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On the Shortcomings of Mill's Utilitarian Value Ordering

Introduction

John Stuart Mill, like Jeremy Bentham before him, was influenced by Enlightenment epistemology. His version of utilitarian ethics is fundamentally an attempt to expand upon a few fundamental principles of the new natural philosophy and develop a system of ethics from that basis. For this reason, it is necessary to understand Mill's theory of knowledge to interpret his ethics, particularly the reason for which he ascribes value to pleasure. Mill's theory of knowledge is broadly described as naturalistic (Macelod). We gain knowledge from our sensory observations of nature, and patterns or associations in these observations lead to inferential claims on the basis of induction. Mill attempts to solve the induction problem by showing that it is self-sustaining: when we first make the jump to inductively conclude (based on our experience) the universe is homogeneous, all other inductive inference follows. He holds that humans are a part of nature, and it is from observation of our desires that we make inferences about what is (and, consequently, ought) to be desired, this last teleological claim bearing the same self-sustaining weight in Mill's ethics as the inductive jump does in Mill's epistemology.

I will show that Mill's theory of value, particularly the way in which he defines *qualities* of utility, results in an absurdity that makes utility impossible to maximize, and is a failed attempt to build upon Bentham’s work on rigorously quantifying utility.

The Parts of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is two-faceted: it depends upon (1) a theory of value and (2) an approach to value. Though each Bentham and Mill take nuanced stances on how we approach value, modern utilitarians generally hold that we should seek to maximize utility, for other conclusions lead to problems with theory. Bentham himself acknowledged the shortcomings of his original theory of value, which held that we ought to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Formulated in this manner, Bentham notes, utilitarianism allows for the domination of the majority ("the greatest number") at the expense of the minority. In sum, Bentham expects that this results in a net loss in pleasure for the whole community. It is clear in Bentham's work that he is experimenting with what modern economists call utility functions. He acknowledges the diminishing returns of utility (in this case, he likely specifically means money) as one becomes wealthier. A pragmatic, civic-minded individual, Bentham likely noticed the possible benefits of the redistribution of wealth, but perhaps these ideas were not fully fleshed out because of the difficulty distinguishing utility (as described in terms of pleasure) from financial capital; modern utilitarians describe utility as a function of financial capital. The optimization of utility as a function of capital is a solution in which we approach parity of utility across a community, which accords with Bentham's intuition that approaching equality maximizes utility. (Crimmins) Bentham shares this egalitarian sentiment with Mill, whose theory of value holds that each person's happiness is equally desirable—the principle of impartiality (Macelod). This is to say that the contemporary utilitarian belief that we ought to maximize utility is consistent with both Bentham and Mill's formulations of value.

However, this approach to value in utilitarianism is obvious. It follows from Mill's teleological claim that what we desire (pleasure, happiness, utility) ought to be pursued, and a reasonable assumption about the additivity of utility: that adding utility is always good. The solution, of course, is to maximize utility.

Maximizing utility requires that we assign a value system, however, and understand what we are maximizing. Bentham and Mill both generally adopt the Epicurean view that value is pleasure, the opposite of pain. This view is inspired by Mill's naturalistic epistemology. I do not want to dwell on this bit for too long, so I will attempt to briefly summarize Mill's general argument for defining utility as pleasure. We observe that we desire pleasure, and this observation is the only evidence that anything desirable can be produced. If ends are equal to what we desire, then it is only possible to define the ends of our actions according to our desires. Individuals desire happiness, and everything else they desire is observed to be desired because it bears relation to happiness, and that which we desire is a proper end. Note that this last condition, the teleological condition, bears similarity to the "jump" made to embrace induction as a valid, self-sustaining system of knowledge. So, too, does mill expect this "jump" to believing the promotion of happiness is good to give way to a self-sustaining ethical system, grounded in this principle. Mill and Bentham diverge on their assessment of our ability to evaluate the desires of ourselves and others (Bentham, in particular, is a psychological egoist), but this is not I point I choose to emphasize here.

This argument lays the foundations for Mill's **Greatest Happiness Principle**, the cornerstone of his hedonistic theory of value:

> "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." (10)

Theory of Value: Value Ordering

Bentham and Mill diverge in one specific element of the theory of value: what I will call the Value Ordering**.** I define value (in this case, pleasure or utility) ordering as the method by which we determine if one instance of pleasure is greater than, less than, or equal to another instance of pleasure. Being able to define this value ordering is minimally necessary to go about maximizing that value. Natural questions emerge: What elements constitute pleasure? Along what dimensions does pleasure exist? I will describe both Bentham and Mill's value ordering systems.

