

last time
last time we began to consider some objections
to Jeremy Bentham's version
of utilitarianism
people raised two objections in the discussion
we had
the first
was the objection, the claim
that utilitarianism,
by concerning itself
with the greatest good for the greatest number
fails adequately to respect
individual rights.
today we have debates
about torture
and terrorism
suppose
a suspected terrorists was apprehended on September tenth
and you had reason to believe
that the suspect
had crucial information about an impending terrorist attack that would kill over three thousand
people
and you couldn't extract the information
would it be just
to torture
the suspect
to get the information
or
do you say no
there is a categorical moral duty of respect for individual rights
in a way we're back to the questions we started with t
about trolley cars and organ transplants so that's the first issue
and you remember we considered some examples of cost-benefit analysis
but a lot of people were unhappy with cost-benefit analysis
when it came to placing a dollar value on human life
and so that led us to the
second objection,
it questioned whether it's possible to translate all values
into a single uniform measure of value
it asks in other words whether all values are commensurable
let me give you one other
example
of an experience, this actually is a true story, it comes from personal experience
that raises a question at least about whether all values can be translated without

loss
into utilitarian terms
some years ago
when I was a graduate student I was at Oxford in England and they had men's and women's
colleges they weren't yet mixed
and the women's colleges had rules
against
overnight male guests
by the nineteen seventies these
rules were rarely enforced and easily violated,
or so I was told,
by the late nineteen seventies when I was there, pressure grew to relax these rules and it became
the subject of debate among the faculty at St. Anne's College
which was one of these all women colleges
the older women on the faculty
we're traditionalists they were opposed to change
on conventional moral grounds
but times had changed
and they were embarrassed
to give the true grounds of their objection
and so they translated their arguments
into utilitarian terms
if men stay overnight,
they argued, the costs to the college will increase.
how you might wonder
well they'll want to take baths, and that will use up hot water they said
furthermore they argued
we'll have to replace the mattresses more often
the reformers
met these arguments by adopting the following compromise
each woman
could have a maximum of three overnight male guest each week
they didn't say whether it had to be the same one, or three different
provided
and this is the compromise provided
the guest
paid fifty pence to defray the cost to the college
the next day
the national headline in the national newspaper read St. Anne's girls, fifty pence a night
another
illustration
of the difficulty of translating
all values
in this case a certain idea of virtue
into utilitarian terms

so that's all to illustrate
the second objection
to utilitarianism, at least the part of that objection
that questions rather
the utilitarianism
is right to assume
that we can
assume the uniformity of
value, the commensurability of values and translate all moral considerations
into
dollars
or money.

But there is a second
aspect to this worry about aggregating values and preferences
why should we
weigh
all preferences
that people have
without assessing whether they're good preferences or bad preferences
shouldn't we distinguish
between
higher
pleasures
and lower pleasures.

Now, part of the appeal of
not making any qualitative distinctions about the worth of people's preferences, part of the
appeal
is that it is non-judgmental and egalitarian
the Benthamite utilitarian says
everybody's preferences count
and they count regardless of what people want
regardless of what makes it different people
happy. For Bentham,
all that matters
you'll remember
are the intensity and the duration
of a pleasure or pain
the so-called higher pleasures or nobler virtues are simply those, according to Bentham
that produce
stronger,
longer, pleasure
yet a famous phrase to express this idea
the quantity of pleasure being equal
pushpin
is as good as poetry.

What was pushpin?
It was some kind of a child's game like to tidily winks pushpin is as good as poetry
Bentham said
and lying behind this idea
I think
is the claim
the intuition
that it's a presumption
to judge
whose pleasures
are intrinsically higher
or worthier or better
and there is something attractive in this
refusal to judge, after all some people like
Mozart, others
Madonna
some people like ballet
others
bowling,
who's to say
a Benthamite might argue, who's to say which of these pleasures
whose pleasures
are higher
worthier
nobler
than others?
But, is that right?
this refusal to make qualitative distinctions
can we
altogether dispense with the idea
that certain things we take pleasure in are
better or worthier
than others
think back to the case of the Romans in the coliseum, one thing that troubled people about that
practice
is that it seemed to violate the rights
of the Christian
another way of objecting to what's going on there
is that the pleasure that the Romans take
in this bloody spectacle
should that pleasure
which is a base,
kind of corrupt
degrading pleasure, should that even
be valorized or weighed in deciding what the

the general welfare is?

so here are the objections to Bentham's utilitarianism

and now we turn to someone who tried to

respond to those objections,

a later day utilitarian

John Stuart Mill

so what we need to

examine now

is whether John Stuart Mill had a convincing reply

to these objections to utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill

was born in 1806

his father James Mill

was a disciple of Bentham's

and James Mills set about giving his son

John Stuart Mill a model education

he was a child prodigy

John Stuart Mill

the knew Latin, sorry, Greek at the age of three, Latin at eight

and at age ten

he wrote a history of Roman law.

