasure, related to the higher faculties (such as intellect, feeling and imagination) – which Haydn, a composer, experienced and the oyster did not – has a higher quality than more corporal pleasures. Thus, although the oyster experiences more pleasure in total, because of the lower quality of the pleasures that an oyster experiences, one should choose the life of Haydn. Hedonism chooses correctly.

Mill distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures through his "decided preference criterion," which he articulates as follows:

"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. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account." (Mill, 1998, p. 57)

Met opmerkingen [OB1]: Lowkey, all my moral essays are quite shit. But my revision guides are very good so look at those!

Met opmerkingen [ER2]: Overall comments:

I enjoyed this essay! Well done. It shows good philosophical skills including: weighing up arguments, good use of scholarship and accurate examples. You also limit your scope well and don't try and do too much. Thing to work on:

- Accurate exegesis of arguments – be sure to explain the different kinds of hedonisms, for example.
- Be precise in what you are arguing: why is it problematic, why is it weak, what are your reasons for thinking this?

heeft verwijderd: No,

heeft verwijderd: ,

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Met opmerkingen [ER3]: Say here exactly *why* its problematic, in your view.

Met opmerkingen [ER4]: Careful not to suggest you're going to merely survey the literature – we want an argument, defended throughout.

Met opmerkingen [ER5]: The Swine Objection and the Oyster objection are distinct objections
- Swine: against the view that all pleasures are intrinsically valuable
- Oyster: against the view the only pleasures are intrinsically valuable.

Met opmerkingen [ER6]: What kind of hedonist? A qualitative or quantitative one?

Met opmerkingen [ER7]: Be sure to explain the whole example – what is Haydn's life like?

Met opmerkingen [ER8]: Again, distinguishing between the two different types of hedonism will help clarify the difference between this claim and the opposite one above.

Met opmerkingen [ER9]: Good.

According to this criterion, for a pleasure to be deemed of a higher quality, it must meet several conditions.¹ The one I want to zoom in on is that almost all who have experienced both pleasures prefer the higher pleasure above the lower pleasure, regardless of the quantity or intensity of both pleasures. In other words, Mill argues that the pleasures are incommensurable; no amount of the lower pleasure will ever make it as worthwhile as the higher pleasure.

Met opmerkingen [ER10]: Use evaluative language here – why are you focusing on it? are you criticising it or defending it?

Met opmerkingen [ER11]: Good.

However, I submit that this condition of incommensurability is, in practice, never met. There are cases in which most people would rather have a lot of a certain pleasure, with a lower quality, than the higher pleasure. This is especially easy to illustrate in the case of pain. Consider the following thought experiment: the University of Oxford changes the tuition fee structure. Instead of paying with money, prospective students must agree to endure torture for the rest of their lives in exchange for admission. According to Mill, no amount of torture – not even infinite torture – could persuade you to drop out of university or persuade you not to go to university in the first place. A single day at university filled with intellectual pleasure (perhaps spent by analysing the wonderful works of Mill), would outweigh an infinite amount of torture. Yet, most people would likely reject the university's offer, they would say that it is not worth going to university for that price. Therefore, in practice, the condition of incommensurability would not be met.

heeft verwijderd: then

Met opmerkingen [ER12]: Good use of own example.

This thought experiment is similar to the thought experiment of Haydn and the oyster. However, here the choice is not between an infinite amount of lower pleasure versus a small amount of a higher pleasure, but between a higher pleasure and an infinite amount of physical pain (or the absence of it). Perhaps, there is something about pain that just makes it different compared to a lower pleasure, could that not be the reason Mill's theory seems to get the incorrect answer for this thought experiment? It might just be the case that pain, even though it is physical, just has a high quality. In fact, even if we modify this thought experiment to the choice between perhaps just one evening of torture and going to university, most people will probably still decide to make the same choice and reject the offer. However, if we take the thought experiment to another extreme: getting pricked with a needle (which is arguably a form of torture, or at least it creates some physical pain) as a price to pay for the University of Oxford. Then, people would probably choose to go to university. Especially if one would ask some ambitious high schoolers. So, in this case, physical pain no longer seems to have a higher quality to going to university and enjoying intellectual pleasures.