Bentham mostly seems to describe value as a quantitative thing, on a continuous value system. Higher quantities of happiness generally mean higher utility, though recall Bentham was beginning to consider the effects of marginal utility as well. Bentham does list several features of pleasure; among these are intensity, duration, proximity, and more. But from his attempts at a Felicific Calculus we gather that Bentham means pleasure can be approximated as a function of several other features for ease of calculation, but pleasure is not fundamentally a vector of these features, and these features are not necessary to define pleasure.

Mill disagrees that quantity is sufficient to order utility. He describes different *qualities* of happiness. Mill writes:

> "If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. 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." (12)

Quality is thus loosely defined in terms of what those who have experienced different classes of pleasure desire more. Mill's phenomenalist epistemology is again at the foundation of

this claim, and he offers an inductive argument for why there are different qualities of happiness, appealing to his observations of others (14).

"Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both [high and low pleasures], do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties." (14)

In other words, we observe that those who have taken happiness in both acts that employ "higher" faculties and lower faculties tend to desire those that employ higher factories more. This line of argument is again in accord with Mill's naturalistic worldview; in particular the way it conceives of conclusions as inductive inferences from patterns in our observations of similar things.

Intuitively, Mill seems right to claim that there are different qualities to the things we desire. However, I will show that adding this second dimension to pleasure (in addition to quantity) results in contradiction.

Mill's Notion of Quality is Absurd

Suppose each pleasure is defined in terms of its quantity and quality. It is trivial we can assign an ordering to quantity independently. Using Mill's language of higher and lower pleasures, we assume we can assign an order to quality (further, this is necessary). Let pleasure $p = (t, l)$, where t is the quantity of the pleasure experienced and l is the quality of the pleasure experienced. Further, let $p' = (t', l')$ be another pleasure. There are four possible cases we need consider:

1. The quantity of pleasure p is greater than the quantity of pleasure p' and the quality of pleasure p is greater than the quality of pleasure p'. $t > t'$ and $l > l'$.
2. The quantity of pleasure p is less than the quantity of pleasure p' and the quality of pleasure p is less than the quality of pleasure p'. $t < t'$ and $l < l'$.

3. The quantity of pleasure p is greater than the quantity of pleasure p' *but* the quality of pleasure p is less than the quality of pleasure p'. $t > t'$ and $l < l'$.
4. The quantity of pleasure p is less than the quantity of pleasure p' *but* the quality of pleasure p is greater than the quality of pleasure p'. $t < t'$ and $l > l'$.

These four options partition the space of possible relations between two pleasures. Cases 1 and 2 lend themselves to obvious results. If $t > t'$ and $l > l'$, we conclude $p > p'$ (p is the greater pleasure). Similarly, if $t < t'$ and $l < l'$, we conclude $p < p'$ (p is the lesser pleasure).

The Ambiguous Cases: What is the tradeoff between quantity and quality?

What concerns us is Cases 3 and 4: How do we order pleasures when the respective orders of their quantities and qualities differ? Mill introduces the notion of quality explicitly to explain instances when one pleasure is considered greater than another, despite having less quantity than the other. But it is difficult to ascertain whether Mill believes quality *always* supersedes quantity in the pleasure-ordering system. Cases 3 and 4 admit to 3 ordering possibilities summarized as follows. For p and p',

i. If $l > l'$ then it is always true that $p > p'$ (quality ordering takes precedence).
ii. If ($l > l'$ and $t < t'$) or ($l < l'$ and $t > t'$), then there are some instances in which $p > p'$, and other instances in which $p < p'$. In other words, there is a solution to partition this space such that it is divided between the space where $p > p'$ and $p' < p$.
iii. We cannot make ordering claims about these instances, and simply do not know whether $p > p'$ in these cases.
iv. There is a last case, that $t > t'$ implies $p > p'$ (quantity ordering takes precedence), but this is absurd, and runs contrary to the reason for which Mill introduced a theory of quality in the first place.

I would like to show that each of the Cases i, ii, and iii results in an absurdity.

Consider Case i, in which we hold that if one pleasure has a higher quality than another, it is the higher pleasure. While this is logically consistent, notice that it does away with the need to invoke any notion of quantity in the ordering of our pleasures. This is not a contradiction, but rather renders Mill's move to add another dimension to our definition of pleasure superfluous.