At age twenty

he had a nervous breakdown

this left him in a depression for five years

but at age twenty five what helped lift him out of this depression

is that he met Harriet Taylor

she in no doubt married him, they lived happily ever after

and it was under her

influence

the John Stuart Mill try to humanize

utilitarianism

what Mill tried to do was to see

whether the utilitarian calculus could be

enlarged

and modified

to accommodate

humanitarian concerns

like the concern to respect individual rights

and also to address the distinction between higher and lower pleasures.

In 1859 Mill wrote a famous book on liberty

the main point of which was the importance of defending individual rights and minority rights

and in 1861

toward the end of his life

he wrote the book we read is part of this course
Utilitarianism.
It makes it clear
that utility is the only standard of morality
in his view
so he's not challenging
Bentham's premise,
he's affirming it.
he says very explicitly the sole evidence,
it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people actually do
desire it.
so he stays with the idea that our de facto actual empirical desires are the only
basis
for moral judgment.
but then
page eight
also in chapter two, he argues that it is possible for a utilitarian to distinguish
higher from lower
pleasures.
now, those of you who've read
Mill already
how
according to him is it possible to draw that distinction?
How can a utilitarian
distinguish qualitatively higher pleasures
from
lesser ones, base ones, unworthy ones?
If you tried both of them
and you'll prefer the higher one naturally always
that's great, that's right. What's your name? John.
so as John points out
Mill says here's the test,
since we can't step outside
actual desires, actual preferences
that would
violate utilitarian premises,
the only test
of whether
a pleasure is higher
or lower is whether someone who has experienced both
would prefer it.
And here,
in chapter two
we see the passage
where Mill makes the point that John just described

of two pleasures, if there be one to which all are almost all who have experience
of both give a decided preference,
irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, in other words no outside, no
independent
standard,
then that is the more desirable pleasure.
what do people think about that argument.
does that
does it succeeded?
how many think that it does succeed?
of arguing within utilitarian terms for a distinction between higher and lower pleasures.
how many
think it doesn't succeed?
I want to hear your reasons.
but before
we give the reasons
let's do an experiment
of Mills'
claim.

In order to do this experiment
we're going to look at three
short excerpts
of popular entertainment
the first one is a Hamlet soliloquy
it'll be followed by two other
experiences
see what you think.
'what a piece of work is a man
how noble in reason
how infinite in faculties
in form and moving, how express and admirable
in action how like an angel. In apprehension, how like a god
the beauty of the world
the paragon of animals
and yet, to me
what is this quintessence of dust?
man delights not me.

Imagine a world where your greatest fears become reality
each show, six contestants from around the country battle each other in three
extreme stunts. these stunts are designed to challenge these contestants both physically and
mentally
six contestants, three stunts, one winner.
Fear factor.

The Simpsons. Well hi diddly-o peddle to the metal o-philes! Flanders- since when do you like
anything cool.

well, I don't care for the speed, but I can't get enough of that safety gear
helmets, roll bars, caution flags. I like the fresh air
and looking at the poor people in the infield.
Dang Cletus, why you got to park by my parents.
Now hunny, it's my parents too.
I don't even have to ask which one you like most
the Simpsons? How many like the Simpson's most?
How many Shakespeare?
What about fear factor?
how many preferred fear factor?
really?
people overwhelmingly
like the Simpsons
better
than Shakespeare. alright, now let's take the other
part of the poll
which is the
highest
experience or pleasure?
how many say
Shakespeare?
how many say
fear factor?
no you can't be serious
really?
alright go ahead you can say it.
I found that one
the most entertaining
I know but which do you think was the worthiest, the noblest experience, I know you find it
the most anything
if something is good just because it is pleasurable what is the matter if you have some kind of
abstract
idea of whether it is good by someone else's sense or not.
Alright so you come down on the straight Benthamite's side
whose to judge
and why should we judge
apart from just registering and aggregating de facto preferences, alright fair enough.
what's your name?
Nate? okay fair enough
Alright so
how many think that the Simpson's is actually
apart from liking is actually the higher experience
higher than Shakespeare.
Alright let's see the vote for Shakespeare again
how many think Shakespeare is higher?

alright so
why is it
ideally I'd like to hear from someone is there someone
think Shakespeare is highest
but who preferred
watching
the Simpsons

Like I guess just sitting and watching the Simpsons, it's entertaining because they make jokes, they make us laugh but

someone has to tell us that Shakespeare was this great writer we had to be taught how to read him, how to

understand him, we had to be taught how to take in Rembrandt, how to analyze a painting.

well how do, what's your name? Aneesha.

Aneesha, when you say someone told you that Shakespeare's better

are you accepting it on blind faith you voted that Shakespeare's higher only because the culture tells you that our teachers tell you that or do you actually agree with that yourself

well in the sense that Shakespeare, no, but earlier you made an example of Rembrandt

I feel like I would enjoy reading a comic book more than I would enjoy a kind of analyzing Rembrandt because someone told me it was great, you know. Right so of some this seems to be, you're suggesting a kind of

cultural convention and pressure. We're told what books, what works of art are great. who else?

although I enjoyed watching the Simpsons more in this particular moment in Justice, if I were to spend the rest of my life considering

the three different

video clips shown

I would not want to spend

that remainder of my life considering the latter two clips.