Met opmerkingen [ER13]: Good clarification but I am not totally sure what this part means! Be precise!

Met opmerkingen [ER14]: Something missing here...

Met opmerkingen [ER15]: A higher quality of what? Sorry I am being pedantic – just make sure you fully explain what you mean.

¹ (Anderson, 1991, p. 9)

Furthermore, Mill himself also appears to acknowledge that physical pain has a relatively low quality compared to intellectual pleasure. Take, for instance, his example of Socrates:

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." (Mill, 1998, p. 57)

This demonstrates Mill's emphasis on intellectual growth; however, it is important to note that the death of Socrates was excruciatingly painful. Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking poisonous hemlock. This plant causes, among other things, severe respiratory failure. Imagine holding your breath and not being able to breathe for a long period of time and eventually dying.² Mill, however, seems to value Socrates intellectual life more than the avoidance of pain, he did not find physical pain to be of higher quality than the intellectual growth that Socrates had. He would rather be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool. This suggests that when you take extreme thought experiments, Mill's "decided preference criterion" starts breaking down. This is because of the incommensurability condition that most people would still prefer the higher pleasure to a lower pleasure, even if the quantity of the lower pleasure is so much larger. And in fact, it seems that higher and lower pleasures are not as incommensurable as Mill says they are.

Finally, Mill could object and say that, for an individual who truly understands the value of intellectual growth, the choice to endure temporary pain (even if it is as extreme as torture) for intellectual development would ultimately be justifiable. That a competent judge should make the informed and reflective decision to prefer going to university, even if it involves a lifetime of suffering. So perhaps the people who choose not to be tortured for the rest of their life are just incompetent judges? They are simply getting it wrong. However, although I have not been tortured myself, I expect that most people who have had experience with both torture and university, who have properly and to the right extent enjoyed the stimulation of the mind one gets from university, and have suffered torture properly and to the right extent, and would therefore be competent judges, would decide not to university.³ And as this would be the majority of the competent judges, their decision would have to be accepted as final.

The problem with Mill's ethical theory is that he rejects all cardinality whatsoever. If one had to make the choice between reading a single word of a poem (which may offer a slight amount of intellectual pleasure, though not much) and free neck massages for the rest of their life, most people would pick the massages. Are these people just wrong? Perhaps they just are not competent judges? However, if you were to ask people who

Met opmerkingen [ER16]: Ouch.

Met opmerkingen [ER17]: You're getting at something interesting here – can we talk about pain having different qualities? Does Mill? Or is pain always quantitative? (think of pain measuring scales at the Doctor's office) -- does this provide a problem for Mill?

Met opmerkingen [ER18]: How does the amount of pain come in here?

Met opmerkingen [ER19]: Why? Perhaps my comment above might help you here – maybe pain always has to be commensurable?

Met opmerkingen [ER20]: Good weighing up of arguments.

Met opmerkingen [ER21]: Precision needed again here: Just wrong about what?

Mill wants everyone to maximise the amount of pleasure/enjoyment in their own lives – so he would not say that this decision is 'wrong' only that there is more pleasure available to these people, were they to properly cultivate their higher pleasures (and read more poetry)

-(sidenote: could you get any pleasure from one word? Or could Mill argue that to get the right amount of pleasure, in fact you need to engage and practise poetry reading – therefore your example doesn't count as a higher pleasure, perhaps.)

heeft verwijderd: . M

² ('Conium Maculatum', 2024; *How Does Hemlock Kill You?*, z.d.)

³ (Crisp, 2009, p. 37)

usually prefer reading a poem over getting a neck massage (because they see it as a higher pleasure and would therefore be competent judges), they would probably still choose the infinite neck massages. Since Mill explicitly rejects all cardinality, the higher pleasures should still be preferred over lower pleasures, even if the higher pleasures had a very small quantity and the lower pleasures (or pains) an infinite quantity. According to Mill, quantity does not matter when quality is different. I, however, have argued that Mill's rejection of cardinality is problematic because... In conclusion, Mill might save us from an eternal oyster life, but he is unable to save us from a lifetime of torture.

Met opmerkingen [ER22]: An entire poem this time?

heeft verwijderd: tried to show

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