Should we do away with any concept of quantity of pleasure entirely? If we do, then how is ordering by quality any different than ordering by quantity? Regardless, this Case misrepresents Mill's own position, as he certainly holds that quantity takes *some* part in the ordering of pleasures.

Case ii seems to best represent Mill's solution to this ordering problem: that there are some cases in which quality takes precedence, and others (perhaps less common) in which quantity takes precedence. Case ii, however, holds strong implications. Consider the two-dimensional space defined by difference in quality between two pleasures, $l - l'$, and difference in quantity between two pleasures, $t - t'$. It is trivial, but necessary to emphasize, that in the case that $l = l'$ and $t = t'$ we would consider two pleasures equally valuable, $p = p'$. If one does not admit this, then they must accept the conclusion that quality and quantity are insufficient to explain a value ordering. Note that this provides us some information about the "solution" to our ordering in this case. Specifically, the partition that divides the cases where $p < p'$ and $p > p'$ passes through the origin of our space (one can imagine this as the point (0, 0) in the Euclidean space.) This implies, by definition, that *quality and quantity exist in proportion to each other*. This seems to best resemble Mill's own stance, who holds that quality and quantity can be compared: “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" (12). However, if quality can be described in proportion to quantity, then it is, by definition, quantifiable! Further, if quality can be described in proportion to pleasure, and quality and quantity are sufficient to define an ordering on pleasure, then quantity alone is sufficient and necessary to define an order on pleasure. In other words, quantity (or some function of quantity) is necessary and sufficient to

define an order on pleasure, and Mill's move to add another dimension to this ordering space is, again, rendered superfluous.

Case iii is certainly the last one Mill would accept: that there is no solution to orderings of this nature, and they are by definition unknowable. Mill would reject this because pleasure is defined empirically, as inductive inference from the preferences of ourselves and others. As such it is impossible to claim total ignorance, or, worse, inability to know, how pleasures are ordered.

It is my position that Mill is simply struggling with the definition of utility, similarly to Bentham, because it is not rigorously defined. Mill notices that though we desire pleasure, we often desire some pleasures more than others, despite there being less "quantity of that pleasure." For this reason, he feels it necessary to define pleasure in terms of both quantity and quality. But this reason is circular! Recall Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, which "holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (10). He adds immediately after this that "By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain" (10). Therefore utility (what we ought to promote) is equal to happiness is equal to pleasure, this concept being the end unto which all actions are valued: "Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so" (55).

Pleasure, as Mill uses it, is equivalent to what we desire. But if it is defined in such a way, it is unnecessary to modify the value ordering of pleasure to conform to our observed ordering of pleasures. The ordering is in the definition of pleasure! Likely, this is also the result of Mill's failure to rigorously define "quantity" of a pleasure. Mill acknowledges that there are different classes of pleasures. He should have seen, then, that "quantity" describes very different things depending on the class of pleasure and is not a consistent dimension along which to evaluate the

value of a pleasure. The obvious solution is to define utility as a value proportional to how much a pleasure is observed to be desired, inductively. And, really, this is how Mill functionally uses pleasure throughout most of his work. By adding a "quality" dimension to pleasure, Mill really obfuscates the essence of pleasure, while his (and Bentham's) functional use of "pleasure" conveys a much more rigorous and consistent theory of value. Neither Mill nor Bentham is particularly rigorous in defining pleasure with respect to how it is quantified and ordered. Bentham, however, comes much closer to developing a rigorous expression of a pleasure-value system when he begins to consider the changes in pleasure that occur when resources are traded, marginal utility, and the Felicific calculus, the inputs for which are best understood as good heuristics to approximate true pleasure. It is for this reason that I conclude Mill's addition of "qualities" of pleasure is not only superfluous to his and Bentham's epistemic foundations, but detracts from them, and this notion of quality holds no utility in the ordering of different pleasures, which is necessary to approach pleasure, by which we mean to maximize it.

One last possibility is that Mill defines quality merely to ease in the calculation of the ordering of quantification of pleasures (in a similar way to the variables of Bentham’s Felicific Calculus) but does not mean quality is necessary. It is my reading of Mill, however, that this is not what he intends, and it remains that, even if Mill introduced quality to the end of providing a better heuristic for maximizing utility, it is a very poor, ill-defined heuristic, particularly when compared to Bentham's Calculus.

References

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