I think I would derive more pleasure from being able to

branch out in my own mind

sort of

considering more deep pleasures, more deep thoughts.

and tell me your name

Joe.

Joe, so if you had to spend the rest of your life on

on a farm in Kansas with only

with only Shakespeare

or the collected episodes of the Simpsons

you would prefer

Shakespeare

what do you conclude from that

about John Stuart Mill's test

but the test of a higher pleasure

is whether

people who have experienced

both prefer it.

can I cite another example briefly?

in biology

in neuro biology last year we were told of a rat who was tested

a particular center in the brain

where the rat was able to stimulate its brain and cause itself intense pleasure repeatedly

the rat did not eat or drink until it died

so the rat was clearly experiencing intense pleasure

now if you asked me right now if I'd rather experience intense pleasure

or have

a full lifetime of higher pleasure, I would consider intense pleasure to be lower pleasure, right

now enjoy intense pleasure

yes I would

but over a lifetime I think

I would think

almost a complete majority here would agree

that they would rather be a human with higher pleasure than rat

with intense pleasure

for a momentary period of time

so now

in answer to your question, right, I think

this proves that, or I won't say proves

I think the conclusion

is that Mill's theory that when a majority people are asked

what they would rather do,

they will answer

that they would rather

engage in a higher pleasure. So you think that this supports Mills, that Mills was on to something here

I do.

all right is there anyone

who disagrees with Joe who thinks that our experiment

disproves

Mills'

test

shows that that's not an adequate way

that you can't distinguish higher pleasures within the utilitarian framework.

If whatever is good is truly just whatever people prefer it's truly relative and there's

no objective definition then
there will be some society where people prefer Simpsons
more
anyone can appreciate the Simpsons, but I think it does take education to appreciate Shakespeare
Alright, you're saying it takes education to appreciate higher
true thing
Mill's point is
that the higher pleasures do require
cultivation and appreciation and education
he doesn't dispute that
but
once having been cultivated
and educated
people will see
not only see the difference between higher lower
pleasures
but will it actually
prefer
the higher
to the lower.
you find this famous passage from John Stuart Mill-
it is better
to be a human being dissatisfied
than a pig satisfied.
Better to the 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 side of the question.
so here you have
an attempt
to distinguish
higher from lower
pleasures
so going to an art museum or being a couch potato, swilling beer watching television
at home
sometimes Mill agrees we might succumb
to the temptation
to do the latter,
to be couch potatoes,
but even when we do that
out of indolence
and sloth,
we know

that the pleasure we get
gazing at Rembrandts
in the museum
is actually higher,
because we've experienced both.
And is a higher pressure
gazing at Rembrandts
because of engages our higher human faculties
what about Mill's attempt
to reply to the objection about individual rights?
In a way he uses the same
kind of argument
and this comes out in chapter five
he says while I dispute the pretensions of any theory which sets up an imaginary standard
of justice
not grounded on utility,
but still
he considers
justice
grounded on utility to be what he calls the chief part
and incomparably the most sacred and binding part
of all morality.
so justice is higher
individual rights are privileged
but not for
reasons that depart from utilitarian assumptions.
Justice is a name
for certain moral requirements
which, regarded collectively
stand higher in the scale of social utility
and are therefore
of more
paramount obligation
than any others
so justice is sacred, it's prior, it's privileged, it isn't something that can easily be traded
off against lesser things
but the reason
is ultimately
Mills Claims
a utilitarian reason
once you consider
the long run interests
of humankind,
of all of us,
as progressive

beings.

If we do justice and if we respect rights
society as a whole
will be better off in the long run.

Well is that convincing?

Or

is Mill actually, without admitting it, stepping outside
utilitarian considerations
in arguing

for qualitatively higher
pleasures

and for sacred
or specially important
individual rights?

we haven't fully answered that question
because to answer that question
in the case of rights and justice
will require that we explore
other ways,

non utilitarian ways
of accounting for the basis
or rights

and then asking
whether they succeed
as for Jeremy Bentham,
who launched

utilitarianism
as a doctrine
in moral and legal philosophy

Bentham died in 1832 at the age of eighty five
but if you go to London you can visit him today
literally.

he provided in his will
that his body be preserved,
embalmed and displayed
in the university of London
where he still presides in a glass case
with a wax head
dressed in his actual clothing.

you see before he died,

Bentham addressed himself to a question consistent with his philosophy,
of what use

could a dead man be to the living
one use, he said, 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.
You want to see what Bentham looks like stuffed?
Here's what he looks like
There he is
now, if you look closely
you'll notice
that
the embalming up his actual head was not a success so they substituted a waxed head
and at the bottom for verisimilitude
you can actually see his actual head
on a plate
you see it?
right there
so, what's the moral of the story?
the moral of the story
by the way they bring him out during meetings of the board at university college London
and the minutes record him as present but not voting.
here is a philosopher
in life and in death
who adhered
to the principles
of his philosophy. we'll continue with rights next time.